

## **Crumpets and clocks: how do we respect an object?**

Full text

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*Museum workers are very often asked to treat objects with 'respect', while people speak of treating historic buildings with 'respect'. What does this mean? The question has been surprisingly little discussed among heritage workers, or even by philosophers, who have given a great deal of attention to respect to persons, but very little to respect to objects. This note considers three aspects: respect as behaviour, respect as an attitude of mind, and 'conservation respect'. In all three aspects we are offering respect not so much to the artefact itself, but to the person, community or culture that produced it, and perhaps to the many ways human beings try to order their lives and understand their world.*

The margarine tub in my fridge has on the top the slogan 'I WILL RESPECT THE CRUMPET.' I assume I should show my respect by spreading my crumpet (of which there is an encouraging picture) with that particular brand of margarine.

But what I want to ask this morning is, what does it mean to 'respect' an object? Museum workers are very often asked to treat objects with 'respect'. They promise to treat human remains with respect. They promise to behave 'respectfully' towards other peoples' cultural heritage, and to 'respect the integrity' of old things and old buildings. But what is this 'respect'? What does it actually mean?

This question very quickly takes one into the world of philosophy, where I am utterly unqualified to tread. I want here merely to raise the question, and to look slightly more closely than I have before at the different ways in which respect for objects happens in the museum and heritage world. It

doesn't concern merely 'sacred' or 'religious' objects (though that is how I got interested) but objects of all sorts, because people can invest all sorts of objects with meaning and importance. I shall begin to try to answer the question 'what does respect for objects mean' by looking at three aspects that directly affect people working in the heritage sector: respect as behaviour, respect as an attitude of mind, and what I shall call 'conservation respect'. I shall suggest that in all three we are offering respect not so much to the artefact itself, but to the person, community or culture that produced it, and perhaps even to diverse humanity itself.

Let's look first at *Respect as behaviour*

Over the past generation or so demands for respect have been increasingly heard from the originating communities of ethnographic objects in our museums. Often, demands that museums respect 'their' objects are an alternative to demands for restitution or return. They are heard particularly strongly in North America, and especially so in regard to what Western culture calls 'religious' or 'sacred' objects - though our sharp distinction between the sacred and the mundane is - let's remember - unknown in most cultures. Ideally they want to see everyone feel respectful towards their objects, and to express that respect in formal patterns of behaviour. But no-one can demand an attitude of mind; what one can demand is respectful behaviour - objects treated in a way that indicates respect.

Museums are asked to show respect in an enormous variety of ways, often reflecting only at some distance the practice of the originating communities themselves. The New York-based Association of Art Museum Directors offers some examples:

- Some sacred objects of the native peoples of the western United States should be stored with sage to ensure their spiritual well-being...

- In some indigenous cultures, special ceremonies should be conducted or offerings made for sacred objects. Museums have worked with native peoples to make arrangements for such rituals, balancing religious practices with a museum's obligations for the conservation of its collections.
- Other solutions include storing objects such as sacred stone lamps of the Alutiiq people upside down, to keep their spirits from departing, or not housing certain sacred objects in proximity to other works.
- Museums can also work directly with artists as well as religious leaders of indigenous cultures. In one example, a Tibetan artist was provided an artist-in-residency in order to replace a Buddhist altar originally constructed by an American artist. The Tibetan artist worked with museum staff and Tibetan consultants in the design and creation of the new altar, which was consecrated by the 14th Dalai Lama after its completion (AAMD 2006).

Malaysia's Islamic Arts Museum has published its own rules for handling the Qur'an and other Muslim art objects (Zekrgoo and Barkeshli 2003, 94). The overall aim is to maintain the boundaries between the sacred and those things regarded as polluting. These include bodily fluids, liquid intoxicants, dogs, pigs and (more problematically) those who do not have faith in God. The Malaysian rules can be summarised very briefly as follows: Muslims should wash their hands according to the wudhu rituals before handling the Qur'an, and non-Muslims should wear gloves. The Qur'an should always be carried, placed or stored in a position that is higher than waist level, and should never touch the floor. Polluting substances must be kept away from the sacred, so for example brushes made of pig bristle or adhesives incorporating pig fat must not be used in the conservation or marking of anything bearing a holy text.

Most faith traditions have such rules. Museum workers, asked to give respect to an object, are being asked to follow these rules, or at least to negotiate a version of them. There are a number of problems with this, which there is time here only briefly to mention.

First, there is the well-known problem of defining the 'community' from which an object comes, and of identifying who might speak on behalf of that community. The unlucky curator, trying to do the right thing, can easily find herself or himself entangled in group politics. With religious objects things can become even more fraught, for even within one broad faith tradition there can be fiercely contested attitudes, and particularly it seems where objects are concerned. Consider, for example, the diverse attitudes to relics just within the Catholic tradition of Christianity.

And what about dead religions? Although an internet search will uncover present-day devotees of almost every deity ever imagined, in practice the curator preparing a display on - say - the Ancient Egyptian god Thoth is unlikely to face questions from devotees of Thoth. He or she may, though, be challenged by those to whom all imagined deities are aspects of a godhead, or of the human spirit, and deserving of respect and respectful behaviour as such.

Some demands for respectful behaviour may challenge the principles and beliefs of the museum or of its staff. The Musée du Quai Branly in Paris famously exhibits Australian Aboriginal *churinga* boards, objects of the most intense significance to their communities, both extremely sacred and extremely secret. But as the museum's Head of International Relations said 'We at the Quai Branly, as elsewhere in France, have decided to respect the principle of *laïcité*. Therefore, we do not take into consideration any claim based on religion or ethnicity...' (quoted in Price 2007, 122).

And again, what happens when we really don't respect an object? When it symbolises something we really detest? Is there a kind of respect that one could offer a knife used for FGM, or a Nazi flag, or

an Inquisition torture-rack? Can we really extend the idea of this kind of respect to cover all objects symbolic of humankind's quest for meaning?

Faced with all these complications and difficulties, it would not perhaps be surprising if curators and conservators ignored demands for respect whenever they could get away with it. After all, nobody usually knows what he or she is doing, alone in the museum store or lab. Yet what little, entirely anecdotal, evidence there is, suggests that museum workers do try very hard to follow the ethical guidelines and to treat objects in the ways their originating communities, or those who claim an interest, would wish.

Why? Why should a curator or conservator, alone in the store or lab and struggling to maintain conservation standards, still go through the motions of showing a sacred object respect, if in truth they simply think of it as at best just a beautiful or interesting thing, to which foolish people in the past once attributed special meaning? If they do - continue to keep the sacred book wrapped in silk, avoid using pig's hair brushes when cleaning it, or refrain from touching the sacred object while menstruating - they will have to ask themselves why. They may be hard-pressed to find a satisfactory answer; at best they may feel that they promised its devotees that they would, and that it matters that they continue to deserve their trust. Mind, they probably will keep their promise. One of the odder consequences of our post-modern multi-faith world is that we feel we need to respect not just other people's beliefs, but also the symbols of those beliefs. It is perhaps only those with firmly-held beliefs of their own who feel able to disrespect those of others.

Secondly, let's consider *Respect as an attitude of mind*

We discover here a distinction between the respect that I feel in my heart towards your object, and the ways that I show it. There is clearly a difference between following the rules - behaving politely

- and feeling real respect. I may shake hands with someone for whom I feel only contempt. So can we tie down the meaning of 'respect' more closely?

I've suggested elsewhere (Paine 2013, 55) that I may still give respect to my grandfather's favourite clock, even though he is long dead, and I may even ask you to do so too. The phrase often used in this kind of situation is '...out of respect for his memory.' In a sense, therefore, the respect is not actually given to the clock itself, but to my (or your) memory of grandpa and of *his* relationship with the clock. So perhaps really I'm signifying my respect for myself or for you, and for what *we* bring to *our* relationship with the clock. In other words, there is a four-way relationship here: between me, you, grandpa and the clock, and the core of this is my relationship with you - I want you to share my happy memories of grandpa, and to symbolise them through our mutual relationship with the clock. You may go along with this, in order to avoid upsetting me. But if I've moved away I shan't actually know what you do with the clock - you can put it on eBay with impunity. If you don't, it may be because you know that I trust you, and you want to continue feeling you deserve that trust.

Philosophers have discussed respect for at least two centuries. Since Kant kick-started this thread, though, most thinkers seem to have assumed that respect is something due to people. Mind, R. S. Dillon suggested that one form of respect might be 'care respect', exemplified in an environmentalist's deep respect for nature. As Dillon put it:

Care respect involves regarding the object as having profound and perhaps unique value and so cherishing it, and perceiving it as fragile or calling for special care and so acting or forbearing to act out of benevolent concern for it (Dillon 2010, 8).

This at once asks the question: should things be valued because of their relationship to (perception by) human kind or are they valuable in themselves, as supporters of 'deep ecology' claim?

So moral philosophers have, it seems, begun to move well beyond Kant's view that only persons are respectworthy, so that some have included animals and other sentient beings, and some have even extended this to include the whole of nature. Few thinkers (and those mainly in the New Age and neo-Pagan traditions) seem yet to have extended this discussion to objects made by people.

A valuable contribution to understanding respect as it is used in the heritage world comes in a stimulating little book published last year by the Harvard philosopher Michael Rosen: *Dignity, its History and Meaning*. Though most of the book is concerned with the dignity of persons, towards the end Rosen briefly and tantalisingly discusses the respect that is owed to non-humans. In particular, he asks why we should treat the dead with dignity, as almost all human societies, in their very different ways, seek to do. Reassuringly, he confesses that 'the puzzle of our obligation to treat the dead with dignity is...truly deep and difficult.' He argues that we have duties, even when there is no beneficiary, and no-one (not even God) is there to observe it. The last person on earth will have a duty to dispose respectfully of the corpse of the second-to-last person on earth. In private correspondence Rosen has suggested that our duty to corpses does indeed extend to objects: 'The odd (but, I think, correct) idea is that such a duty can't be owed to a beneficiary but still has something like an expressive or symbolic character.' We owe that respect (and perhaps reverence, and gratitude) even though it isn't clear to whom we owe that duty.

We must hope that more philosophers will give their attention to respect as we know it in the museum and historic buildings fields. Generally, to respect someone or something must be to admire them or it, and (crucially) to express that admiration through words and actions. In the case of an object it must be what it signifies that attracts admiration. We are in fact offering respect not

so much to the artefact itself, but to the person, community or culture that produced it, and perhaps even ultimately to the very notion of the diversity of humankind, and to the many ways human beings try to order their lives and understand their world. What we are doing when, in the privacy of the museum store, we handle reverently (or, if that word is too strong, with care and courtesy) a statue of Thoth is to remind ourselves how it both carries meaning accorded it by its ancient devotees, and symbolises humanity's quest for meaning.

### *Conservation respect*

There is another sense in which the term 'respect' is used in the heritage world, and that is to mean something like 'demonstrating esteem by leaving well alone.' The distinction between conservation and restoration relies precisely on the idea that conservators should respect the integrity of the historic object. The word is regularly used in this way in codes of conservation ethics. Thus the Institute of Conservation (IIC) says (Article 5): 'The Conservator-Restorer shall respect the aesthetic, historic and spiritual significance and the physical integrity of the cultural heritage entrusted to her/his care.' The American Institute for Conservation says (II): 'All actions of the conservation professional must be governed by an informed respect for the cultural property, its unique character and significance, and the people or person who created it.' The Burra Charter extends this respect to places:

1.11 Compatible use means a use which respects the cultural significance of a place. Such a use involves no, or minimal, impact on cultural significance.

3.1 Conservation is based on a respect for the existing fabric, use, associations and meanings. It requires a cautious approach of changing as much as necessary but as little as possible.

24.1 Significant associations between people and a place should be respected, retained and not

obscured. Opportunities for the interpretation, commemoration and celebration of these associations should be investigated and implemented.

Note that these mostly speak of respect for an object's 'significance' or its 'associations and meaning'. The use of the term in this way seems, though, to be fairly recent. Ruskin used the term rarely in his writings; Morris did not use it at all in his famous 1877 Manifesto for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. Nor did Cesare Brandi, sometimes called the grandfather of modern conservation, use the word in his 1977 *Teoria del Restauro*. The term seems to have crept into this use over the past couple of generations.

In none of the published codes of practice is any attempt made to define the term. The same is largely true of discussions of conservation ethics, both in the objects-conservation and in the buildings-conservation fields. By implication, though, its meaning is clear: ensuring the preservation of the original object. But what is 'the original object' and what is the 'integrity' that IIC wants respected? The definition of both has changed substantially in recent years. As Richmond and Bracker put it (2009, xv) 'large fluctuations are happening within conservation theory, including the philosophical shift from scientific objective materials-based conservation to the recognition that conservation is a socially-constructed activity with numerous public stakeholders.' Today 'respect for the integrity of the cultural property' (Clavir 1994) includes spiritual, aesthetic, and historical qualities, along with the physical.

Dinah Eastop (2006, 518) reminds us that today the 'true nature' of an object includes all sorts of intangible qualities and attributes - 'it is not a fixed state but varies with context, is socially determined and is subject to contestation.' Stefan Michalski adds that in this 'conservation' sense of the word, too, respect refers back ultimately to people:

We must realise that to say we have a responsibility to the objects is only a parable. Our responsibility is to our biological inheritance as perceptive, active, emotional beings and our social inheritance as knowledgeable, cultured beings, as influenced by objects (1994, 257).

### *Conclusion*

Salman Rushdie has called respect a code-word for fear<sup>1</sup>, and even respect paid to objects may be prompted by nervousness of one kind or another. A worthier motive, though, is simple politeness, courtesy to others, demonstrated by a politeness shown to the objects in which others have encoded their dreams and aspirations. Respect, I have argued, is both an attitude of mind, and a pattern of behaviour that - at its best - genuinely reflects that attitude through the performance of certain set actions. Behind this interim conclusion, though, there must lie many layers of ethical and philosophical consideration. If heritage workers are to respond fully to public demands to respect objects, or are to use the term persuasively in argument against restoration, we need to give a lot more attention to what it means, and we need to ask the aid of philosophers and moralists.

Meanwhile, I suggest, when we show respect to an object, whether in our attitudes or in our actions, we are in effect offering and expressing it not so much to the object itself as to those who created it and invested it with their own meaning. Perhaps we are offering and expressing respect, too, to humankind as a whole, and to the multitude of ways in which people have encapsulated their beliefs and dreams in 'dumb matter'.

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<sup>1</sup> In an interview on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, 15.9.12.

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