

LEARNING FROM ERRORS

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The artist projects and rejects. He destroys the shavings in the course of producing an original form. In contrast to this, the scientist abstracts matter as long as he can. He does not declare causalities to be laws until their sequence can be repeated at random. The craftsman only achieves masterly skill by constantly practising on interchangeable objects.

Under obligation to all three, the conservator, however, is in the unfortunate position to be able to learn from his errors — even if they should seem insignificant and pardonable.

Let us not deceive ourselves: «good» skillful routine ordinarily only meets the meagre demands of average quality which cannot do justice to the distinctness and particularity of a unique and inimitable art relic or cultural relic. Every recipe, every technique, every aid can be the death of the defenceless guinea-pig. Which of us practises in trial runs? And then again — are the results of experimentation applicable to the unique work of art? And who has not repeatedly been taken by the frightening feeling to have had more luck than understanding in this procedure or that treatment proposal...?

Ethically speaking, our profession is teetering on the edge of a most dangerous precipice: often we are artists and craftsmen enough to «retouch» the traces of our own destruction; often scientifically well-versed enough, in conversation with the layman, and in documentation to cover over the traces of our own errors. The sins of our predecessors are only added to our own. Which stretcher, which varnish was still «genuine» when we mistakenly laid it aside? Which overcleaning stems not from «grandfathers time», as some newcomer in the conservation studio perhaps reached for the wrong solvent bottle...?

Once upon a time, conserving art was a profession for the needy, ironically laughed at, suspect — a matter for dead-beat artists. Since then, in the public eye, we have gained some social respectability, since the deterioration and unrenewability of our cultural property has beckoned to us, and clothed us in the mantle of the scientific approach, but are we, in future seriously willing to accept the individual responsibility for our activities?

Our professional unions themselves with their unifying call for order and regulation can serve us only as an identification card, and *not* as a fig leaf!

Medical doctors have since created price standardization for their treatments. Only we conservators seem not to be able to establish genuine price-estimate standards for *our* work based on quality, responsibility standard, degree of education and experience — not being quantifiable with naked criteria of treatment time, object value, surface, weight or volume.

And finally, who is his own just judge, concerning experience, ability and goodness, when it is necessary to dispute cost proposals?

But back to our errors. One need not look far to find them. *Where*— as an example of the writer's — a be-spiked automobile drove over a painting, which was forgotten on the way during transport on the top of the vehicle — or *there*, where by «all-hands-on» handling of a large jute decoration by Picasso, a razorsharp corner of a table went clear through the painting, — or, for instance, *there*, where the mustache painted by the artist himself as an «after-thought» was gotten rid off — .Anecdotes of this kind exist in droves in all our experiences. But fundamental misconception, which begins to fill us with consternation only after some time, is more invisible and insidious: it breeds in all too comfortable methods one has picked up long ago, unproven theories, and in an uncritical or pretentious method which nevertheless must «pay for itself». It breeds in the «playland» of the everbelieving, ever «young-at-heart» chemist/technologist, but also merely in the fleeting moments of lack of respect of an unappreciated object, due to its unsightliness. Error begins with the taking-on of a lucrative project, although we may sense that we are not quite «up to it», or just with a self-apologetic sigh, that «it would soon be done, and behind us». Error again would be the recruitment of an insufficiently trained — yet inexpensive — collaborator; or then again, his dismissal, when his services are no longer required: for what he has bungled *under supervision* will be undoubtedly continue to do *without supervision* — with even more devastating results.

In the field of conservation, there is no such thing as rectification — not even in an immaterial sense. Nowadays, being scholarly, we ask of ourselves «reversibility» — forgetting or dispelling the notion, that there is no such thing: every intervention — even non-intervention, in the case of a deteriorating object — is irreversible before the eyes of history. A couple of chemical reagents may react reversibly «in se», but not so in application to or association with an entrusted object. The misuse of materials will become obvious only in the future, as these materials in their turn begin to age.

The mature person learns from his errors and may banish them later to the subconscious as painful occurrences. The conservator, ever-struggling towards experience, however, covers over the precincts of his many years of «activity» with an ever-growing soiled carpet of misdeeds: alas, these errors will be even more portentously clear: Time, which beneficently completes the artist's work through «patina» runs mercilessly forward carrying along our «miscarriages»: how many retouches, adhesions, fillings, impregnations, await the hour, the year, the decade of revelation?

But *must* the conservator's maturing lead to pessimism, nail-biting and inactivity? Or will he, on the other hand, be compelled — with a self-righteous view of even lesser competent colleagues — to pursue a tough career according to the old excuse that «conservation is, after all, a job like any other»?

Almost fifty young people — as volunteers, students, assistants, or collaborators — have gone through the conservation studio of the writer. The main preoccupation has never been considered merely as «jobs to be done». Behind our endeavours has stood the purposeful didactic questioning of the strange topic itself: conservation. Is experience conveyable? Is education within the «inviolable precincts» of profession at all possible? Is schooling only the hermeneutic awakening of a predisposed «gentleman»? The answers read almost always equivocally for educator and the young people in the profession — different, indeed even diametrically opposed: how often from «real» model-pupils are created «ideal» flops!

And we forge ahead all these years — always convinced in the obvious need for academic standards — the founding of public educational centres, even when the academic screening violates those practically trained; even when suspicious relationships of «latent adultery» between *university* and *craftmanship* have issued from the negotiations of a few European centres. If, in the long run, the load-bearing institutions would be lacking in their *ability to teach* the ever-so-necessary advancement of knowledge, the oppressive doubt would not be settled concerning the *learnability* of academic-orientated processes in this profession: How *does X* actually employ his microscope? Does *Y* also make his UV and raking-light photographs «after conservation»? Who *really* is concerned by the physical/chemical formulations of *Z*?

Last but not least, further failure of our endeavours, concerning the immanent problem of freedom in the profession. A teacher who must survive generations of questioning students, cannot - onpunished and completely without opportunism and positivism — demonstrate the feasibility and efficiency of his profession. His own constantly-occurring errors, which as stated earlier, should «work educationally and ennobling upon him», can he, as educator, seldom employ.

Failure and experience – in life ordinarily two antagonists, seem to be pulling the cart in our case. In order to steer it in the right direction and to attain appropriate speed and distance, the driver must possess seemingly contradictory virtues: intuition and scientific knowledge, taste and calculation, courage and restraint, loftiness and subtlety, love and sobriety...Which of us is still willing, burdened by all these conditions and demands, to wed this virtually impossible profession?

Translated by Christine Fillion