

Why Old Art Matters to Contemporary Art Conservation

For decades, the conservation of contemporary art has been diverging from the traditional ethics and practices that guide conservators of more conventional artworks. For good reason: the unfixed nature of contemporary art presents challenges such as variability, rapid obsolescence, and ephemerality. For these reasons, it is widely held that contemporary art and traditional art are fundamentally different. This paper interrogates that view by suggesting ways in which traditional artworks are also unfixed, and where conservation treatments of the old and the new are analogous. If we accept that the traditional and contemporary arts are not fundamentally distinct, but rather falling on different points on a spectrum of rate of change, then old art may once again become useful to contemporary art conservators. Specifically, this paper proposes that old art may provide a standard by which acceptable aging in contemporary artworks can be assessed. The aim of the paper is not to undermine developments in the discourse on contemporary art, but to make a case that traditional artworks (and its conservators) should not be excluded from it. At minimum, the long trajectory of old art may provide clues to how theoretical and practical decisions about contemporary art will affect how it endures.

Short bio

Cybele Tom is currently Andrew W. Mellon Fellow in the Department of Conservation and Science at the Art Institute of Chicago, her professional home for the last five years. Specializing in polychrome sculpture, she has additional interests in conservation theory, documentation, and the provocations of contemporary art. In 2013 she received a Master's in Art History and Advanced Certificate in Conservation from New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. She has carried out long-term internships at The Frick Collection in New York and the Bode Museum in Berlin. She also serves as Book Review Editor for the Journal of the American Institute for Conservation (JAIC).