

# Preservation and Restoration in Heritage and Museum Context

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**Abstract:** Preservation and restoration both appear in heritage studies and museum studies, by discussing the definition and evolution of the concept as well as several examples, the different notions of preservation and restoration can be seen.

**Keywords:** Preservation; Restoration; Heritage; Museum

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## 1. Introduction

Heritage is a place or a memory that represents a group memory, a sense of belonging, and a reflection from the past. (Nilson & Thorell, 2018, p.10) Different part of the world have their own focus on heritage, for example in Europe, it is often associated with old city centers, and in North America, it has a strong connection with national parks, museums, and galleries. (Boyd & Timothy 2003) Due to differences in how people identify heritage preserving and restoring heritage has become a complex topic and there are many ongoing debates about it. Do we need to preserve everything? What is the standard of preserving and restoring heritage and museum aspects? Who should be responsible for setting the standard? However, this paper will not and cannot provide proper answers to all those debates, instead will discuss the definition of preservation and restoration of heritage and museums separately and then discuss one debate specifically, finally will discuss challenges and some suggestions to this topic in heritage and museums aspects.

## 2. Heritage aspect

In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the concept of heritage conservation was introduced mostly in the Western world. (Jokilehto, 1995, pp.18–29). After UNESCO introduced the notion of world heritage in 1972, it has been developed over the past fifty years, it contains tangible and intangible cultural heritage such as historic buildings, monuments, folklore, and traditions, and natural heritage such as landscapes, forests, and biodiversity of a site. (Nilson & Thorell, 2018, p.9) With the aim of sustainable development, UNESCO created a list called “List of World Heritage in Danger” which are threatened by natural for example climate change and human activities such as urbanism and industrialism. (Levin, 2019, pp. 97-104) And the definition of preservation and conservation can be slightly different sometimes although they have the same means. Preservation is an action aimed to protect historical and cultural sites from human impact while conservation is more focused on protecting and maintaining cultural sites by regulating human activity. (Admin, 2022) But sometimes they are used interchangeably. And restoration can be part of the preservation progress if needed. (Nara Document of Authenticity)

With the development of world heritage studies, there are some ongoing debates about it. For a long time, governments and institutions tend to think we need to save everything we have which is a sweet dream impossible to achieve and will cost lots of resources, but do we need to save everything, or in another way of saying that is what if we embrace the change rather than resist it? (DeSilvey, 2017) In the post-preservation contexts, cultural heritage specialists insist on preserving heritage for future generations because they think the past has inherent value to all humankind. (Holtorf, 2013) But how can we decide what should be preserved and restored? What can be meaningful to future generations? As Holtorf mentioned in his paper ‘Rather than remembering the past, future generations might be remembering remembering the past.’ (Holtorf, 2013, p.162) This means for future generations, what has been preserved and restored will not be valued as much as we do now, instead, the progress and the history of preserving and restoring them are more important and can be identified as heritage in the future. This discussion leads us to think of the standard of preserving and restoring cultural heritage. And what should be preserved and restored for the future generations. Preserving and restoring a heritage

site is not just about repairing the old roof or repainting the wall, but about protecting and passing the value behind it. (Poulios, 2010) In this concept, how to define value is crucial and lies beneath the discussion.

Ioannis Poulios introduced a new concept called “living heritage” which aims to create discontinuity between the past and the present. (Poulios, 2013) From my point of view, cultural heritage represents a memory of the country, of the local communities. The academic value is important and will guide future researchers, but time, the way how heritage is associated with local communities and traces from different periods are more important. The erosion of the surface, the missing parts of a monument during the conflict, and other things help to create heritage experiences such as visitor management and production related to expanding the influence of the heritage. (Harrison, 2013) Together will complete the value of heritage, we need to respect history and time, we cannot preserve and restore everything perfectly, but we can come up with new approaches to create new value and pass it to the next generation. Rather than struggle to preserve and restore everything, we should free ourselves and let the thing carry on with its changes. (DeSilvey, 2017, p.180)

### **3. Museums aspect**

If we see cultural heritage as a history, a period, museums are more like physical places that can hold exhibitions, engage people with their history, and promote the understanding of heritage. To this extent, museums can represent history and are matters as historical institutions. (Prakash, 2012, p.317) Preservation and restoration in museums can be different from heritage. International Council of museums-committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC) adopted “preventive conservation”, “remedial conservation”, and “restoration” together to constitute “conservation” of the tangible cultural heritage at the 15th Triennial Conference in September 2008. (ICOM-CC, 2008) The Institute of Conservation (ICON) defines conservation as an approach to things, containing cleaning, documentation, and long-term preservation. Restoration is an action to return an object to a former state and requires understanding and professional skills. (ICON, 2020) International Council of Museums (2017) demonstrates that museums should be responsible for the tangible and intangible natural and cultural heritage. Based on the definition given by ICOMO-CC the preservation of tangible tends towards perfection, but how to preserve intangible heritage from the perspective of museums is still unclear. And it forces us to rethink the role of museums in preserving and restoring cultural heritage.

Tangible and intangible heritage are not isolated, they have a strong connection with each other, and it can be acknowledged that all human achievements are from intangible heritage, desires, experiences, and interests of humans are driven forces to create tangible heritage. (Arizpe,2004) So the preservation and restoration of tangible and intangible heritage need to be seen as a whole. Nowadays most museums still focus on displaying physical objects and ignore the connection between an object and the history behind it. So, it is time to rethink the role of museums and their functions and utilize tangible heritage with intangible heritage to reach a museum not about the past and the present but a museum about the future as well. (Boletsis& Skjetne& Nilsson, 2020) From the perspective of museology, modern museums should contain oral transmission of knowledge such as customs, rituals, and craftsmanship. (Boletsis& Skjetne& Nilsson, 2020) From this perspective, museums should not be seen as a place displaying objects from the past but as an agency of community. (Boletsis& Skjetne& Nilsson, 2020) Helping local people engage with their culture and provide a sense of identity to them. To achieve this goal here are some suggestions for museums, firstly, museums use the latest technologies to preserve and display cultural objects. Secondly, museums should have a close connection with local communities and get the public involved in the preservation and restoration process. Finally, reach a balance between satisfied stakeholders and promote new forms of exhibition. The museum is more than a historic agency, it involves lots of elements such as economic and political, we cannot preserve an object because we think it is valuable, but to utilize the function of education to enhance the understanding of cultural heritage to the public.

### **4. Conclusion**

There are still lots of ongoing debates and challenges around preservation and restoration in heritage and museum contexts. This paper can only focus on limited aspects and discuss them from a broader perspective. From a heritage perspective, the standard of preservation needs to be clarified, and to be selective and try not to preserve everything. From a museum perspective, the need to transform the function of museums and engage with the public is urgent. Besides those issues, there are differences between preservation and restoration in the Western world and the Eastern world, the crucial concept in preservation and restoration is authenticity, which needs more further discussion. Institutions like UNESCO and ICOM need to build related standards and complete their framework because preserving and restoring heritage is not about culture but about economic, political, and social activities. It is their responsibility to reach a balance between them and create a better environment.

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