Making the Case for Conservation: A Tale of Two Languages

James Janowski, Professor of Philosophy, Hampden-Sydney College, Virginia, U.S.A.

Conservation is about artifacts. But conservation is also, ultimately, about people—about safeguarding meanings and values, transmitted as they are through things, for future generations. I show how conservators themselves can promote understanding of the value of conservation. Conservators receive deliberate training in “the language of objects.” But they also learn, rather less consciously, “the language of meanings and values.” I argue that fluency in this second language is crucial if conservators are to make their case. Why? Administrators, politicians, and the public have this colloquial idiom as their native tongue. Conservation’s allies are better able to “hear” the language of meanings and values than the language of objects. (“Preserving historical and artistic value” resonates; “back-scattered electron-imaging” does not.) Put differently, conservators certainly come to know what to do in treating artifacts. But they’ll win over advocates if they can further articulate why they do what they do. Persuading others of conservation’s importance presupposes forceful talk about the why and what for of the work. I close by discussing the types of value in the conservation of cultural heritage and by suggesting that highlighting the same will require linguistic stretching. Simply put, I argue that conservators need to become bi-lingual.