



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)

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# The Assessment in Preventive Conservation, Searching for Values

## Abstract

The introduction of evaluation methods in the field of heritage conservation implies, although they are never explicitly stated, the question of the values by which organisations are judged. The evaluation is the product of a succession of classification operations, measurements and data selections. All these operations search for as much objectivity as possible in the description of conservation conditions and of degradation agents. Evolving by necessity between the quantitative and the qualitative, evaluations in the field of heritage conservation, even if they are meant to be pragmatic, cannot claim to offer a total rationality in the quest for data. This contingent part of the context in which they evolve is decisive in the construction of evaluation tools. While these allow to give a value to expected but measurable results, the attribution of the evaluation criteria remains partly subjective.

But the situations can be appreciated only in relation to the models that represent what is to be, what we want to tend to. The mirage of the quantification induced by the use of norms and appreciation criteria must not lose sight the fact that no value system has inherent objectivity. It only translates what momentarily corresponds to a dominant model in the search for results. Rankings, grids, scales of appreciation are only admissible if choice relativity is set down by those who build them because we are in the presence of open systems that schematisation must neither close, nor freeze.

## Keywords

Preventive conservation, evaluation, values, norms, criteria.

## The Need for Evaluation

For several years, evaluation has become a necessity, even an injunction that is spreading across all sectors, seeking to base decisions and actions on efficiency, conformity or rationality criteria. This need is now so widespread that we are talking about “fever or evaluative folly” [Prigent, 2009]. Through this symptom, we can observe the consequence of the development of the computer tool which allows to manage a large amount of data, but also the tendency in contemporary society to want to put the world in order, to impose quantification on it and submit it to algorithms.

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Given the complexity of the functioning of contemporary institutions where the introduction to preventive conservation has led to a significant increase of parameters to be mastered, evaluation has to be the most effective tool for dealing with these new conservation developments and the dissemination of heritage collections.

The difficulty of creating an evaluation tool peculiar to the preventive conservation field lies in the fact that the evaluative practice has spread to the museum world only in the last twenty years. Previously, we mainly spoke of *Survey*, which was an evaluation without addressing the question of values. These were considered from the point of view of cultural property per se and not from the point of view of their conservation. The latter followed the heritage designation act as a technical answer after a piece or object had been recognised as carrying cultural value [Avrami, 2000, p. 8]. But the value given to the object does not induce the values on whose behalf the conservation process is organised to achieve its objectives: preserve to transmit. Until 1990, the methods that were used to assess conservation conditions took the form of decision support by drawing up an inventory revealing the weaknesses and strengths of the organisation. There was no existing comprehensive method of specific assessment for heritage institutions, with systemic evaluations being developed mainly in the education and the economic sectors. In these two sectors, in the interest of control or compliance, the focus was on reporting system performance, diagnosing weaknesses and proposing improvement solutions.

### **From Survey to Evaluation**

Early museum evaluations focused on exhibitions and public reception and “many approaches can be read as ways to justify the activity rather than trying to better understand its value” [Mairesse, 2010]. They have a purely technical vision evading the meaning of the studied devices.

It was in 1990 that the talk on the conservation assessment started with the Getty Conservation Institute, which published *The Conservation Assessment: A Tool for Planning, Implementing, and Fundraising*, which was then followed eight years later by *The Conservation Assessment: A Proposed Model for Evaluating Museum Environmental Management Needs*. Even though Suzanne Keene does not decide in 1991, in her UKIC paper, to yet differentiate audit and *survey* [Keene, 1991], the aim of both Getty publications was to analyse and characterise conservation conditions, degradation causes and factors and then to propose a strategy and an action plan that goes beyond simply registering the condition report to which the survey was limited.

In 1992, with Michalski’s publication *A Systematic Approach to the Conservation*, risk management and an inclusive approach to conservation are suggested. This is a decisive step because we move from normative to predictive. The aim is to introduce the cost estimation of the

value loss caused by a potential degradation, so as, it is specified in the text, to “reduce the total percentage of damage,” over a whole collection and to take all the degradation factors into consideration. From then on, the scale and objective are changed.

It was only a short step towards risk evaluation, as developed from 1993 onwards by Robert Waller, then taken up by ICC/ICCROM, that leads to the ABC method in 2016, which claims a comprehensive knowledge and a comprehensive appreciation of all the risks to which a heritage collection is exposed.

At the same time, proposals for self-evaluation are being developed to identify, according to immediate and localised needs, analyses and diagnostics of conservation conditions such as in Belgium [Bonnier, 2003] or in Switzerland [Meyer, 2011]. Also in 2011, the ICCROM offers, with the help of Gaël de Guichen, *Re-org, outil d'auto-évaluation pour les réserves de musée* using forty-three evaluation criteria applied to four areas for reorganising the reserves.

Also, through all the evaluation methods that have been developed since the beginning of this century and whose very complete account and comparative evaluation are made in the *Cronache 7* publication [Forleo, 2017], we start to have an overview of the evaluations whose common point is to quantify through quantified indicators both the state of conservation conditions and the priorities, but without explicitly addressing the question of values.

But an evaluation is not only a report, and it differs from a survey, as it must sustain a relation with the value. It is therefore a question of identifying a scale of values that will make it possible to determine the relation of the organisations evaluated on this scale, because before judging, we must put this in the light of what we judge, in the name of which principles are heritage collections preserved and transmitted.

In 2009, Nathalie Heinich, in *La Fabrique du patrimoine*, showed the different levels and processes of value judgement that project heritage into the news and allow its improvement: “The value, she says, is ‘administered’ to the object, in the sense in which it is proposed and then attached to it, in a more or less effective and lasting way according to whether the object accepts, supports, integrates this operation” [Heinich, 2009, p. 259]. The value assigns and manages a status and this concept of *operating* value will be developed more widely by the same author in another book: *Des valeurs. Une approche sociologique* [Heinich, 2017]. But this question about value is crucial in historical monuments where the first object of the collection is the building itself. It is not only a repository, it is heritage in its container as well as its contents. It is the *catch* that makes that each object it receives makes the history of the place present and gives it its value of re-presentation and exhibition. When a loss of value is observed on an object from a collection or on the entire collection in a historic house, it doesn't only

concern the value of the object but it is transferred to the values that situate it within the ensemble. The objects hold a value as much by their historical stature as because of their link to the site and its history (effect of presentification and representation).

### **The Introduction of Value**

Value is the product of operations by which quality is assigned to a situation, an action or an object. Awarding a value, or the choice to use one or the other, is a complex, discontinuous and discreet process that is representative of the culture of which it is the expression. This is what makes conservation assessment operations contextual and variable.

The evaluations, that is, the judgment that awards a value, depend on the nature of the evaluated situations, the capacity and resources of the evaluators (their axiological equipment) and the context on which the analysed situations depend (constraints, determinations). By interacting with his culture, the evaluator uses the values indicated by his mental representations conditioned by his intellectual background and experience. Any evaluation therefore remains dependent on the rules and criteria that allow it to build and exist. Each act of evaluation proceeds with the choice of what is to be mobilised as referential, that is to say, the “effective interactions” between situations, objects, humans and contexts. Thus, improvement operations depend on the nature of the evaluated situations, of the evaluator’s capacity and resources and the context from which result the constraints and determinations of the analysed situations.

It is in the recognition of the three operators – object, subject, context – and in the use of values [Heinich, 2017], that the practice of evaluation in preventive conservation evolves.

However, in our evaluation process, the values are never set down. They are implicit. We can nevertheless, by experience, designate some that control the use of cultural heritage collections and their conservation:

- The values applicable to the object (heritage values), which, without attributing an economic value, place it in a scale of cultural importance corresponding to its own network of designation: antiquity, authenticity, rarity, preciousness, historicity...
- These values recognise the object as heritage and worthy of preservation. They intervene in cost calculation of conservation of a set of objects or the loss of value caused by bad conservation conditions. Ultimately, they can intervene to define the relative importance of the objects within a set that involves classifying the prescriptions of an action plan [Keene, 1991, pp. 139-142].
- Values applicable to operating conditions (precautionary management values) that allow to establish in the long term the organisation

of the development of the collections. These are the *principles* on whose behalf we act and make cultural collections efficient: availability, accessibility, mobility, visibility...

– Values applicable to conservation conditions (state values) by which the sets of collection pieces are organised to meet management values. These values are used as conformity criteria and they are decisive for the observation of the way we maintain: efficiency, integrity, durability, rationality, order, storage, classification, protection...

And overarching everything, preside conservation and transmission values, in whose name the improvement of collections of objects recognised as heritage, is carried out through the values of use ensuring the **dissemination** and the option values and the legacy guaranteeing the **transmission**.

Three of these values are decisive in establishing conservation conditions.

First the availability that makes possible the use of cultural collection objects by protecting them by law, identifying them with the inventory and locating them in the institutions.

Second is accessibility, which includes all the provisions and the material operations that allow to grasp, see and consult collections. The accessibility covers three aspects:

1. There is accessibility to the meaning and the message conveyed by the objects. They mean something invisible: the past, the sacred, the memory [Pomian, 1987]. But for them to keep on being what they are, their form, defined by the material, must stay readable, and therefore accessible to knowledge. Also accessibility has for a limit the integrity of the material without which it is impossible to recognise and transmit the particular signification of which they are depositary;
2. There is accessibility to knowledge of the objects through inventory and documentation. Without recording the data concerning creation conditions, studies and interpretations, in a corpus made up of organised, available and accessible documentation, the objects cannot render their entire richness. Conservation also works on constituting and perpetuating this documentation;
3. Finally accessibility to the objects themselves through storage, location, handling and marking conditions. A heritage object that cannot be seen and is difficult to identify and locate cannot respond to the use for which it is intended.

Thirdly, the mobility which concerns all the operations or arrangements allowing the movement of the objects: handling, circulation, transport, hanging... Mobility ensures the utilisation of cultural pieces either in the form of the consultation or in the form of the mediation (exhibitions).

These values are not hierarchical but operate in interaction, the

<b>CONSERVATION</b> To enable future generations to dispose of collections in the same conditions as we have today		
<b>Initial Values</b>	Diffusion <b>Communicability</b>  Consultation, dissemination, mediation, exhibition on which the mode of existence of cultural collections is based.	Transmission <b>Transferability</b>  Articulation of knowledge, the sacred or the precious, without which there is no heritage.
<b>Heritage Values</b> <Appreciative Principles>	Social, symbolic, aesthetic, historical <b>Antiquity, rarity, preciousness, historicity...</b>	
<b>Precepts Values</b> <Operating Principles>	Values by which sets of cultural collections are managed <b>Availability, accessibility, mobility, rationality, security...</b>	
<b>State Values</b> <Evaluative Principles Compliance Criteria>	Values that characterise a situation and identify how cultural collection pieces are being exploited <b>Efficiency, integrity, durability, order, cleanliness, protection...</b>	

Table 1  
Distribution of values for  
heritage conservation.

register of some affirming or invalidating the register of others.

Thus, if we consider the *accessibility* of a collection of objects in the reserve or in storage, the value judgment will be based on the *rationality of spaces* and the *order* (state values). The *order* value, which meets the conformity criterion, refers to the *accessibility* value as the acting principle of a well-organised and efficient reserve (which can be translated for example by the criterion of time required to dispose of an object).

If we take the more prosaic example of *cleanliness*, we can consider it as a value because the presence of dust has an effect on the appearance of objects and their exhibition value. It leads to the inability to satisfy the values of *integrity* (alteration of the appearance) and *availability* (the objects can not be exhibited or lent as they are). From the point of view of evaluation, the *cleanliness* value, as a conformity criterion, activates *availability* as a working principle, calling for a prescription.

### Values, Norms and Criteria

A situation can only be appreciated in relation to a model that represents what is to be, what we tend to. To place the level of performance and determine the quality of conservation conditions, we use **norms** or **criteria**. These characteristics, which establish links and dependence between themselves and whose distinction with the values can be difficult to establish, have an *instrumental* role in the recognition of the system's state and the production of judgment value.

If these terms can seem interchangeable, they nonetheless play a

specific role in the evaluation, explicitly clarifying the role values, the existence of which is often implicit. These technical aspects of the evaluation constitute what is most obviously rational in the process. A congruence is sought between the experience and the principles that manage the conservation, between the goals, the means and the foreseeable consequences of the action (finality), for the rationality supposes a set of means is adapted in order to reach a definite purpose.

The **norm** refers to a dictate that indicates that something must be or happen. It is the prescriptive side of value. The norm is always established for an end (result of a behaviour, consequence of an action). Therefore, in order to be in a normative necessity, that end and means must be wanted but there are choices to be made because all the means are not valid. For there to be a norm, there must be the *desire* to produce something. The norm is not an end in itself: “The standard does not want anything,” says Kelsen, it is necessary to aim at something while laying down a norm [Kelsen, 1996, p. 13]. It is the norm that will signify the act and give it an end. The example of the climate norm is significant from this point of view: it is an appropriate humidity in relation to a context that must be the norm and not an imposed value: “50% for wood!” But the goal is to conserve the wood, it is not to reach 50% of RH. This example illustrates the confusion that can establish itself between the *necessary* and the *possible*, between means and the end. Oscillation between knowing what one **wants** to do and knowing what one **must** do, nuance between subjective end and objective end, between what is desired and what is obtained. In any case, if the end is well determined, the means to execute it are not. It is the whole question of norms and their effectiveness that arises. But also of the evaluation’s purpose: to evaluate for what end? To comply with norms or make the collections available and accessible to the public?

Criteria are constant characteristics that allow the appreciation, the selection or the recognition of the qualities required to establish good conservation conditions. These are the specifications that are used to judge that something is consistent with the values [Heinich, 2017, p. 228]. Any evaluation remains dependent on the rules and criteria that allow it to be constructed and exist.

Criteria call for a scale of value allowing to classify facts according to their congruence with the desired order of things (conformity of a situation or of a given action with respect to a repository). The judgment can be expressed by numerical indicators (indices), classified on a scale from a positive pole to a negative pole. This quantified aspect gives the judgement an objective characteristic, although a bit artificial for, in the statements, quantifiable elements that want to be as objective as possible will coexist with elements in a subjective position that are induced by the mere fact of operating choices. But the fact remains

that this numbering gives a tangible basis for what could only be a sensation or a feeling, various perceptions that can prevail in the same situation.

The evaluation, as envisioned here, goes beyond the mere control operation in its design and scope to make sense of conservation devices. What needs to be established is that evaluation must remain the tool of change and not the means to subject organisations to the dictates of the measurable or the quantifiable. It must stay a method, proposed for risk prevention and degradation causes, a tool adapted to the needs of knowledge and the control of the parameters of conservation conditions, targeting and adapting actions which need to be carried out in institutions. The tools and means of evaluation can be used as resources that can be mobilised to make systems evolve and not to make them subject to profitability or rationality of cultural behaviour.

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