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Damage, dirt and change over time: documenting conditions at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

Abstract

How does one ethically care for a global collection shaped and maintained within a colonial context? How do we address institutional responsibilities in a way that is transparent, rigorous and reparative? This article discusses on-going conservation research at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology as part of a 5-year storage relocation project. Moving beyond key vocabularies and abstract critique, this work examines the potential role of conservation in documenting and interpreting evidence for damage, displacement and erasure related to methods of colonial knowledge production and historic museum practice. The work includes a consideration of the language used to distinguish modifications resulting from museum practice such as the application of pesticides; monitoring change over time; the expectation of object longevity; and the potential consequences of disrupted traditions of maintenance and knowledge exchange. The article concludes by reflecting on the ways in which technical vocabularies, documentation and decision-making processes can shape and even improve the ways in which these collections are studied, valued and utilised by a diversity of stakeholders.

Keywords

ethics; documentation; ethnographic collections; damage; colonialism; pesticides

Introduction

This article explores the condition and care of ethnographic collections at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) from the perspective of an objects conservator and researcher within a stores move project. The article includes an examination of the language used for condition assessments and descriptions of materials and techniques of production found in the collection, as well as ways in which these objects exhibit the long-term effects of historic museum practice and colonial knowledge production. The work presented here represents the initial findings of the author's on-going postdoctoral study on access and ethics for global material heritage in a UK museum.

Between 2020 and 2024, over 300,000 archaeological and ethnographic objects will be moved from an historic airplane repair facility in west Cambridge to a refurbished nuclear bunker nearer to the centre of town, now called the Centre for Material Culture. This is the largest collections care project in the museum's history and involves a team of nine collections assistants, two managers, a workshop technician and a conservator (the author). This work will transfer a large portion of the collection at MAA from a poorly performing and obsolete storage facility to a site with greater capacity for engagement and object-based research. The museum is treating the move project as an opportunity for reflection on the organisation and accessibility of their collection, as well as their responsibilities to stakeholders as an institution. For the first time in the

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¹ For more information about the moves project see, 'Spotlight on Stores Move', *Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology*, https://maa.cam.ac.uk/whats_on/exhibitions/spotlight-stores-move (accessed 20 February 2023).

² The Cambridge Antiquarian Society was founded in 1840. Nicholas Thomas, 'Introduction', in *Gifts and Discoveries: The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge*, ed. Nicholas Thomas and Mark Elliott (London: Scala Publishers, 2011), 6–7.

collection's history, objects are being methodically processed in order to make sure they are stored, labelled and documented both consistently and precisely and with rigour concerning provenance, the agency and actions of originating communities as well as collectors, and the place of archival or antiquated language. As the collection is packed (or re-packed) for transport and long-term storage at the new facility, each object is photographed—some for the first time—and its record is updated both internally and publicly on MAA's website. The stores move project team have also produced a small exhibition and several blog posts for the University of Cambridge Museums.¹

As the objects are processed, collections assistants are encouraged to raise interests or concerns about materials and techniques used in the fabrication or historic care of objects, condition, handling and their own safety. On joining the project in September 2021, the author circulated a short glossary for internal use, tailored to focus on materials in the collection to clarify the use of certain vocabulary and conditions affecting the collection, such as the identification of active bronze disease or Bynesian decay on shells. The glossary also describes when and how to flag issues about which the team should notify a conservator to then carry out a risk assessment, for example if there is powdery or active mould, evidence of insect activity, or crystalline residues or loose powders. In addition to the conservation glossary, guidelines for responding to hazards were produced at the beginning of the stores move project by the collections team coordinator Lucie Carreau and University of Cambridge Museums conservator Kirstie French. As the project progresses and the team gains more knowledge of the collection and its specific challenges and complexities, both of these documents are being collectively updated and refined and after the move, a revised version of the hazards guidelines will be produced in order to promote safe handling both internally at MAA and for visiting researchers, educators, students and community groups.

Materials collected at MAA since its establishment in 1884 represent a gradual accumulation of displacements, excavations, donations, effort and resources including, for example, a part of those objects acquired in the Pacific by James Cook (1728–1779) and a number of objects from British collectors and colonial representatives travelling in the Kingdom of Benin in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century—some of which have recently been restored.² Archaeological material includes Egyptian and Pre-Columbian objects as well as the Cambridge Antiquarian Society's deposit of local British Iron Age, Roman and early Medieval finds. However, of the nearly one million archaeological and ethnographic artefacts held by the MAA, only a portion of those in off-site storage are being moved. Thus far, the project has engaged with over 100,000 objects including musical instruments, weapons, household items, vehicles, games, models and textiles from across the African continent and Americas, as well as ceramic fragments, unfired mud brick and archaeological metals from the UK, northern Africa and western Asia. Catalogue cards, hand-written labels and other archival materials are also being relocated and digitised, with the collections database being renovated to accommodate the findings of the move project. Many of the objects continue to be stored in wooden boxes padded with acid-free tissue paper and some have not been seen for decades.

In the setting of MAA's stores move project, the role of a conservator is largely that of a triage nurse, sorting and prioritising short and long-term risks to the collection or staff. Common activities include controlling pest infestations (historical, actual or potential), advising on packing for transport and storage, and updating museum records for object materials, manufacturing technique or condition. Another concern is the management of

the diverse hazards found in an ethnographic collection such as poisoned arrows and blades (actual or apocryphal), repurposed industrial materials made with heavy metals or radioactive components, masks constructed from hundreds of sharpened porcupine quills, Victorian medical kits containing strychnine and liquid mercury, powdery soapstone carvings which may or may not have asbestos-containing minerals, and several forms of residual pesticide. All such occurrences are flagged to be treated with caution in both the database and with stickers applied directly to the exterior of the relevant storage containers.

In addition to safer handling practices, an improved standard of care and more consistent documentation, the stores move project has facilitated a broader perspective on the condition of the collection and the longer-term effects of museum practice on its many forms of material heritage. After an initial 18 months of practical research—often treating and handling tens of objects in a week—patterns started to emerge in the language used, ethical dilemmas faced and decisions made as a conservator in this context. Using a series of case studies built around specific objects and conditions encountered during MAA's stores move project—often repeatedly—this article aims to explore key conservation terms and concepts such as 'dirt', 'detrimental soiling', 'damage' and 'evidence for change over time'. Further, this work suggests the need for a socially restorative perspective on conservation practice within a collection of global heritage which is shaped in part by displacement, disruption and legacies of colonial knowledge production in the UK. As part of this it will be demonstrated here that conservation documentation—and the critical expansion of our documentary methods and vocabularies—has the potential to cultivate institutional accountability, engagement, historical transparency, knowledge exchange, research and restitution.

Damage, dirt and change over time

To introduce the case studies from the collection it is worth considering a few relevant sources that have informed the vocabularies used to describe the condition of objects and narrate the ways in which terminology has been shaped by changing functions and settings for storage and use. From its outset, this article is informed by the recent critical work of colleagues like Jane Henderson, for example, who has proposed an investigation of concepts of loss, change and damage in conservation practice in order to work ethically, inclusively and 'beyond [the] lifetimes' of specific objects or collections.³ Rather than prioritising its treatment or the integrity of its materials, this research seeks to understand the relationship between an object's condition and the social, cultural and historical complexity of its context(s).

In his 1999 book *Risk Assessment for Objects Conservation*, Jonathan Ashley-Smith, previously Head of Conservation at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, stated that:

'Damage is usually associated with a loss of material, a loss of well-being or a loss of expectation. Not everything people consider as damage results in a change of value. Not every change in physical or chemical properties results in loss. The relationships between state, value and use are examined in an attempt to arrive at definitions of damage. The most useful definition is related to changes in utility.'⁴

Here damage to a collection is articulated in terms of its loss of value or utility rather than a change in its material 'state' or condition. Ashley-Smith further comments that all 'change is not damage', that it is inevitable, and, further, that it has the potential to be creative or beneficial. It is a central concern in this work that damage to material heritage should be

³ Jane Henderson, 'Beyond Lifetimes: Who Do We Exclude When We Keep Things for the Future?', *Journal of the Institute of Conservation* 43, no. 3 (2020): 195–212.

⁴ Jonathan Ashley-Smith, *Risk Assessment for Objects Conservation* (Oxford: Butterworth Heineman, 1999), 99.

defined in terms of the value and utility of collections rather than evidence for their chemical or physical change. Moreover, it is important that these definitions should be established in terms which take account of the various settings in which material heritage is and has been activated.

Evidence for value, utility and damage in the collection at MAA is therefore informed by the knowledge and concerns of a variety of stakeholders including communities of origin and their descendants, museum staff, researchers, previous custodians and/or local visitors. At the same time, in a varied collection like MAA, the dilemma of which accretions, deposits or residues should be cleaned or removed is navigated several times daily. When describing the present condition of objects and their surfaces, as the anthropologist Mary Douglas has stated, 'there is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder'.⁵ In a collection which includes food storage containers, ritual objects and agricultural tools, distinguishing artefactual dirt or data from detrimental soiling is an ever-evolving challenge. Like concepts of damage and utility, dirt which is an indication of poor condition has to be defined in relation to the object's context and priorities determined by its custodians.

Cultural use and historical value inform the preservation of certain accretions, alterations and abrasions but not others, though the parameters for making this decision—with a preference for leaving things in place—are constantly changing given each object's unique vulnerabilities. Treatment decisions are therefore often collaborative and based on access to accurate data about the specific history and function of the materials. Where possible, conservators in ethnographic contexts have worked with colleagues and sometimes communities of origin to determine the appropriate parameters for cleaning and level of intervention.⁶ In a high-volume setting like a storage move, this would be logistically challenging and relies on having well-documented origins for each object (see below). Moreover, distinctions between dirt and data made by conservators and collections care staff can be found to reflect the concerns of the specific institution. MAA is an anthropological and archaeological collection at a research university with a global reach. In a fine arts museum, regional historical society or community archive, changes interpreted as unwanted debris or evidence of significant use may be different altogether.

Finally, many of the objects held in a collection like MAA were not designed to be useful longer than one human lifetime; many others were maintained through practices of renovation and repair. The former Keeper for the Department of Ethnography at the British Museum, Malcolm Donald McLeod, observed that ethnographic objects in particular 'are in a constant state of change, sometimes the change is great, rapid, sometimes slow, almost undetectable. But change is of their essence'.⁷ The current International Council of Museums (ICOM) Code of Ethics states that the purpose of conservation 'should be the stabilisation of the object or specimen'.⁸ Yet stability is often easier to achieve in museum storage for materials like stone or paintings on canvas than for baskets, feathers and animal skins. Severely weathered or excavated materials, composite objects and those made from unrefined plant fibres and animal derivatives—all common to a collection like MAA—often experience the expectations of modern museum practice such as travelling for loans, display and long-term storage as instability, damage and deterioration.

Rather than understanding all change as detrimental or any soiling as dirt, this research reflects on the ways in which condition, its assessment and institutional setting are related. Moreover, the work here explores the implementation of conservation terminology shaped by on-going discussions about the function of museums, the constantly evolving

5 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Oxford: Routledge, 1996), 2.

6 Cf. Dean Sully, ed., *Decolonising Conservation: Caring for Maori Meeting Houses Outside New Zealand* (Oxford: Routledge, 2010).

7 Malcolm Donald McLeod, 'Where to Start, Where to Stop?', in *Papers from the British Museum/MEG Ethnographic Conservation Colloquium, Museum Ethnographers Group Occasional Paper*, no. 4 (1995): 7.

8 International Council of Museums, 'Section 2.24 Collection Conservation and Restoration', *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*, <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/code-of-ethics> (accessed 20 February 2023).

relationship between access and preservation, the long-term and global effects of European colonialism on museums and academic knowledge production, and conservation as a people-centred discipline.⁹ Building on these existing sources, the following describes seven case studies from the MAA stores move project which engage with the practicalities of documenting the condition of things, the ethical considerations deliberated and the decisions finally made by a conservator working in this setting.

⁹ See, for example, International Council of Museums, 'ICOM Approves a New Museum Definition', *International Council of Museums*, <https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-approves-a-new-museum-definition/> (accessed 23 February 2023).

Examples from the MAA stores move project

Due to the scheduling of MAA's multi-year stores move project, the following examples are largely drawn from between 2021 and 2022 and where work was carried out with cultural material from different parts of Africa. Since this research is on-going, potential future outputs may focus on other cultural groups, regional technologies, practices or material traditions found at MAA. Moreover, though MAA also cares for archaeological material, these case studies are largely drawn from ethnographic collections, i.e. objects collected and preserved as ethnographic research or through ethnographic methodologies.

One of the most pervasive condition issues found in these collections is that of benign neglect, an inattention to objects which results in their deterioration over time. In a pigeon basket collected from west Africa by a British anthropologist (Fig. 1) this can be seen as the structural collapse of plant fibres which have been unsupported for over 100 years, resulting in deformation on one side. Other evidence for this pattern of benign neglect across these collections includes the presence of mould and pest infestations on skins, fur, feathers and other vulnerable materials. Frequent monitoring would normally be required to maintain them in good condition in the storage environment, yet this benign neglect is both a symptom and the root cause of a larger problem. At present, the entire anthropology collection at MAA is managed by a team of two who are responsible for all loans and acquisitions, facilitating access for visiting researchers, registration and preventive maintenance for over 100,000 objects from the Americas, Africa, Asia, the Pacific and the Arctic. A recent survey by the author on experiences



Fig. 1 Pigeon basket collected by the anthropologist Northcote Thomas in Edo state, Nigeria near the end of the nineteenth century (Z 13210). Image by Emily Shorter/MAA.



Fig. 2 Drum, collected from the Buganda kingdom by Rev. John Roscoe and brought to MAA in the early twentieth century (ROS 1920.319). Image by author.

¹⁰ This survey will run until September 2024; see also Ayesha Fuentes, 'Conservation and Gatekeeping: Preliminary Results from an Ongoing Survey into Experiences of Access Restrictions for Cultural Materials' (ICOM-CC Theory, History and Ethics of Conservation Working Group Newsletter no. 24, forthcoming 2023).

¹¹ John Roscoe, *The Baganda: An Account of their Native Customs and Beliefs* (London: Macmillan, 1911), 312 and fig. 50.

¹² University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 'Repositioning the Uganda Museum Project to Repatriate Objects from MAA Cam-

of restricted or denied access at museums and archival collections found that staff time and resources are the most commonly acknowledged challenges to making items accessible to the public, researchers or students.¹⁰ A lack of preventive conservation for ethnographic collections is therefore often indicative of a larger problem with institutional resources.

In contrast, an excess of attention through invasive research methodologies can also be problematic. The Baganda drum (Fig. 2) has a light-coloured section of thick, inflexible hide patched into the drumhead with some kind of adhesive putty. The instrument also has a remarkably dull sound when lightly tapped. After discussing its poor condition as an instrument, the collection assistant processing this drum—Eleanor Beestin-Sheriff, a musician herself—looked into the museum record to see how or why the object had been altered in this way but there was no description of the procedure. During the course of the stores move project, the team had encountered other instruments from the same or related cultural groups which also contained supplementary materials, likely placed within the drum body during fabrication. Beestin-Sheriff also found a historic photograph taken by the Baganda drum's collector in 1911 showing the instrument upside down with similar supplementary contents positioned around the exterior.¹¹ Moreover, she recognised one of the bundles from the photograph as an object she had processed months earlier, though there had been no record of its having been associated with or removed from the drum. To date, she has as yet been unable to identify other materials from the drum due to the poor quality of the photograph but has, nevertheless, managed thus far to reconcile the bundle, the instrument and its condition within the museum's internal database.

Refreshingly, despite the disruption to its appearance and function, this drum is one of a number of objects from MAA currently being considered for repatriation by Ugandan heritage authorities.¹² It is hoped by many involved in the moves project that processing the collection will continue to be a pathway for restitution through increased visibility and intellectual access. At the same time, accountability through accurate documentation



bridge to Kampala, Uganda', *Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology*, <https://maa.cam.ac.uk/news/repositioning-the-uganda-museum> (accessed 20 February 2023).

Fig. 3 Three figures from a tomb, a Konso man, his wife and a man he killed, acquired in Ethiopia in 1919 by Arnold Hodson (1922.1538 A-C). Image by Lily Stancliffe/MAA.

about the historical treatment of collected objects has the potential to repair trust, encourage new avenues for collaborative research, and empower a broader range of material custodians including global colleagues and communities of origin.

The aggressive intervention seen on the Baganda drum is not necessarily common to the collection at MAA, though many objects exhibit evidence for the ways in which the museum's practices have changed or been revised over time. Three carved wooden figures from a tomb in Ethiopia (Figs 3 and 4) were found mounted on a polished wooden base and the assumed identity of each was labelled in pencil directly on the forehead. According to records made by the collector while in east Africa, the figures represent a deceased Konso man, his wife and a man he killed. It is not clear how these objects were acquired nor by whom they were mounted on the wooden base. When this group of figures was first encountered by the author, they observed that these graphite notations could be considered detrimental soiling and be removed. A colleague pointed out that it would be better to leave them in place as evidence of colonial violence and historic practices for knowledge production in a museum setting. As such, it was decided to leave the labels on the figures for the purposes of future transparency, while these details about the object's condition were recorded in the museum database. It should be noted that MAA's conservation documentation is not made accessible to the public.

This example indicates how decision-making and the practice of care in this context are both interpretive and collaborative. It is also worth noting that, although our methods are more self-aware than they previously were, it remains common practice to label objects which have been acquired by a museum.¹³ The stores move project has exposed a variety of evidence for the ways in which museum practices in the nineteenth and twentieth cen-

13 Objections to labels on ethnographic collections have been made to

the author in conversation with a number of colleagues, collaborators, informants and community representatives external to the museum. Like other institutions, MAA offers to remove museum numbering on objects which are being returned or repatriated.



Fig. 4 Detail of writing on the forehead of the central Konso figure. Image by author.

turies have changed, adapted or remained consistent—it is hoped that accurate documentation about the present condition of the collection made as part of object processing will facilitate the re-assessment of our methods by future custodians. Furthermore, seeing the long-term results of changing practices puts current standards and priorities into perspective as one of a number of possible approaches to material care.

There are many ways in which objects in this collection suggest that conservation practice is a tradition in many cultural groups, something fundamental to material culture and its capacity for knowledge transmission. The stores move team has encountered numerous examples of mending, patching, repairing, re-use and renewal made locally before arrival at MAA. These include a series of mechanical joins made on gourd containers from several regions in Africa using plaited cords or plant fibres as seen in [Fig. 5](#).¹⁴ These treatments are often resourcefully and skilfully done, and have resulted in repairs that have aged well, prolonging the utility of the object as both a container and educational tool.

¹⁴ Lucie Carreau, 'Scars and Stitches: Repairs in African Collections', *University of Cambridge Museums Blog*,



Fig. 5 Gourd bowl reinforced with plant fibre, collected by Northcote Thomas in Nigeria (Z 24639). Image by Annie Tomkins/MAA.

There is increasing interest in these historic techniques for their design and capacity for public outreach as seen, for example, in the 2007 exhibition 'Objets blessés: la réparation en Afrique' at Musée de Quai Branly in Paris which exhibited historic repairs made by local African peoples on 110 objects in the collection. More recently in 2022, Somerset House in London paired with a commercial lifestyle brand to produce the exhibition 'Eternally yours: Care, repair and healing', and offered free mending workshops including Japanese *kintsugi* ceramic repair and *sashiko* stitching techniques. It also had a free repair shop operating for the public in the gallery on select days.¹⁵ Many such local techniques and materials deserve to be re-evaluated by conservators in terms of their potential sustainability, environmental impact, resourcefulness and relative toxicity.¹⁶ At the same time, evidence for skilled repair and maintenance by communities of origin also challenges the technical expertise of conservators as well as the standard of care cultivated in the museum environment. Finally, this invites further re-evaluation, knowledge exchange and collaboration between conservators and external practitioners.

The museum's standards for long-term care are arguably also undermined by the loss of historical information which could provide details about the origins, use and manufacture of objects and inform decisions about their handling or treatment. This also means losing the potential for collaboration with source communities or descendants (Fig. 6). Dissociation—the interrupted connection between material heritage and the cultures in which it has been historically activated, maintained or valued—is recognised by many conservators as an agent of deterioration, yet one which conservation struggles to address in a global context shaped by centuries of various collecting strategies.¹⁷ While a conservator might be able to prolong the material integrity of a dissociated object, without key information about its function or geographic origin they will not be able to understand its utility or its value. Nevertheless,

<https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/blog/2022/05/27/scars-and-stitches-repairs-in-african-collections/> (accessed 23 February 2023).

¹⁵ The exhibition, 'Objets blessés: la réparation en Afrique' was held between June and September 2007 at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, <https://m.quaibranly.fr/fr/expositions-evenements/au-musee/expositions/details-de-levenement/e/objets-blesses-36621/>; 'Eternally yours: Care, repair and healing' was held between June and September 2022 at Somerset House in London, <https://www.somersethouse.org.uk/whats-on/eternally-yours> (both accessed 11 April 2023).

¹⁶ For example, many techniques for repair found in the collection would meet criteria outlined in 'Sustainable Material Use and Disposal', *American Institution for Conservation Wiki*, https://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/Sustainable_Material_Use_and_Disposal-General_Tips_for_Sustainable_Material_Use (accessed 23 February 2023).

¹⁷ Robert Waller and Paisley Cato, 'Agent of Deterioration: Dissociation',

Canadian Conservation Institute, <https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/agents-deterioration/dissociation.html> (accessed 23 February 2023).

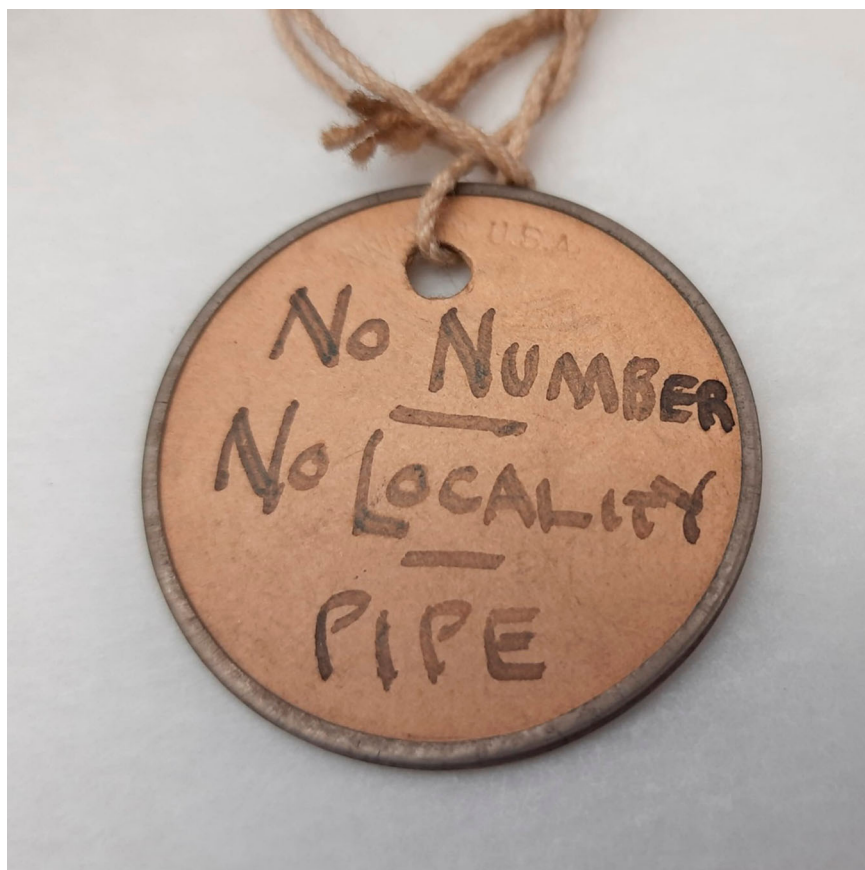


Fig. 6 Historic label from one of over 400 unprovenanced objects in the collection at MAA. Image by author.

work with the MAA stores move project has facilitated new ways to approach the collection as a material archive and to document it in a way that remains open to engagement with different forms of technical expertise and knowledge production. Condition assessments emphasise material and fabrication details—like local repairs—which can help facilitate reconstruction of the object's history and supplement the team's archival work which is made accessible and updated immediately via MAA's online collection portal. Historic labels are also being photographed, transcribed or scanned and old packing materials like newspapers have been informative.

With the notable exception of Edo materials from Benin, provenance research and heritage science are rarely oriented towards ethnographic collections.¹⁸ Yet by investing in the technical choices, ecological resources and material expertise of object fabricators and users, these collections might be better connected to the communities, landscapes and cultural settings from which they have been displaced as well as those to which they are local. For example, one of the expected outputs from the ongoing research at MAA is the creation of a fibre reference library using hair taken from different species in the collection, including hyena, leopard, yak, elephant, giraffe and several types of goat. These fibres are being imaged using optical microscopy at the McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research in Cambridge and will be added to the publicly accessible online Betty Haines Archive supported by the Leather Conservation Centre in Northampton.¹⁹

¹⁸ For example, there is a focus on European fine arts and antiquities such as in: Arthur Tompkins, ed., *Provenance Research Today* (London: Lund Humphries, 2020). For an example of the research on the Benin bronzes see: Tobias B. Skowronek et al., 'German Brass for Benin Bronzes: Geochemical Analysis Insights into the Early Atlantic Trade', *PLoS ONE* 18, no. 4: e0283415, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0283415> (accessed 12 April 2023).



Fig. 7 Detail of an unknown fine white crystalline residue found on many objects at MAA, including frequently on east African leatherwork collected in the first half of the twentieth century. Image by Katrina Dring/MAA.

Finally, one of the most dramatic and detrimental changes resulting from historic museum practice is the accumulation of toxic residues and deposits resulting from pesticide use (Figs 7 and 8). Developing a pesticide screening programme as well as a procedure for the cost-effective reduction or removal of residues has been a conservation priority during the project. This has been done in collaboration with University of Cambridge Chemical Safety representatives and means the team are well-informed about the use of personal protective equipment, safe handling and risk management for the packing and long-term storage of hazardous materials. Anything which is suspected to be contaminated with pesticides—that is, anything with a crystalline or powdery residue and/or a strong smell—is labelled in both the database and with a sticker on the exterior of the object's storage container, with the future goal of testing to confirm and identify suspected contaminants.

Conservators in the anglophone world have been aware of the specific risks of pesticide contamination to ethnographic collections for decades through collaborations between North American museums and that region's indigenous groups.²⁰ In the UK, individual projects and studies have identified a number of toxic substances applied repeatedly and successively to anthropology collections including ethylene oxide, methyl bromide, dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) and compounds of lead, mercury and arsenic.²¹ However, as a recent article from the UK's National Archives about the use of pesticides in historic book-bindings in colonial-era publications circulated to tropical regions indicates, the response to many museum and heritage institutions is to isolate objects or materials which have been identified as toxic.²² As the authors observe, some collections—archives and libraries, for example—must be handled in order to maintain their value and utility and, furthermore, this can be done safely with the appropriate PPE and risk management in place.²³ Moreover, though these residues are hazardous to staff within a restricted collections storage environment, they pose additional risk where they remain unidentified or unmitigated on objects being considered for outreach or repatriation.²⁴

¹⁹ 'This archive was collated in most part by Betty M. Haines between the 1940's and 1970's. It is comprised of skin and leather samples from a wide variety of species types, collected from around the globe, prepared as grain and cross sections. The collection also contains hair samples and vegetable tannin samples', <https://bettyhainesarchive.co.uk/> (accessed 12 April 2023).

²⁰ Cf. Nancy Odegaard, Alyce Sadon-gei, and Associates, *Old Poisons, New Problems: A Museum Resource for Managing Contaminated Cultural Materials* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2005).

²¹ See, for example, Andrew Charlton, Kelly Domoney, and Jeremy Uden, 'Pesticide Residues on the Cook-Voyage Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford' (pre-prints of the 17th Triennial Conference of ICOM-CC, Melbourne, Australia, 2014, Pulido & Nunes/ICOM Committee for Conservation, 2015).

²² Lora Angelova et al., 'The Use of "Poisonous Insecticidal Solutions" in Bookbinding: Coping with Historic Pesi-

ticide Treatments in the Archive', *Heritage Science* 11, no. 51 (2023): 1–16.

23 Angelova et al., 'The Use of "Poisonous Insecticidal Solutions"'.²³

24 Cf. Davison Chiwara, Siona O'Connell, and Maggi Loubser, 'Potential Pesticide Contamination in Repatriated Artifacts in African Museums: The Need for the Adoption of Safety Protocols for Access and Use of Hazardous Artifacts', *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, online publication (October 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/01971360.2022.2104576> (accessed 12 April 2023).



Fig. 8 Doll from Mozambique (1922.414), dressed in barkcloth which is covered in a fine, loose crystalline residue which was significantly diminished with a dry brush under suction with a HEPA filter-enabled vacuum cleaner.

25 Odegaard, Sadongei, and Associates, *Old Poisons, New Problems*, 5.

26 See A. Elena Charola and Robert J. Koestler, eds, *Pesticide Mitigation in Museum Collections: Proceedings*

Within the MAA stores move project, the presence of pesticide residues is documented as a form of damage and detrimental soiling resulting from museum practice. And as other authors have observed, it has been found that 'insects are the most numerous, resilient, and persistent of all the agents of deterioration that affect museum collections. Only people are more destructive'.²⁵ As this article has explored, the application of pesticides and other collecting methodologies may have stabilised materials for long-term storage but they nevertheless have also complicated or diminished their potential capacity for safe handling, restitution, circulation and/or creative reactivation through performance or use. It would be responsible for those who have acted as custodians in recent decades to clearly communicate the risks associated with pesticide residues and to trial technically-accessible and cost-effective methods for their remediation.²⁶ This research aims to increase the visibility of these issues in order to promote constructive dialogue and collaboration amongst museum colleagues, institutions and their administrators.

Conclusion

This article has explored specific cases of alterations to objects in an ethnographic collection that reflect a variety of actions and intentions, and represent different perspectives on the care of material heritage in a UK university museum setting. The discussion has focussed on conservation ethics in practice through a series of condition assessments, decisions about treatment or language, risks identified and/or mitigated, and opportunities to recontextualise objects encountered during the MAA stores move project. The study examines the ways in which different forms of damage, dirt or change over time can be articulated in terms of their relevance to revised object histories, provenance research, risk management or material knowledge exchange. Moreover, by critically engaging with the practice of conservation in this setting, it can be seen that many of these forms of damage invite new and innovative solutions for repair including collaboration, outreach and material knowledge exchange.

This on-going research-in-practice will continue to investigate how the diversity and complexity of materials and techniques found in the anthropology collection at MAA can inform our technical understanding of the ways in which cultural objects experience change over time and how this impacts expectations of longevity or stability common to current standards for museum practice. Further, the author proposes that the specific knowledge and experiences of conservators and other museum staff working with ethnographic collections contribute a unique perspective on current professional standards and efforts towards sustainability, social justice, community engagement and intellectual access. In contrast to a preoccupation on the stabilisation of objects through treatment or restricted access, this work hopes to reflect on conservation being a practice with the capacity to facilitate, repair and reactivate relationships between people and objects.

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Résumé

«Altération, saleté et changement au fil du temps: documenter des états au musée d'archéologie et d'anthropologie de l'Université de Cambridge»

Comment prendre soin de façon éthique d'une collection mondiale constituée et entretenue dans un contexte colonial? Comment aborder les responsabilités institutionnelles de manière transparente, rigoureuse et réparatrice? Cet article parle des recherches en cours sur la conservation au Musée d'archéologie et d'anthropologie de l'Université de Cambridge dans le cadre d'un projet de déménagement des magasins sur cinq ans. Au-delà des termes

from the MCI Workshop (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2010). Treatments discussed in this source include the use of supercritical carbon dioxide, heat treatment and the controlled application of microbes for specific treatments and trial studies.

clés et de la critique abstraite, ce travail examine le rôle possible de la conservation pour la documentation et l'interprétation des preuves d'altérations, de déplacements et d'effacements liés aux méthodes de production de connaissances coloniales et à la pratique des musées historiques. Le travail comprend une réflexion sur le langage utilisé pour distinguer les modifications résultant des pratiques muséales telles que l'application de pesticides, un suivi de l'évolution dans le temps, l'objectif de longévité de l'objet et les conséquences potentielles des traditions de maintenance et d'échange de connaissances qui ont été interrompues. L'article se conclut par une réflexion sur la manière dont les termes techniques, la documentation et les processus de décision peuvent façonner et même améliorer la manière dont ces collections sont étudiées, valorisées et utilisées par une diversité d'acteurs.

Zusammenfassung

„Schäden, Schmutz und Veränderungen im Laufe der Zeit: Die Dokumentation der Sammlungsbedingungen im Museum für Archäologie und Anthropologie der Universität Cambridge“

Wie kann man eine weltumspannende Sammlung, die in einem kolonialen Kontext geformt und gepflegt wurde, ethisch betreuen? Wie können wir die institutionelle Verantwortung auf transparente, strenge und reparative Weise wahrnehmen? Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit der laufenden restauratorischen Forschung am Museum für Archäologie und Anthropologie der Universität Cambridge im Rahmen eines fünfjährigen Umzugsprojektes. Jenseits von Schlüs-

selvokabularen und abstrakter Kritik untersucht diese Arbeit die potenzielle Rolle der Bestandserhaltung bei der Dokumentation und Interpretation von Beweisen für Beschädigung, Verdrängung und Auslöschung im Zusammenhang mit Methoden der kolonialen Wissensproduktion und der historischen Museumspraxis. Die Arbeit beinhaltet eine Betrachtung der Sprache, die verwendet wird, um Veränderungen zu unterscheiden, die aus der Museumspraxis resultieren, wie z.B. die Anwendung von Pestiziden, die Beobachtung von Veränderungen im Laufe der Zeit, die Erwartung der Langlebigkeit von Objekten und die potentiellen Konsequenzen von unterbrochenen Traditionen der Pflege und des Wissensaustauschs. Der Artikel schließt mit einer Reflektion darüber, wie Fachvokabular, Dokumentation und Entscheidungsprozesse die Art und Weise, wie diese Sammlungen von einer Vielzahl von Interessengruppen untersucht, geschätzt und genutzt werden, gestalten und sogar verbessern können.

Resumen

“Daños, suciedad y cambios a lo largo del tiempo: documentación de las condiciones en el Museo de Arqueología y Antropología de la Universidad de Cambridge”

¿Cómo se puede cuidar éticamente una colección global moldeada y mantenida en un contexto colonial? ¿Cómo abordamos las responsabilidades institucionales de una manera que sea transparente, rigurosa y reparadora? Este artículo analiza la investigación en curso sobre conservación en el Museo de Arqueología y Antropología de la Universidad de Cambridge como parte de un proyecto de cinco años de traslado de su almacenamiento. Más allá del vocabulario clave y de la crítica abstracta, este trabajo examina el papel potencial de la conservación en cuanto a la documentación e interpretación de la evidencia de daño, desplazamiento y cancelación en relación con los métodos de producción de conocimiento colonial y la práctica museística. En este trabajo se considera cómo se utiliza el lenguaje para distinguir entre los cambios debidos a las

prácticas de los museos, como por ejemplo la aplicación de pesticidas, monitorear cambios a lo largo del tiempo, la expectativa de longevidad del objeto; y las potenciales consecuencias de obstaculizar tradiciones de mantenimiento e intercambio de conocimientos. El artículo concluye reflexionando sobre la forma en que el vocabulario técnico, la documentación y los procesos de decisiones pueden moldear e incluso mejorar las formas en que las diversas partes interesadas estudian, valoran y utilizan estas colecciones.

摘要

“损伤、污脏和时过境迁：剑桥大学考古和人类学博物馆的状况记录”

如何从伦理上保护在殖民背景下形成和维持的全球收藏？我们如何以一种透明的、严格的和补偿性的方式来肩负起机构责任？本文探讨了剑桥大学考古和人类学博物馆正在开展的保护研究，它属于一个为期五年的库房搬迁项目。除关键词汇和抽象批判以外，这项工作研究了保存修复在记录和解释证据时的潜在作用，这些证据是与殖民知识产生方式和历史博物馆实践相关的损伤、位移和去除。这项工作包括了对表述的考虑，用以区分因博物馆实践造成的修改，如杀虫剂的应用、持久的监测变化、对物品寿命的期望，以及维护和知识交流的传统受到破坏的潜在后果。文章最后反思了技术词汇、档案记录和决策流程方式，它塑造甚至改善了这些藏品被不同利益相关者研究、重视和利用的情况。

Biography

Ayesha Fuentes is currently the Isaac Newton Trust Research Associate in Conservation at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. She is an objects conservator and graduated from the UCLA/Getty MA Program in the Conservation of Archaeological and Ethnographic Material in 2014. She completed her PhD in 2021 at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. For more information about her research and activities, please see <https://www.ayeshafuentes.com/>.