

Conservation and restoration

On the lacquer art

The generic term "lacquer" covers a wide range of techniques and materials with diverse composition, properties, and origins.

The world of lacquer is currently divided into three primary categories: vegetable lacquers, most of them come from the Asian territory (China, Japan, Southeast-Asia) where the resin is extracted from the lacquer tree, *Rhus vernicifera*, through the methods practiced for thousands of years.

The second type is referred to as "European lacquer" or "European varnish (like Vernis Martin, Vernis Dagly, etc.)", which utilize a blend of natural resins dissolved in oils. These lacquers were created to mimic the lacquer originating from China and Japan.

The emergence of synthetic polymers and advancements in the petrochemical sector led to the introduction of new types of lacquer, such as nitrocellulose and polyurethane lacquers.

The conservation and restoration treatment of cultural properties are affected by their origins and composition.

On the conservation and restoration of lacquer objects

The conservation/restoration of cultural property is defined by The International Council of Museums-Committee for Conservation (ICOM-CC) as: "*The conservation restoration treatment are all measures and actions aimed at safeguarding tangible cultural heritage while ensuring its accessibility to present and future generations.*"¹

This definition highlights the objective of preserving cultural heritage for the benefit of future generations.

Furthermore, the European Confederation of Conservator-Restorer's Organization (E.C.C.O.) issues guidelines for professionals to help them honor their responsibilities for the preservation of artifacts. According to Article 5, "*The conservator-restorer shall respect the aesthetic, historic and spiritual significance and the physical integrity of the cultural heritage entrusted to her/his care.*"²

However, the implementation of conservation treatments is approached and carried out in specific ways depending on the country and the object.

In Europe, conservation heavily draws on the writings and concepts of Cesar Brandi³, Paul Philippot, and recognized institutions in the heritage conservation field. Recognizability and the reversibility of any intervention on conservation treatment of artwork are highly valued in Europe, leading to a preference for the use of materials that differ from the original.

In contrast, in the East, especially in Japan, it is important to respect the work of art as a whole, taking into account metaphysical, ethical, philosophical and technical factors.

¹ ICOM-CC definition: <https://www.icom-cc.org/en/terminology-for-conservation>, consulted October 8th 2023).

² E.C.CO professional Guild lines, https://www.ecco-eu.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ECCO_professional_guidelines_II.pdf, consulted October 8th 2023).

³ Brandi C., *Théorie de la restauration*, traduit par Colette Déroche, Centre des Monuments nationaux/ Monum, ed. du patrimoine, 1989.

On the western side, there is an emphasis on using reversible products, while in Japan, there is more focus on preserving the original material.

According to Japanese, "the use of a material similar to the original is not only appropriate for physical reasons, but also for metaphysical reasons"⁴.

As a result, lacquer, a non-reversible material, is employed for each stage of conservation treatment and restoration in Japan.

However, Catherine Allasimone⁵ argues that Japan's participation in international organizations like UNESCO (1951) and ICCROM (1967) has had a significant impact on its receptiveness to the Western model of cultural heritage conservation.

In the past two decades, many collaborative research initiatives and workshops have facilitated a greater integration of Eastern and Western preservation practices, with each side valuing and accommodating the perspectives, techniques, and approaches of the other. Treatment projects, such as those conducted on the Mazarin chests at the Victoria and Albert Museum⁶ and the Japanese chest at the Rijksmuseum⁷, are the result of these developments.

The introduction of hybrid treatments, combined with training Westerners in Japanese restoration techniques and collaboration between East and West, facilitated the introduction of conservation treatments for lacquered works that consider the work in its entirety while respecting all the senses of the heritage.

⁴ Webb Marianne, *Lacquer Technology and Conservation, a comprehensive guide to the Technology of both Asian and European Lacquer*, Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford, 2000, P.14

⁵ Allasimone, *Protection du patrimoine intangible et politique culturelle au Japon*, Thèse de doctorat, Atelier National de reproduction des thèses, 2003.

⁶ <http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/t/mazarin-chest/>

⁷ <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/research/our-research/conservation-science/furniture/lacquer-chest>