Villa Abegg – from private residence to museum

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Abstract

Villa Abegg in Riggisberg, Switzerland was built as the private home of the collectors Werner and Margaret Abegg in the 1960s. Built in a neo-baroque style it was designed to incorporate historic architectural elements, furniture and works of art. After the death of Mr. and Mrs. Abegg the house was opened to museum visitors. Respecting the wishes of the founders, the villa was kept exactly as they had left it. The aim of this paper is to highlight the tensions that arise between preserving a historic interior and the requirements of conservation. Case studies, regarding textiles and works in other media, reveal that loyalty to the founders and conservation needs may in some cases contradict each other and require compromises to be made in conservation treatments. The multiplicity of materials and problems presented by the house and its contents requires collaboration between curators and conservators of various disciplines.

Keywords

Textile conservation, historic interior, interdisciplinary approach, preventive conservation

History of the house

Villa Abegg in Riggisberg, Switzerland was built as the private residence for the Swiss collector Werner Abegg and his American wife Margaret in the 1960s [Fig. 1]. It is situated in rural surroundings near the building complex that houses the museum of the Abegg-Stiftung with its exhibition galleries, textile conservation workshop, research library and offices.

After having lived in New York for several years during the 1940s and 1950s, Mr. and Mrs. Abegg decided to move to Switzerland in the early 1960s. Mr. Abegg originally came from Zurich and had started collecting in the late 1920s. While living in New York the couple continued collecting textiles and
works of art from late antiquity to the Baroque period. During the post-war years Mr. and Mrs. Abegg also owned a house in Turin where they spent several months of the year. Here they extensively collected northern Italian works of art as well as pieces of furniture and historic interiors from the Piedmont and Venetian region, mainly dating from the eighteenth century--a period particularly favoured by Margaret Abegg. When Mr. and Mrs. Abegg eventually decided to return to Europe they chose the picturesque region of Berne to build a museum that was to hold their collection and adjacent to it their private residence, which later came to be called Villa Abegg.

Built in a neo-baroque style reminiscent of northern Italian architecture, the villa was designed to incorporate elements of historic interiors, such as an eighteenth-century mirror cabinet [Fig. 2]. It may seem a typically American concept to build a house in historic style for art collectors, and indeed, in Switzerland this was very unusual. The house was filled with historic furniture and innumerable works of art dating from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. In some cases historic elements were creatively adapted to a novel use, such as the petit- and gros-point embroideries which cover the seats of the mirror cabinet.

Generally the architecture of the house was designed to accommodate the dimensions of existing works of art. The Renaissance room was built in the exact size required by a Spanish Renaissance painted wooden ceiling that already belonged to the collection. The same went for a double door with intarsia decoration, once part of a studiolo in the ducal palace of Gubbio in Umbria that now marks the entry to the library. The small dining room was decorated with a set of painted Chinese export wall panels of northern Italian provenance.
Transition into a museum

The founders of the Abegg-Stiftung had always intended that their private residence be open to museum visitors after their time. Mr. Abegg died in 1984, while his wife lived until 1999. In the year 2000, the Board of Trustees of the Abegg-Stiftung authorized the transformation of the villa into a museum. At that point an inventory was made of the complete contents of the house and the condition of all of the objects was checked by specialized conservators. Among the first conservation measures taken were equipping all of the windows with UV-light-filters and developing a climate control system to balance the moderate seasonal fluctuation of temperature and humidity. The installation of an air-conditioning system would have meant a severe intervention into the original building structure and was therefore rejected. Instead the decision was made to stabilize the climate throughout the seasons with the help of twenty mobile humidifiers and dehumidifiers. This system works well and the temperature is now maintained at around 17 degrees in winter and 20 degrees in summer and the relative humidity at 45% in winter and 50% in summer.

Respecting the wishes of the founders, it was agreed to keep the interiors of the villa exactly as they had left them so as to present to the public how twentieth-century collectors lived with historic artwork. The transition from private residence to museum environment took several years. Since 2003, small groups of up to five persons at a time have been admitted to the representative rooms on the ground floor in guided tours. During the seasonal opening period that runs from May until November, the villa has regular visiting times every day of the week in the afternoons. In order to preserve the lived-in atmosphere of the
collectors’ home, all objects were left where they used to stand on tables and consoles around the house without showcases or cordonning off areas. Visitors are requested to deposit their bags in the waiting room. Security is maintained by a warden who accompanies the groups, as well as by a discreet protection system for the objects.

The contents of the house were documented and conserved with no consideration of their age. Apart from works of art dating from earlier centuries, the household owned large quantities of twentieth-century table linens, glass, and silverware which were intended for use. By now, these objects are also historical and are therefore treated with the same museum quality care as older pieces. They include some beautiful hand embroidered linen tablecloths and napkins which had been made to order in Venice and several sets of exceptional Venetian glasses from the Salviati factory. Other modern pieces are a large silk-covered sofa which had been commissioned from an American designer in the 1950s and a splendid Art Déco chandelier from the 1930s.

Preservation versus conservation?

All of the original fittings and built-in furniture were kept as they were. They include the original 1960s bathrooms as well as the kitchen. They also include a number of built-in closets which were made of modern materials in the 1960s--materials which we now know to cause particular conservation problems. Most of the glass, porcelain, table linen and silverware of the house are kept in built-in closets [Fig. 3]. The interiors of the closets were constructed from plywood and the shelves were covered with a layer of plastic to provide a soft surface. These materials emit fumes, including formaldehyde and hexanal, which were detectable by smell and by measurements that were carried out inside the closets when closed. It was noticed that some of the glasses exhibited opaque, soapy accretions on their surfaces marking the initial stage of glass sickness.

As an interim solution, last year conservators removed the surface alkali from the glasses by washing all of them. In addition they covered the shelves with chlorine- and acid-free cardboard.

The conditions in the closets are also harmful for textiles. However, while the effect of formaldehyde becomes apparent on glass after only few years, it remains invisible on textiles for a much longer period. Cellulosic materials such as linen and cotton are especially in danger of being damaged. Their decay is slow but irreversible. Clearly, this situation necessitates some form of intervention.
We are caught in a dilemma. We have an obligation to preserve the original furnishings of the house including the built-in closets that are known to harm the objects they contain. But, at the same time we should aim to preserve the original ensemble and distribution of objects in the house. This appears to be a no-win situation.

Four of the closets in the large and small dining room, which originally contained glass, were renovated a few years ago in an attempt to ameliorate the climatic conditions inside them. The original plywood shelves with their plastic coating were replaced by modern shelves and all inside surfaces of the closet were sealed with polyurethane paint. Should we proceed to renew the interiors of all closets and thereby destroy many of the original fittings of the house? Since it appears to be impossible to preserve both objects and original furnishings in their original setting, we have to consider the radical alternative of taking all objects out of the closets and storing them in newly built storage facilities somewhere else in the house. This would, however, constitute a severe intervention into the original integrity of the house. If minimal intervention is the policy for the conservation of individual objects in the collection should not the same principle be adhered to in the treatment of the house as a whole?

Multiple materials

The Abegg-Stiftung has a large professional textile conservation workshop. This is due to the nature and history of the Abegg-Stiftung’s museum collection, which has a strong focus on textiles and, from the start, it was equipped with the facilities and staff to take proper care of them as well as a training program in textile conservation. For the conservation of works of art in other materials we rely on outside specialists. Nevertheless we keep an eye on all works of art as well as on the general conditions of the villa in order to be able to react or call upon external assistance in case of need. Our students have taken on the task of integrated pest monitoring in the house as part of their training in preventive conservation. This proved especially significant in the rooms on the first floor which are so far not frequented by visitors.

Study of individual objects may at times lead to recognition of more fundamental problems. Many rooms of the villa are lit by spectacular chandeliers with rock crystal pendants. Some of these, such as the chandelier in the mirror cabinet [Fig. 2], date from the eighteenth century, while others were made in the nineteenth century reusing older elements. Missing rock crystal pendants were usually replaced by glass pendants obtained through art dealers. A specialist surveyed all of the chandeliers in the villa and drew our attention to the fact that all of them have 1960s wiring which, with age, may turn brittle and become a fire hazard. Rewiring all of the chandeliers would be a major conservation project involving taking the entire metal structure of each piece apart and rewiring and remounting them in close collaboration with a technician.

Interdisciplinary action is also called for in case of the mirrors of the historic mirror cabinet. The coating of the mirrors consists of tin-amalgam with high mercury content. One day tiny drops of mercury were discovered on the floor underneath one of the mirror panels. In many areas the amalgam has corroded, thereby reducing the reflection of the mirror and endangering the integrity of the ensemble. We plan to evaluate the problem with specialised conservators in order to determine whether the corrosion can be stopped and how we can best preserve the mirrors.

Our responsibilities include taking care of works of art inside as well as outside Villa Abegg. The house is situated in a formal garden with fountains and garden sculptures that constitute an integral part of the entire complex. This means that museological criteria also apply to the conservation and preservation of the design and works of art in the garden. Upon closer inspection, some of the sandstone sculptures showed a loss of substance as the surface had weathered and some parts had even broken off. Investigations into the causes of these damages revealed that plastic sheets had been used to cover the sculptures in winter to protect them from snow and rain. It turned out that this method was unsuitable as during the day condensation water would collect underneath the warmed covering without being able to evaporate. During cold nights the condensation water that had soaked into the pores of the sandstone
would freeze. The tension produced by the freezing and melting water caused the deterioration of the sculptures. During one summer the sculptures were conserved by a specialist conservator. To prevent further damage, the head technician of the Abegg-Stiftung developed an alternative system for winter protection in collaboration with a firm producing metal sheets. The new system consists of an open cylinder made of pierced aluminium and a closed slanted roof [Fig. 4]. The complete hood is placed over the sculpture and fixed upon a loosely placed chrome steel ring. The holes in the aluminium sheet ensure that dry winter air will dry out damp areas on the sculpture’s surface during the day so that there is no remaining moisture to freeze inside the stone. The new system has proven simple to install, but effective in use.

![Fig. 4: Winter protection on garden sculptures](© Abegg-Stiftung, CH – 3132 Riggisberg 2004 (Photo: Christoph von Viràg))

**Textile conservation**

Various textiles in the villa presented problems that were treated by the textile conservators of the Abegg-Stiftung. Finely embroidered tablecloths and napkins such as those exhibited in the large dining room had come to us starched and ironed as they had been treated by the villa’s domestic staff [Fig. 5]. The next time they require cleaning, we shall have to clean them ourselves. A tablecloth exhibited one season on the table in the small dining room was stained by fly dirt and now urgently requires treatment because acids contained in the secretion will damage the fibres over time. Should we treat the table linen in the previous manner in order to achieve the same visual result, or should we treat them according to modern conservation standards? Is a household textile of the 1960s less of a museum object than a textile from earlier centuries? Should we give priority to the aesthetic effect of the traditional treatment, or the longevity of the textile?
Individual textiles required careful conservation treatment in order to preserve their substance and ensure their survival. An eighteenth-century gilt bronze candlestick with a silk screen showed severe damages on the inner side of its silk covering caused by former use. The piece stands in front of a mirror with its damaged side clearly visible to visitors in the reflection. In order to avoid further deterioration and to improve the aesthetic impression, old wax accretions were reduced by applying carefully controlled heat. Subsequently, all loose fragments were returned to their correct position and the whole surface covered with fine crepeline [Fig. 6]. The result is a calm surface pleasing to the eye and stabilizing to the object.

The large American sofa also required treatment. The filling was coming out in areas where the silk covering had torn with age [Fig. 7]. The sofa stands in front of a window and was in the past exposed to strong light. We discussed whether to replace the entire cover as Mr. and Mrs. Abegg might have done during their time, or to cover only the damaged areas with a matching fabric. A classic conservation treatment proved impossible because of the strong tension on the cover. We decided in favour of a museum solution, covering the damaged areas and thereby regaining the
original form. In addition, black silk fabric was sewn onto the rear side of the sofa to protect it from further light damage.

Two silk weavings with a pattern of chinoiserie scenes on a red ground decorate the main bedroom, where they hang on either side of a window. The silk panels, each two meters high and 73 cm wide, were mounted in glazed frames like paintings for the purpose of hanging them on the wall. They are, in fact, two lengths of a furnishing silk. As such, they were of interest to a research project on furnishing textiles which resulted in a special exhibition in the museum of the Abegg-Stiftung in 2005. So that the two panels could be shown in the temporary exhibition, they were transported to the museum to be unframed and remounted. It turned out that the silk fabric had been glued along its edges onto a support, which was covered with a layer of plastic. Over the years, the glue had produced a very strong adhesion of textile to support, and we did not immediately find a suitable solvent to dissolve the glue and detach the silk from its old support. For the exhibition, a mat was constructed which hid the edges of the support, and both panels were integrated into a pressure mount. Our intention was to show the panels at different heights in order to reveal the original pattern composition. The panels complement each other in their pattern, suggesting the extension of the original design. After the exhibition, the panels were returned to their old frames and original location. We intend to readdress the problem in a practical course within the students’ training program.

Another project over the last few years was the conservation of a group of eighteenth-century puppets of the Commedia dell’Arte. The puppets wear costumes that are largely historical but partly supplemented by newer materials. They were decoratively placed on various chairs and settees as well as on the top of a
The costumes showed old damages and repairs as well as more recent tears probably due to their sagging seating postures. Former repairs were left as they were. On the other hand, more recent damages which had led to a loss of original substance were carefully treated. The costume of Gianduja, for instance, had some areas that showed light damage as well as several minor losses. The damaged bow tie, which was a replacement for the original, had to be secured with crepeline. During the conservation project which was carried out by our conservation students, some of the puppets were studied in more detail in order to better understand their structure. X-ray-images were taken of the figure of Capitano Spavento whose arm had come loose. The x-ray-pictures revealed the inner metal hooks used to attach the head and movable jaw of the puppet. The arms were only attached by sewing techniques. Following their conservation, the puppets were exhibited in showcases in the villa’s entrance hall during one season. For this purpose little seats fitted with padding were built to accommodate the figures [Fig. 8]. After the exhibition the puppets were returned to their original places on various seats and settees, but with adapted supports to avoid further stress on the textiles.

Fig. 8: Puppet (Capitano Spavento) after conservation
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Conclusion

Transforming a formerly private residence into a museum is a complicated issue—especially if the prerequisite is not to change the interiors. Loyalty to the founders’ heritage and conservation needs may, in some cases, contradict each other, requiring compromises to be made. Confronted with a multiplicity of materials and problematic issues curators, conservators and technicians are required to work closely together. An interdisciplinary approach and a careful analysis of each individual case are indispensable for arriving at satisfactory solutions.

Anna Jolly studied Art History at the University of Cambridge, England, and graduated there in 1993 with a Ph.D. dissertation on “Madonnas by Donatello and His Circle”. The following two years were spent with internships at the Museum Folkwang in Essen, the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu and the Detroit Institute of Arts. In 1996–1997 she worked as a curatorial assistant at the Bavarian State Museums in Munich. The subsequent year she spent as a visiting scholar at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam with a research project on sixteenth-century Netherlandish sculptors. In 1999 Anna Jolly joined the Abegg-Stiftung in Riggisberg and in 2001 was appointed Curator of Textiles and Works of Art after 1500. In this position she has so far curated two exhibitions of eighteenth-century textiles, both of which were accompanied by a catalogue and an international colloquium. (Abegg-Stiftung, Werner Abeggstrasse 67, CH – 3132 Riggisberg, jolly@abegg-stiftung.ch.)

Corinna Kienzler trained as a textile conservator in Hamburg. From 1988 to 2001 she managed her own textile conservation workshop, working free-lance for private clients, church heritage and the Bavarian castle administration. In the following two years she was head of textile conservation and teacher at the University of Applied Art in Vienna. Since 2003 Corinna Kienzler has been senior textile conservator at the Abegg-Stiftung, Riggisberg, with teaching responsibilities within the degree course of textile conservation at the Department of Conservation and Restoration at the Bern University of the Arts. (Abegg-Stiftung, Werner Abeggstrasse 67, CH – 3132 Riggisberg, kienzler@abegg-stiftung.ch).