Book Review

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James Beck with Michael Daley
Art restoration: the culture, the business and the scandal
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What should we do and what do we do with the ancient and beautiful works of art that we care for? Do we *conserve* them, by keeping them stable and secure in whatever state time and hazard has chanced to leave them? Or do we *restore* them, by taking off the impacts of wearing centuries so as to return them to their first original glory? Or do we in fact *remake* them, by transfiguring them into things they never were, or were never intended to be, which fit better with what we enjoy today?

I am neither art historian nor picture-restorer; but I am – like this journal – interested in these issues. Different attitudes direct different modern practices, as different professions in the various branches of the history business see them. Archaeology, the branch where I work, is concerned with learning about the past from its material remains, without a necessary first concern for the beauty of the stuff; the professional in our field is generally call a *conservator*, and the expectation is increasingly to clean and to stabilize the object so it holds its state as found. In the art business, more concerned with aesthetics, the equivalent professional is called a picture *restorer*; the common practice, once the later varnishings and accretions have been stripped off, and the original stabilized, is to supply missing portions in new paint so as to return the piece closely to the original perfection. Those two professional names stand for two stances within a wide range of "good modern practice".

Beck and Daley's book is about art restoration, and in the particular about Italian Renaissance art. Its three detailed case-studies are the restorations of 15th-century marble sculptures by Jacopo della Quercia in Lucca cathedral, of 15th-century frescoes by Masolino and Masaccio in the Brancacci Chapel, Florence, and of 16th-century frescoes by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, Rome. This last is one of the more remarkable, and controversial, restorations of recent decades, it has so changed

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the appearance of this most celebrated of Renaissance frescoes and, with it, our perception of Michelangelo as artist.

Beck's case against the restorers, following in each case different detailed observations, is on the same theme. The restorers are not just removing later dirt and darkenings, or faithfully painting in what was once there and is now lost, but they are stripping out integral parts of the artist's intention, and making the images into something new. At Lucca, the original polish was destroyed, and the surface lost where abrasions were smoothed out. In Florence, some early (often potentially original) elements were removed, famously the leaves which concealed Adam's proud genitals, whilst some new elements were created, such as a stone bridge put in where the original paint is wholly lost and the subject of that detail is unknown, and others, like the gilt haloes, were re-done in a manner alien to 15th-century habit. In Rome, the shadowing and *chiaroscuro* that made the moulded three-dimensional quality of Michelangelo's technique have been reduced, and the darkening glue which the artist overlaid to tone down the force of the pigments has been removed, so the painting is now more in flat areas of bright colour than in the artist's celebrated dull tones and sculptured forms. In sum, the restorers are neither conserving what there is nor restoring what there was, but are *re-making* these ancient beauties into something we are delighted by today which never existed before. Further, they are putting their safe future at risk by treating them with untested oils and chemicals whose long-term effects are unknown and unknowable.

In a later chapter, Michael Daley criticizes, in like manner, restoration practice at the National Gallery, London; and Beck and Daley widen their criticism to the "Restoration establishment" of restorers, gallery-directors, collectors, promoters, publicists and sponsors whose interests fuel the restoration fashion. In a world where novelty is everything, to be old and good is not enough; the old masters have to be revealed to us anew, in changed and more colourful forms that will catch our attention.

The restorations Beck and Daley criticize are mostly recent, and so are the specifics of their plaint. The generalities have often been heard. They echo to me the polemics of the "anti-Scrape" movement a century ago, when William Morris and the campaigning Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings saw arrogant architects as remaking old churches into an artificial, idealized and polished style that was more Victorian-contemporary than restoration or even a sensitive medieval revival. Often connoisseurs have preferred their own dreams to scrub away historical truths. As is commonly known, classical statues were painted in polychrome, and the preference of recent centuries for clean white

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marble is a modern fancy having nothing to do with ancient realities. It is less commonly remembered that medieval stone statuary, and perhaps including Jacopo's Lucca sculptures, was also painted and gilded; again, bare stone is a modern idiom. It is not much known that many of the Cycladic sculptures of prehistoric Greece, which have risen to fashion these last thirty years because they look so white, clean and intensely modernist, were also painted. The following of that "error" in overlooking (or, one fears, in sometimes scrubbing away during clearing and restoration) the ghostly traces of prehistoric paint on Cycladic figures recapitulates the previous mistake inflicted on Classical sculptures. This should tell us it is not an "error" at all, but the privileging of our own and newer vision of the past over good evidence for what these things really were like in their own time.[1]

Suppose we did know exactly what colour, darkness and appearance Michelangelo intended for the Sistine ceiling, and suppose the restorers had been able precisely to recover that. Would we than see it as 16th-century people saw it? Our eyes would, for their physiology has not changed. Our brain, our visual perception, would see it differently, because we live in a world of different colours and different lights. Since the early 19th century, our cultural world has become much more strongly coloured, first with the artificial pigments of first-generation organic chemistry, then with the even brighter "flash" colours of our generation, and increasingly with the pure intensity of electronic colours; since Michelangelo, our man-made environment has been made less dull and earth-coloured, more fiercely polychrome. In the present century, our world has been more brightly lit, with gas and first-generation electric lights, increasingly with the pure intensity of modern artificial lighting; since Michelangelo, our building interiors have become very bright, where once they were dimmed. There is a congruence here with the transformation that we see in the restoration of the Sistine Chapel, from the duller and darker to the brighter and lighter. I am not competent myself to know if Beck's criticisms of the Sistine restorers are well founded; I find them cogent and compelling, but I have not heard the other side of the argument. The camps are opposed: the darkening overwash of glue and shadowing which Beck sees as integral to Michelangelo's intent is, to the other party, the distorting by smoke, dirt and maltreatment of that very intent. What is striking is the way in which the restoration has made Michelangelo's work more compelling, more agreeable to twentieth-century eyes; brighter and highter, it makes the Renaissance master more "one of us". Another disconcerting congruence is in the modelling of Michelangelo's large figures, which Beck argues are now so

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much "flatter" in the look; think of a distinctive twentieth-century graphic style which works in flat areas of bright and pure colour and you may have it – the visual style of cartoon animation. Do we now have, courtesy of chief restoration sponsors Nippon Television, a Sistine ceiling that is not so much restored to Michelangelo's intent as re-made in the Hanna Barbera manner?

In my own smaller world of prehistoric archaeology, there was a little storm in 1988,[2] when the British Museum restored the Bush Barrow lozenge, a decorated piece of sheet gold from a Bronze Age burial-mound close by Stonehenge. The restorers recovered, as they believed, its original form, as a smooth shape, gently domed, rather than the flat and crumpled shape we had been used to. Others contended the domed profile was not authentic to the original, but arose from the stretching of the soft metal in the several times its shape was interfered with, before, during and after its many centuries in the ground. Dr Michael Corfield, Chairman of the United Kingdom Institute for Conservation, remarked, "It is now quite impossible to settle the controversy as the only evidence was the distorted object."[3] Was it restored? Was it re-made into a shape it never had before? The uncertainty tells me we would have done better to leave the original Bush Barrow lozenge alone; of uncorroding gold, it was stable and safe as long as we did not handle it often or carelessly, or risk it by making it travel. The safe option, of leaving in stable peace what one does not properly understand, may not exist for the Sistine ceiling; in his review for *Nature* of Beck and Daley's book,[4] Ian McClure of the Hamilton Kerr Institute – which found it "polemical journalism that uses all the tricks of the trade" – says the dark glue layer whose removal by the restorers Beck so dislikes cannot be left: "That brittle and hydroscopic[5] glue layers will inevitably and increasingly cause flaking of the paint layers is well known to conservators but dismissed here." To leave the ceiling alone is to see it destroyed.

Questions of information and potential information apart, I myself prefer the visual appearance of the Bush Barrow lozenge as it was before the new conservation, and wrote at the time: "Its dulled and crumpled state, complete with museum accession number scratched into the side, was the record of how time and chance had treated it over three and a half thousand years. There was a beauty in that, like the beauty in an old person's face, which may not be less than the fresher beauty of youth. Even if there were no doubt as to the original form, and no possibility of potential information being lost in a restoration, would it be right to remake it as it once was?"[6]

With art and archaeological objects of all periods, there is a contemporary conflict – not often acknowledged, and nearly

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never addressed properly – between two time-scales. We wish to preserve these things in perpetuity, without knowing what in practice perpetuity for our society will be. Archaeological artefacts – when of the most robust materials – are commonly five thousand years old, often fifty thousand, sometimes five hundred thousand. If it is to last into that kind of perpetuity, the Sistine ceiling, about 584 years old, is only a fraction into its perpetual existence. Yet any one of us can know the world only for the less than a century of a human life-time, and individuals look after these treasures through working lives of only a few decades. All our daily existence is planned out on time-scales that extend only a very few years; half a century is an unknowable, unpredictable distance away. Beck and Daley notice that the Brancacci and the Sistine frescoes have been cleaned and restored more than once before, and one sees the same habits and the same time-scales in the rhythm by which we know and look after all these would-be perpetual things. Take Stonehenge, four thousand and more years old, already seven times older than the Sistine paintings. Half its area was excavated in the 1920s, when archaeologists became impatient with their ignorance of the place. By the 1950s, the work from the 1920s was so old and unsatisfactory that further excavations were thought essential. In the 1990s, we come to see the work of the 1950s – first rate for its time – as deficient, and would dearly like to excavate again. But how can Stonehenge survive in perpetuity if we chop into its very finite extent each generation, each thirty years?

Beck and Daley notice this in respect of the pictures, though they make no large issue of it. We need to. We hope all restoration work is done to the best contemporary standards, and we hope the contemporary standards will actually be good. (There have been calamities before and passing fashions. In the 1960s, Beck and Daley remark, there was a vogue for removing frescoes from walls to turn them into portable pieces. Now, they say, that practice is "used only as a desperate last resort in cases of flooding or earthquake".) But notice the rate of consumption, if we conserve (restore) (re-make) our old masters every generation. And the risk: what if restoration methods applied to so many of the old masters this century – however expert, however considered – turn out to be deeply damaging in delayed effects that show in the next century or five? The paintings do look magnificent to us when newly restored, and the restoration compels us to admire them again: "A Renaissance for Michelangelo," said the *National Geographic* cover story about the Sistine ceiling. But can we keep them in perpetuity if we restore them nearly each generation?

There are two fundamental mistakes in the framework by

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which nearly all of us address these insoluble realities.

First, we cannot expect to preserve in genuine perpetuity a great many objects – however lovely – that are fabricated of organic and perishable materials, like canvas, wood, and paints based on natural oil and protein binders. They will all change and perish through a gradual decay, and when natural and human calamities – a flood of the Arno, a civil war in the Balkans – chance to carry individual ones away. Our ideas drift away too, and they become less comprehensible as they become distanced from us. What we can do, for a limited number of these, is to slow down that perishing. If the materials that support or cover or are the masterworks – the canvas under Leonardo's paint, the glue over Michelangelo's paint, the chemical-composite boards and unstable chemical paint of much 20th-century art – are transient on that long time-scale, even the gentle policy of leaving them alone will permit or speed their perishing. Can we keep them in perpetuity if we do *not* restore them nearly each generation?

Second, we cannot recover the original appearance, impact and meaning of an old work of art even if we can restore it precisely to its original or intended appearance. The modern mind sees a different thing even if it looks at the self-same object. The rationale for full restoration, that it re-creates the original as it originally was, fails in this light, which I think is the reality of our era. Instead and like it or not, we are in a more complex game in which our mental perception of Michelangelo changes our visual perception of Michelangelo's art; even a constant physical object is a moving cultural object.

After six chapters of serious grumbling, Beck and Daley propose a remedy, in the form of a Bill of Rights for a Work of Art. A work of art, they contend, is not an item of property to be possessed, or transported around the world as a celebrity to be exhibited and exploited. Rather, "All works of art have the inalienable right to an honourable and dignified existence." Individuals or nations hold these things as responsible custodians "under an enforceable public trust". This is the same and good spirit as infuses many movements in our field; the draft of a new code of ethics for the Society of American Archaeology, on which some of us are working, presently begins, "The archaeological record, the material memory of our predecessors on this earth by which we may know them, is a common good held in public trust." (Note we chanced on that same quasi-legal concept of public trusts). The challenge, then, is to have those enduring ideals actually change what we do in professional practice, year by year and generation by generation, despite all the worldly pressures and all our ignorance of what is really right over a longer time-scale than any of us can know.

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Braver or dafter than our archaeological community, Beck and Daley want to put their ideals into real bureaucratic expression. They imagine discriminating boards of "practising artists, architects, art scholars, restorers, engineers and critics, as well as representatives from political, economic, scientific and educational components"; these would judge which works are of highest and global merit. A yet higher commission, of the most distinguished and disinterested minds of the culture, would select from these the finest, world-class masterpieces. After a book-length emphasis on the uncertainty and frailty of knowledge, we are suddenly bounced into an imaginary and laughable land in which commissions "selected from lists of Nobel prize winners" can judge what is good for ever and ever. You should stop at the top of page 177, where the right of the work of art is stated, and abandon the nonsense that follows, unless you are in a mischievous mood; then you should search out lists of Nobel winners, and see how dotty a commission of last aesthetic judgement you could contrive from the names.

This absurd and poor end to an instructive and perplexing book shows how deep a trap these issues hold for us. We think we conserve and restore in relation to timeless ideals; we believe the things "of the past" are eternal, when they were first so much made in the mirror of one passing world, and are now so much re-made in the mirror of another.

Notes

1 On this, and other ways in which prehistoric Cycladic figures are treated and transformed in the world today, see David Gill & Christopher Chippindale, "Material and intellectual consequences of esteem for Cycladic figures", *American Journal of Archaeology* 97 (1993): 601–59.

2 *Pro*: I. A. Kinnes, I. H. Longworth, I. M. McIntyre, S. P. Needham & W. A. Oddy, "Bush Barrow gold", *Antiquity* 62 (1988): 24–39. *Contra*: Colin A. Shell & Paul Robinson, "The recent reconstruction of the Bush Barrow lozenge plate", *Antiquity* 62 (1988): 248–60.

3 Michael Corfield, "The reshaping of archaeological metal objects: some ethical considerations", *Antiquity* 62 (1988): 261–5.

4 Ian McClure, "Using artistic licence" [review of James Beck with Michael Daley, *Art restoration: the culture, the business and the scandal*], *Nature* 366 (9 December 1993): 521–2.

5 *Sic.* I think "hygroscopic", meaning "readily absorbing moisture from the air", is intended.

6 Christopher Chippindale, Editorial, *Antiquity* 62 (1988): 205–13.

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