



Preventive
Conservation
in Historic Houses
and Palace
Museums:
Assessment
Methodologies
and Applications

SilvanaEditoriale

Preventive Conservation in Historic Houses and Palace Museums: Assessment Methodologies and Applications

Conference of the National Museum of the Palace of Versailles (EPV), the Association of European Royal Residences (ARRE), and the Research Centre of the Palace of Versailles (CRCV)

In collaboration with the International Committee for Historic House Museums (DEMHIST), held at the National Museum of the Palace of Versailles and Trianon

From 29th November to 1st December 2017

Conference Proceedings

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With the participation of

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Thanks to

Lorenzo Appolonia, Lionel Arzac, Jean-Vincent Bacquart, Wojciech Bagiński, Jérémie Benoît, Marie-Alice Beziaud, Céline Boissiere, Anne Carasso, Élisabeth Caude, Gabrielle Chadie, Thibault Creste, Stefania De Blasi, Elisabetta Brignoli, Hélène Dalifard, Gaël de Guichen, Ariane de Lestrangle, Festese Devarayar, Françoise Feige, Christophe Fouin, Éric Gall, Thomas Garnier, Roberta Genta, Denis Guillemard, Michelle-Agnoko Gunn, l'équipe du Grand Café d'Orléans, Pierre-Xavier Hans, Nicole Jamieson, Thierry Lamouroux, Marie Leimbacher, Nadège Marzanato, Béatrice Messaoudi, Stefan Michalski, Christian Milet, Marya Nawrocka-Teodorczyk, Marco Nervo, Lucie Nicolas-Vullierme, Clotilde Nouailhat, Agnieszka Pawlak, Amaury Percheron, Arnaud Prêtre, Gérard Robaut, Bertrand Rondot, Valériane Rozé, Béatrice Sarrazin, Béatrix Saule, Didier Saulnier, Emma Scheinmaenn, Violaine Solari, Emilie Sonck, Pauline Tronca, Rémi Watiez, Thierry Webley, Sébastien Zimmerman



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Conservation and the Living Home

Abstract

Discussions about conservation often take place in the context of buildings and collections that may once have been inhabited, but which are now sustained for their value as heritage sites. In reality however most heritage remains in private hands, and most conservation is therefore a private endeavour carried out beyond the realms of charitable or publicly funded heritage organisations. In the UK, there are over eight times as many properties in independent hands (as represented by Historic Houses) as there are mansion houses owned by English Heritage and the National Trust put together. Many Historic Houses places remain lived-in family homes. What is the appropriate level of conservation control to apply in a house that continues to be a lived-in family home? Our organisation offers advice to owners that helps them find a pragmatic balance.

Ben Cowell

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Keywords

Historic, house, private, owner.

Historic Houses¹ represents the UK's largest collection of independently owned historic houses and gardens. Our members include over 1,500 Grade I and II* listed historic houses and gardens (or their equivalents in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). Our member properties are connected by the fact that many of them remain lived-in, family homes. What impact does this have on their conservation approaches?

Our member houses sustain themselves largely by private endeavour. Historic Houses properties across the UK welcome 26 million visits each year, contribute over £1 billion to the economy and generate 33,700 full time equivalent jobs. As tourist attractions, events venues and rural business hubs, Historic Houses places are catalysts of rural prosperity and cultural lynchpins for local communities. As well as opening for tourism day visits, historic houses operate as wedding venues, venues for corporate events, holiday accommodation providers, film sets, and a whole host of other business uses.

A great many works of art hang on the walls of independently owned houses. For example, there are fifty times as many artworks held under



Fig. 1
Conservation activity
at Marchmont House,
Scotland, winner of
Historic Houses/Sotheby's
Restoration Award 2018.
(© The Curries)



Fig. 2
The Hon Nicholas Howard
brushes the first sheet of
gold leaf onto the lantern
on the dome of Castle
Howard, Yorkshire.
(© Mike Cowling /
Turnstone Media)

the conditional exemption scheme as there are in the National Gallery. Yet few public grants are available for conservation work in private houses, and tax incentives are generally limited to capital tax arrangements (such as the possibility of seeking conditional exemption from the full application of inheritance tax, in return for opening a house and collection to public access). Nevertheless, private owners of significant listed properties clearly have obligations towards the ongoing care and conservation of their heritage assets.

At Historic Houses, we offer owners the chance to attend workshops on housekeeping, in order to introduce them to the basic principles and techniques of the conservation of historic objects as well as specific techniques for caring for different sorts of materials. In reality, a more pragmatic set of decisions are necessary when considering conservation in the living home. Artworks may be on the walls of rooms that are still in active use for social events and general family life. Precise control of sunlight, temperatures and humidity needs to take place with regard to human needs and comforts as well as to the long-term care of collections. This is the pragmatic reality of much conservation work in the UK, therefore.

Endnotes

[1] www.historichouses.org.



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Cinisello Balsamo, Milan

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