

The importance of personal taste in the conservation of works of art

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Abstract

The way we treat and present any object will inevitably affect its appearance, integrity and values, and therefore the way the public will perceive it. During the process of conserving work of art we are generally confronted with a wide array of possibilities and options, with different ways to resolve a problem and therefore to present the finished work. A series of decisions have to be made accordingly, and these will unquestionably affect the result, both on a technical and aesthetic level, as well as the object's significance and values.

It is so that, quite often, the same artefact, treated by different conservators, would potentially be tackled, completed and presented in different ways, and they can each be acceptable and right. In fact, there is probably no right or wrong when it comes to choices of aesthetic nature. Luckily, we do not generally work alone and these decisions are normally, ideally, contrasted, discussed and agreed with other colleagues, experts and stakeholders, especially those regarding the technical aspects of our work. However, we are not so used to go through the same process and ask for second opinions on decisions affecting the aesthetics of our work. That is just because we all have our own notion of taste, which, as we know, can be harder to argue over. There is no accounting for taste. This notion, our personal taste and inclination, is unquestionably at the bottom of many of the decisions we make during our work, whether we like to admit it or not. Taste is undeniably subjective and therefore cannot be measured or be subject to scientific analysis. It is based on our own past and present personal and professional experiences and, for most of us, it will keep changing through the years.

It is precisely for all those reasons that the interference of taste in our work has traditionally been avoided, rejected or banned in the modern scientific theories and principles of conservation, which originated in the second half of the 20th century. Despite this, more recent theories and approaches in our profession have come to accept and embrace the presence and importance of the personal taste of the conservator during her or his work. It is the aim of this presentation to show how taste is, and has always been, present in the decision-making process on the field of conservation and restoration of works of art, and particularly in the case of stained glass.

