



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

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The EPICO Programme: Preventive Conservation in Historic Houses and Palace Museums

Abstract

The EPICO (European Protocol in Preventive Conservation) research programme starts in 2014. The idea of this research was born from a reflexion thought over in the field: the work of collection caring carried out daily at the Palace of Versailles, was a privileged experimental field for the application of preventive conservation strategies developed in France.

The research on their adaptation to the peculiarities of historic houses then represented the *incipit* of the EPICO programme.

From 2014 to 2017 the objectives of the EPICO programme have been included in the scientific and cultural programming of the Palace of Versailles and its Research Centre. Thanks to the dissemination provided by the Association of European Royal Residencies, the Palace of Versailles joined forces with two other European partners: the Palace of King Jan III Museum in Wilanów (Warsaw) and the Foundation Centre for conservation and restoration of Cultural Heritage at “La Venaria Reale” in Turin.

EPICO aims to meet a need, which is prioritising preventive conservation actions in historic houses, thus avoiding to respond solely to conservation emergencies on a case-by-case basis.

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The Objectives of the EPICO Programme

Literature and field experience in this area are very rich and diversified: the assessment methods have been developed for museum collections, the storage rooms, the archival warehouses and archaeological deposits.

Our research shows that there is not at present a method perfectly suited to the collections in historic houses. Hence the need to develop a new assessment method able to meet these criteria: simple, adapted to the exhibited collections in the historic houses and the palace museums, conducted according to a systemic approach, able to provide a synthetic and global image of priorities for intervention, reproducible and transferable to other houses, whatever the size or complexity of the institution.

Based on this observation and in order to identify the priority actions, it seemed essential to start by establishing a diagnosis of the conservation conditions of the house and the state of conservation of the collections.

And in the face of hundreds of objects and exhibition rooms, it has proved necessary to have an assessment method.

Fig. 1
 Examples of methods
 developed for museums,
 reserves, archives...
 (© Danilo Forleo)



Following the three stages of the program: survey, test, elaboration, an interdisciplinary team of 15 professionals focused on the research and then the analysis of the 21 assessment methods that can be adapted to the EPICO's objectives.

Four methods were then selected and applied 3 times during life-size tests in the program's partner residences.

The goal was to identify the strengths and weaknesses of each method following a scientific approach, and then develop our own assessment system: the EPICO method.

Our experimentation field will have included a total of 40 museum rooms, 700 art pieces in the painting, sculpture, furniture and art object collections from the Palace of Versailles, the Wilanów Palace (Warsaw), the Pitti Palace (Florence) and the Stupinigi Hunting Palace (Turin).

This congress opens phase 2 of the EPICO program which is the application and experimentation of the method in the Palace of Versailles along with its dissemination within the member institutions of the network of the Royal European Residencies and the heritage conservation institutes in Europe.

The Assessment of Risks

Historic houses and palace museums are particular conservation systems that imposes specific risks on the collections.

These risks are closely linked to the very nature and use of these buildings: originally places of power, delectation and representation, they now become museums, reception spaces, places for contemporary and institutional events.

The whole of these activities often coexist inside the same house.

The Palace of Versailles is an emblematic example: a museum since 1837, it currently hosts several million visitors a year, it is the seat of the Parliamentary Congress, presidential receptions and the setting for numerous cultural events of different nature (shows from the Royal Opera, film shoots, professional meetings, round tables organised as part



Fig. 2
Château de Versailles, Galerie des Batailles, the largest hall of the Musée d'histoire de France, inaugurated in 1837. (© Didier Saulnier)

Fig. 3
Concert in the Galerie des Batailles. (© Didier Saulnier)

Fig. 4
Château de Versailles, filming in the Galerie des Glaces. (© Didier Saulnier)

Fig. 5
Relocation of the king's Louis XV's roll-top secretary for the exhibition "18, aux sources du design," Château de Versailles, 2014. (© Didier Saulnier)

Fig. 6
Relocation of large-size paintings for the new museography of the Galerie d'histoire of the Palace of Versailles. (© Danilo Forleo)

of this congress which will take place in historic rooms).

This implies a different management of collections from that of a museum for which the conditions of use and visit are designed ad hoc.

Tools for analysing deterioration sources such as climate, light or the manipulation of collections and the management of visitor flows are widely documented in scientific literature. Many experiments have been conducted since the 1970s when the practice of preventive conservation was developed in the heritage community.

But how to adapt these tools to the scale of a house the size of Versailles?

It is difficult for managers of collections to have a global vision of deterioration sources in their interaction with each other and at the scale of the house:

- which artworks should we focus on as a priority?
- which rooms present major risks?
- in particular, to which priority subjects should we allocate our time and financial resources?

The value of these unknowns, multiplied by the vertiginous figures of the Palace of Versailles (17,000 exhibited pieces, 1000 museum rooms, 5 million and a half visitors a year) makes the equation we face complex.

At the same time, even if in the private house of a modest size, the number of collections presented seems to make things easier, the “how” remains the most difficult question to grasp.

Often, due to lack of resources or expertise, it is difficult to identify priorities for action in a simple and transparent process.

Reacting to conservation emergencies turns out to be the only possible answer for most cases and institutions. Often the method is effective and allows to establish an observation of the most sensitive areas.

- But, how can one be sure not to forget a latent risk, or worse, a cause already active in a room among the few thousand of a castle like Versailles?
- How to justify, with scientific data, the right conservation directions?
- How to compare in time and in different spaces the results of our analysis and the effectiveness of our corrective actions?

Critical / Innovative Aspects

One of the most important aspects but also the most difficult aspects of our program was the search for a system that could shed light on the existing relationship between causes and visible effects of deteriorations, which we believe is the safest way to assess and legitimise any corrective action taken on the environment and the material of the collections.

To better contextualise this fundamental point of our program, the characteristic and common elements of our houses have been identified

and have allowed us to understand how the methods already developed for the collections of museums, archives or reserves are not directly applicable to our case.

These risks are related to the particularity of the presentation of the pieces and the conservation system that the house represents. Indeed, displayed according to the use for which they were designed, part of an inseparable group of collections and immovable decors, the collections from historic houses escape any thematic scheduling that would be accompanied by museum equipment designed for the preservation of collections.

The piece thus loses its character of *unicum* because it exists in relation to the neighbouring objects, its decor and its architecture.

It is obvious that its isolation in a showcase would break the spirit of the place.

In addition, the architectural envelope, itself a work of art, is also difficult to modify and cannot adapt to modern technologies of preventive conservation.

On the other hand, this privileged link between collections and building informs us about the particular relation thus established between the deteriorations of the material in the collections and the surrounding conditions that could potentially be the cause.

And this is the interest of the exercise. This is the characteristic point of the collections from historic houses and that we tried, in the framework of the EPICO program, to highlight with an innovative approach that we will develop further.

As we will see later, the second complex aspect of the research was the development of the statistical method to identify the representative sample of the rooms (the conservation conditions) and of the collections (conservation state).

We assume that beyond 500 objects we do not have the means and the time to make an analysis object by object or room by room. Thus it was necessary to identify the distinctive criteria of the house and its collections (the *mother population*, in technical jargon) in order to be able to choose the statistically representative sample of the different conservation zones in the castle-museum.

Conclusion

The methods presented in this congress formed the basis of our research. Above all, the methodology developed during 20 years of studies and experiments at the Master in Preventive Conservation at the Sorbonne made it one of the most comprehensive courses in Europe. Of course, this methodology is echoed in England, Canada and the United States where the expertise in risk assessment is a reference for the international scientific community.

For example, we can cite the studies conducted by Joel Taylor and



Fig. 7
Tapestries removed during building works on the collections of the southern central body of the Château de Versailles.
(© Danilo Forleo)

Fig. 8
The collections of the Château de Versailles in figures.
(© Christophe Fouin)

Fig. 9
Château-Musée Museography: collections exhibited in their creative context.
(© Christophe Fouin)

Fig. 10
Château-Musée Museography: collections exhibited in galleries retracing the history of the Château.
(© Christophe Fouin)

Amber Xavier Rowe on the intersection between risk assessment and deterioration causes, based on the condition report, which represents one of the foundations of our research.

It is not risky to identify in these different approaches the sometimes well-defined traits of the great schools of thought that were developed during the 1990s.

These different approaches are revealing, according to the latitudes of the different administrative contexts which demanded, for each one, the most adapted method to persuade the recipient of the assessment the accuracy of the diagnosis.

Should we analyse the risks or the state of the collections? Is it possible to cross the two approaches?

We tried to answer these questions.

On the basis of our experience, the fact of starting from the damages and therefore the observation of the symptoms and then deducing by a scientific method the plausible causes, represents the most convincing way of legitimising any corrective action recommended for the environment of the collections.



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