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RESTORING THE IMMATURAL: USING NEW MEDIA TO COMMUNICATE CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

As conservators, we necessarily immerse ourselves in the material nature of artwork, always holding the physical concerns of the work paramount. These efforts have an ambitious goal: to preserve the creator's original intent, or, as is often the case with archaeological or ethnographic objects, to preserve information that communicates an object's original use or purpose. Yet, however present the actual work of art may be, our efforts are challenged by the incontrovertible fact that often, the intangible aspects of the work's creation are necessarily lost when the object is removed from its original context, or when that context itself evolves over time.

Today, new media tools, for instance interactive tablet applications, podcasts, videos, and even augmented reality, offer an effective means by which context might be suggested in experiential, holistic ways. Such didactics can be thought of as a more conceptual restoration, one that approaches the object from other vantage points than its materiality. The information available to the conservator's eye is crucial to these efforts, as the physical traces of the object's past environments are readable on its surface, and the details of an object's creation so often reveal the thoughts, influences, and unique approaches of its creator. For an audience accustomed to seeing art objects cleanly divorced from their original context, this information places the object back into the real world and thus allows an entirely different experience. This article presents selected examples of projects that work to connect an object's physical nature with its original context and discusses ways in which conservators are, and should continue to be, part of this conversation.

1. INTRODUCTION

The impetus for this article grew out of collaborative work the authors undertook with an organization called Smarthistory, a media-rich website founded by art historians and educators Steven Zucker and Beth Harris. Steven and Beth create simple videos, generally consisting of sequenced still images overlaid with conversational style dialogue, that aim to bring artworks into the “real world,” breathing a sense of life back into the iconic objects that fill the pages of the usual art history textbook. Their site is used by high school and college students, and gives a low-tech yet vivid picture of the context surrounding an art object. The site communicates the who, what, why, when, where, and how of now-static objects that are so often divorced from their original place and time.

We realized this is quite closely aligned to what conservators do through our investigative approach to learning about an object and the decisions we make about its preservation. This approach is familiar territory to us: the idea that an object encompasses and is the result of multiple histories, including its original function and use. The changes that the object has undergone, its “life events” so to speak, create complex levels of interpretation, while the work also has a modern impact and relevance. Conservators aim to understand and recapture this lifespan, and so we are comfortable thinking about objects in different contexts, each of which contributes to the understanding of the object as a whole.

The Smarthistory founders, among many others in education, media, and academic fields, are working to communicate this “hidden” history to the interested public, thereby helping to restore elements of an object that otherwise remain unknown. We can say that this study helps to communicate the “wholeness” of an object. As professionals, we often share this type of insight with each other and with our colleagues. However, in this article, we would like to focus on the opportunities that are now before us to use new media technologies to share this information with a wider audience. This question is
also timely, as much dialogue has centered on how we can better communicate our relevance and our values to colleagues in other fields and the public at large.

We began our investigation by scouring the web for interesting projects, followed by a call for help from our colleagues. Many people responded and we were extremely grateful for this help and support. There is so much happening in this area that it is not possible to cover everything, but we have chosen a few examples to begin to raise some of the issues, questions, and opportunities that exist from a conservator’s point of view.

2. WHAT IS CONTEXT?

As this is such a large topic, we have to begin by drawing some lines around it. First, we would like to examine how we are using the term “context,” a term far more nuanced than it might at first appear. We know that the conservation process relies heavily upon understanding an artwork’s original context. As Helen Glanville writes, “the importance of going back to the sources, of knowing the context within which the works we are restoring were created, becomes paramount” (Conti 2007, xi). And yet, this quote underscores the vagueness captured by the word context. What does it mean, exactly?

We have chosen to try and unpack the physical context, the space and the place, that held the original object, and as a corollary, how it functioned there. Conservators have a unique perspective on questions of space and use, as often the traces of the object’s life are preserved on its surface. For example, we may infer the original position of a painting displayed in a church by remains of candle soot on the frame, or learn through examination of surface crusts that a marble sculpture was displayed outside in a seaside villa for many centuries, though now it lives inside a museum. Of course, functional objects bear many traces of their working past on their surfaces, giving us a picture of the places they have been.

We decided not to focus on the area of the so-called “technical art history,” though we recognize that this area of study is one of the ways in which conservators can, and do, communicate what we learn about art objects and the way we understand them. We are also necessarily leaving out many projects that provide a “closer look” at objects themselves, though these are also exciting, and directly relevant to where conservators are participating and even creating content. For example, 3D laser scanning and 3D technologies have been put to excellent use providing virtual experiences with objects and artifacts that cannot be handled in reality. Similarly, we have excluded reflectance transformation imaging (RTI), a technique that has involved close collaboration between conservators and technology experts to visualize and share the details of an object’s surface.

3. NEW MEDIA

We must also briefly define what we mean by “new media.” We have chosen to be rather broad here and must also acknowledge our own unfamiliarity with many of the technologies in use for recreating context. Digital technology might include very sophisticated code, such as 3D immersive experiences or interactive gaming-type environments, but we have also included 360° panoramic photography. Lower budget approaches that utilize straightforward audio and video editing software together with still images are also included. This all falls under the umbrella of the “digital humanities” field, an area of study defined by the interdisciplinary nature of its collaboration. Part of the thought behind presenting these projects in this venue was to encourage our colleagues to pursue these types of collaborations and to have a voice in this fast-moving conversation.

We will now turn to examples we found particularly compelling, where this idea of context has been communicated in a unique or particularly insightful way. Following this review, we will discuss key issues and questions that arise and thereby impact how we think about these projects.
4. CASE STUDIES

A large number of the projects we found concern archaeology, a natural fit, as spaces are being excavated and human experiences in those spaces imagined and recreated. This type of re-creation fascinates all sorts of audiences, professional, and public alike, and many resources have been devoted to such work. Within this vast group, we are going to focus on the few that also incorporate moveable objects or monuments, given our specialty here.

Perhaps the broadest example is the Eternal Egypt website, which has it all: virtual environments, 360° panoramas, and animations provide context to objects, which are also viewable in 3D rotatable views and detailed zoomable high-res images (see Appendix for all website addresses). Webcams of the locations in the present day provide reality parallels to the virtual environments. The website provides a wide variety of ways to access the information, including a library of written material and a guide to the sites and museums. The site is not only available on the web but also through mobile devices, so one could potentially view the reconstruction of Giza while standing at the site.

While the Eternal Egypt site is mostly a “watch and learn” kind of experience, other projects are more interactive and allow viewers to direct their own experience. A well-developed example of this is the virtual reconstruction of the Regolini-Galassi tomb, placed within an exhibit at the Gregorian Etruscan Museum at the Vatican. The reconstruction is in a room separate from, though closely associated with, the actual objects on display. This is a fully interactive, virtual tour of the tomb as it may have appeared shortly after being sealed. By moving physically, the viewer guides the flythrough, choosing where to go, where to stop and look, and can click on objects in the tomb to bring up more content. Those active in museum exhibition design have been quite vocal about the potential risk associated with digital content in museums, namely that museum visitors will spend more time interacting with the video than actually looking at the objects. We therefore thought the tomb approach encapsulated an effective way to separate but not sever the connection between the virtual and the real.

What we as conservators found particularly interesting here is that the objects in the digital environment are shown as recreations of what they would have looked like before being subjected to millennia of a burial environment. This idea of “virtual” conservation is appealing to many and may also cause conservators some palpitations—but it is happening, and we should be involved. The creation of realistic surfaces and textures is itself a whole area of academic study in computing, and another place where conservators can and have entered the conversation (see, for example, the work of Holly Rushmeier at Yale University Computer Graphics Group: graphics.cs.yale.edu/site/research_areas). The developers of the tomb project make it very clear that they are not reconstructing the past, but are instead visualizing what is known about the past, based on current studies. Here their task is helped by the fact that it is a tomb site, an ancient context that was sealed until its modern history, rather than a site that was used and reused, obscuring information, and complicating decisions about which periods to actualize.

Other similar projects featuring ancient sites must necessarily privilege a particular moment, or choose a suite of such eras, when developing reconstructed contexts. The Sanctuary of the Great Gods site on the island of Samothrace, Greece, is one such example. A cultic site in use from the seventh century BC to the fourth century AD, it is familiar as the original find location of the iconic Nike sculpture, currently in the Louvre. On their website, seven video walkthroughs trace various paths taken by pilgrims to the site. As some of the initiation rites were completed at night, some of the videos are set against dark skies. The remaining videos were visualized as occurring at 9:30 a.m. on June 4, 200 BC. The decision to dramatize the video as the experience of an initiate reflected the goals of the project: to better understand the elevation of the buildings as unearthed and their relationship to the landscape, as well as how the original builders used these features to heighten the religious experience.
The result is a very human-focused narrative that explores the relationship between the viewer and the buildings. The virtual restoration of the Nike, seen here with her arms and head modeled, demonstrates the importance of the initiate's experience of the objects at the site as well as the structures. We thought this was especially interesting, given how iconic the statue has become in its current state and location. Here, the simple graphics tend to keep the reconstruction closer to information than entertainment.

A similar approach to communicating the experience of objects and buildings was taken by Princeton’s computer science and archaeology student collaboration, which visualized several buildings at the Cypriot site Polis Chrysochous in a narrated video. One particularly exciting moment of the film dramatizes the destruction of a temple and the monumental sculpture inside, an inclusion that gives context to the fragmentary objects as they exist today. This video also uses overlays to compare the foundations that the visitor sees today with the 3D models.

The Digital Roman Forum from UCLA’s Experiential Technologies Center even more actively contrasts the contemporary and the ancient, with parallel views of the forum today and a reconstructed model in which the viewer can move the camera view around 360°. With this project, the layer of academic interpretation has been laid bare: each visualization is presented side by side with a written description of the structure, a complete history, and a bibliography, as well as a detailed list of the information sources used in the reconstruction explaining where the questions remain or assumptions were made. The density of information makes it ideal for academic and informed audiences, while a casual visitor can get a thrill from zooming around the model in parallel with the view of modern Rome, living in both times at once.

The next group of projects focuses on historic houses or interiors, another natural fit with space and place contexts, and one where the space is sometimes the same as the “object.” In the Damascus Room at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a touch screen is installed just inside the entrance. This not only provides contextual information about the room’s original use and setting via still images and text, but also includes a video walkthrough of a 3D model of a typical Syrian home. The period room is considered the object here, while the larger house is the “space and place” from which it came.

For this example, the evidence existed in the room itself, and in other traditional houses that still stand in Damascus. Similar interiors also exist in other collections, but most have been significantly physically altered to fit their new spaces. This room was also altered in its first installation at the museum, and a recent reinstalltion allowed it to be returned to a state more closely reflecting the original context. Conservators played an important part in these decisions, compiling firsthand information from a trip to Damascus, and working with curators to replicate all the details that give the viewer an authentic experience. Conservators similarly contributed to the development of the video, reviewing the drafts of the model and making adjustments to the 3D reconstruction that better represented the room’s architectural details, and those of the courtyard and house. The house represented in this video is not a real place, as the room’s exact provenance is as yet unclear, but it is based on existing Damascus houses that provide the context now divorced from both the visitor and the room itself.

Another way of calling up contexts that do currently exist, though they may be far away from the audience or the object, is through the use of 3D panoramas. Historic sites, from St. Peter’s Basilica to Machu Picchu, have utilized this technology. The most basic of these simply allow the viewer to manipulate the viewpoint, much like the 3D views of objects we mentioned before, but some incorporate clickable hotspots to bring in additional contextual information and historic records. Drayton Hall, a plantation home built in the late 18th century, is a successful example of this approach. The site itself has not been physically “restored,” for instance, there are neither period furnishings nor reproduction wallpaper, nor has it been virtually restored, but combining the “new media” panoramas with “old media” photos and documents produces an engaging experience of the house and its history.
Interestingly, many of these very same approaches, including the use of clickable hotspots in panoramic photos, are being put to use by those wishing to document installation art in the present day. Our research into this area was spurred by comments offered by Glenn Wharton and Gwynne Ryan, of the International Network for the Conservation of Contemporary Art North America (INCCA-NA, changed in 2015 to VoCA), in reply to our call for contributions to this topic. Though at first these projects seemed to be limited to documentation by conservators, it soon became evident that there are many parallels with the historically focused projects we have discussed and with the goals of communicating and preserving context. As noted by Ulrike Baumgart in *Inside Installations*, the documentation of contemporary installation or variable art is not only a tool for those tasked with its preservation, but also a means of continuing to make the experience available to scholars and public audiences (Baumgart 2011). Installations are not unlike the temples at Samothrace; both comprise spaces designed and objects arranged in a particular way to achieve a particular effect, with the viewer playing a critical part. The preservation and documentation of each instance differs primarily in the factor of time. While we are standing at a moment far distanced from that of the initiate at Samothrace, attempting to recreate their experience, contemporary installations are occurring in our time, and we are faced with the challenge of preserving our experience for those in the future.

5. INTERPRETING THE CASE STUDIES

In reviewing the impressive variety of new media projects accessible around the web, we worked through several frameworks to determine what we felt was the most useful way to present the information. All of the projects or type of project concern themselves with context, however each is also responding to a unique set of challenges, some of which help to define the goals. Ultimately, it became clear that this factor of time was a key way to think about the projects, or rather, the question of where we stand today in comparison to the place or space being reimagined. This determines what resources can be called upon to create the context; we might think of this as the information “input.” How much has to be re-created or even imagined, and from where? Do we have primary sources? Are we looking at a historic site that still stands or the foundations of a Roman ruin?

If we consider archaeological sites, a good deal of reconstruction or interpretation of the physical context is required, often based on a number of disparate sources, as the record is fragmentary and time has obscured so much of the information. And of course our own cultural biases will color our interpretations and be embedded, however subtle, within the code and image of the media display. Historic houses or period interiors benefit from greater primary information, given that the spaces generally still exist, though deteriorated or much altered. There are often also other types of documentation available, such as written records or photographs. Finally, with contemporary art, the installation, which we might consider the “primary source object,” exists now but will not be around forever. Recording it during the initial lifespan allows for documentation that not only assists conservators with its preservation but also impacts future generations who might then be able to experience the piece. Further, the artist who created the piece also serves as “primary source material” for such work.

Yet even with complete and current access to the work and the artist, conservators still have to make similar certain “narrative” choices that creators of archaeological reconstructions also consider, such as camera perspective, method and technology of documentation, and presentation scheme. A video walkthrough from a viewer’s vantage point is wonderful, but it gives only one person’s experience, and who decides where to turn, where to linger? How much can we remain neutral and objective, and is this the primary goal? This can be further complicated by the input of the artist. Some might feel that media documentation can effectively serve as the basis for future installations, while others feel a certain amount of variability is encouraged as long as the intent is preserved, a complicated question in and of itself.
These questions of source material lead into another of the fundamental issues these projects raise, a question that is familiar to conservators: how far do we go? We know that communicating a context that no longer actually exists is in fact an act of curation, selecting and composing bits of information into a created narrative. How far can we go in creating a complete context and still remain true to the evidence? Or with contemporary material, how do we determine the most effective means of documentation when we cannot make accurate predictions about the future? Conservators can have an important role here vis-à-vis identifying physical evidence, as we have unique access to the object itself and the information stored within. This still requires interpretation, and often this act must be conducted across several audiences.

6. INTENDED AUDIENCES

This brings us to another interesting issue: that of the delivery of the material. Who is our intended audience and how are they being reached? One of the main benefits of using digital technologies is that the answers to these questions are variable, for instance, the same information or data set can be used in a very academic or professional manner, or can be interpreted for a public audience. The democratic nature of new media allows not only for multiple narratives to be told, but also opens the door for “smart” users, allowing viewers to play an active role rather than the static experience inherent to more traditional media approaches. An extreme example is the number of different interactive gaming environment reconstructions of historic spaces, like that of St. Andrews Cathedral in Scotland, among others, which allow users to interact with people and objects via an avatar.

The other part of “delivery” is the question of where the audience is receiving the information. Are they at home on a desktop computer, in the gallery with objects, visiting an archaeological site, or in a specialized 3D “cave?” We may feel that the direct “enhanced” experience is preferable—for example, viewing a virtual recreation of ancient ruins while standing alongside the actual remains. However, experiencing the same reconstruction remotely on a computer may encourage a real visit to the site or drive interested viewers to a local museum, and reaches many more people. Some applications we have discussed show both together; for example, one can view the Roman Forum as it looks today side by side on the screen with a digital model, all without being there. But again, increasingly this content can be made available through many channels, and the answer can be “all of the above.”

7. CONCLUSION

Certainly this article has only skimmed the surface of the relevant projects in progress, the continuously evolving nature of which makes a comprehensive review challenging. Several professional groups are discussing many of these issues in more depth, for example, at conferences including Museums and the Web and the International Symposium on Virtual Reality, Archaeology and Cultural Heritage, also known as the VAST Conference. Other groups focus on game-based learning and virtual reality, such as the Immersive Education Initiative, or iEd. For our specific interests here, we would like to propose a multifaceted conversation considering both where a conservator can contribute and why they might want to do so, drilling down into conservation’s roles.

We would like to proffer the idea that building a virtual context works in tandem with, and indeed supports, physical preservation. By imbuing an object with a sense of original use and import, might we be helping cement its value and even its role within a collection? In turn, will this be communicated in a more effective way to the interested public and professional parties alike? Several
examples of the virtual content we reviewed might benefit from our understanding of objects and how they may have looked. This technical knowledge also engages audiences on an emotional level by expanding this sense of narrative, for instance with the Damascus room, where material details help to create a more accurate experience. Our object-focused perspective encourages immediate connection to the piece itself, making history tangible.

Thus, we uncover a unique opportunity for conservators to develop a direct relationship with museum visitors or web-based audiences, where previously such connections were less tenable. By contributing to digital content, conservators not only help to start conversations with interested members of the public and colleagues of aligned fields, but also take steps toward guiding discussions. Such democratizing technology, where knowledgeable users are not necessarily privileged over those less informed, allows us to envision these efforts as a sort of natural arena for advocacy. Work within this space also opens up a platform for deeper professional collaboration, whereby contemporary-focused colleagues and those working on ancient and historic cultural property might learn from one another and help build and refine guidelines relevant to the ever-evolving new media landscape.

Appendix 1: WEBSITES REFERENCED


REFERENCES


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