

# **Preserving significance: Why the journey mattered more than the car**

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## **Abstract**

*The conservation of technological objects in social history museums requires a modified approach to conventional static conservation or traditional restoration projects. Objects in these museums are being preserved more for the story they embody than for the technology they represent.*

*Leading up to the opening of the National Museum of Australia (NMA), conservation was undertaken on one of its most valued objects, the Francis Birtles Bean car. The car became internationally famous in the 1920s for the journeys it undertook, including one from London to Melbourne.*

*The NMA takes into account an object's function as much as its form when undertaking conservation projects. Finding a balance between an object's preservation and the uses a museum seeks to put it to can be especially challenging when treating functional technology.*

*This paper will discuss some of the ethical and practical approaches to conserving technology at the NMA using as a principal example the Bean conservation project. This paper is designed to be read in conjunction with the other material being presented by the NMA at this conference. It will primarily cover ethical issues of preserving story, while our other work will cover practical applications.*

## **Introduction**

Preserving collection items in a museum like the National Museum of Australia (NMA), where an object's social history story is given at least as much value as the physical form of the object itself, means developing conservation techniques that preserve significance.

*Significance* is a difficult term to define in a museum context. What makes something worthy of preservation for the greater good of humanity? What about it warrants the expenditure of storage and conservation resources that attempt to prolong its presence as a community resource? Defining significance, the reason why an object is being kept in the collection, has pivotal importance to designing a conservation plan for an object's ongoing care.

This will primarily be a philosophical discussion. It will cover amongst other topics, why we at the NMA are proud of the oil leaks in our vehicles, how functionality relates to significance, and the value of conserving function.

Butterflies pinned out in museum glass cases make a dramatic statement about the variety of nature, but butterflies in the ever popular zoo butterfly houses give a direct

experience of these gentle creatures. Many of the world museums display as “industrial sculpture” the world’s most impressive testaments to human ingenuity. Like butterflies in glass cases they lose their context. The fact that machines are designed to work is pivotal to their significance. Balancing physical preservation objectives against preserving meaning is becoming increasingly central to designing effective conservation plans for technological objects. In a world where the museum public is increasingly hostile to what they perceive as dead collections “rotting” in the stores, there is pressure for conservators to adapt their treatments so that the public feel that *their* collections are being preserved in ways which fulfil expectations. This means finding a healthy balance between the nostalgic desire to see something operate the way it did when it was new, and the museum appreciation that we preserve collections in perpetuity for the benefit of humanity.

Conservators have worked hard over the decades to promote an understanding of the value of original surfaces, the importance of presenting the uninterpreted original object (warts and all) for the public to draw conclusions from, of the need to limit deterioration rates so that historical objects are not “consumed” by the display imperative of a single generation.

The problem with restoration is that human beings, by their nature, have a tendency to seek to improve on the technology that is in front of them. A technology restorer often cannot help but make “improvements” based on modern technology and thinking. The problem in museums is that this tampers with historical integrity and meaning. The world would be outraged if a publisher printing a Shakespeare play decided to change a few lines here and there because they thought it sounded better. The publisher would be ridiculed for daring to impose their own personal judgement onto one of history’s great legacies. Why is it that when masterpieces of human technological history are “restored” there is often but a whimpering observation when new parts or technologies are introduced as if they were integral with the original? Why is it that we are accepting when a restorer says “*This car won Le Mans .... During the restoration we had to put on a new body, put on hydraulic brakes and replace the pistons with aluminium*”, that we are prepared to accept the restored car as the one which completed this historic achievement? In museums, making an interpretation of humanity’s great technological achievements is equivalent to editing Shakespeare because we think it sounds better. Museums should seek to preserve the integrity of our technological history with as much vigour as they defend great works of art and literature.

We are relatively early in the history of post industrial revolution technological objects. Technology has moved so rapidly that there is a certain familiarity with these objects. They do not yet have that certain aura that is associated with a Renaissance painting or 1000-year-old jewellery. Its development has changed human history in quantum leaps, but because it is not ancient, not yet sacred, many amateurs, and even professionals, feel they have licence to treat these objects on an personal possession basis. Perhaps this is the natural process of attrition, one through which we whittle down to those most significant objects that will survive the passage of time. But there is a risk in our enthusiasm to preserve for posterity. Harrison’s marine timekeepers and the Wright Brothers’ flyer, pivotal technological developments, have both undergone major restorations in the last century. We pass them on through time as partial interpretations rather than as master works of history. Their survival today is perhaps because of these restorations, but it has come at the cost of portions of their creators’ work. What happens to an object as it passes through time is important to

museums, but once in museum collections there are important decisions to be made about what format we want to pass the object on in, and how we preserve what is significant about it.

The awareness of technological objects as being three dimensional knowledge repositories is increasing. Likewise is the demand by researchers to be able examine and interrogate the unedited and untranslated “text” on their own behalf. It is becoming increasingly important that conservators of technological objects limit personal interpretation to a bare minimum, and clearly mark any additions to an object so that it does not run the risk of becoming an historical interpretation.

The value of original technological objects as material testimonials to the society that created them is being recognized by museum conservators and curators. Thankfully the tide of “ruthless glamorizing ... often with harmful, irreversible methods” (Van De Wetering, p.193) has begun to recede from the way we look at object care and display. There are many museum objects that to all intents and purposes look like, and may as well be, plastic models or mock up replicas. Their original fabric has been interpreted so heavily in pursuit of fulfilling the *display fashion* of the day that their historical value has become questionable. Through idealized interpretations they have become a misrepresentation to admiring onlookers. They tell of a history that never was. The personal interpretations of the restorers are imposed on the viewer, and the object becomes less about the makers’ intentions, and more about showing off restoration skill.

If we ascribe part of the significance of an object to its capacity to yield raw research data then the degree to which it has *not* been modified or improved by museum practices becomes important. Too often traces of history have been made unintelligible, modified to give erroneous interpretations, or have been outright destroyed by attempts to meet the display imperative of the moment. As Lanord points out, when treating objects we are acting as custodians of human thought and aspiration, not just of matter:

*“The treatments and care we administer in the laboratory ought to return to the object, as much as possible, its significance...it must be remembered that ... the object is not just inert physical matter ... they are important ... because of all they hold that is still alive in them ... as an embodiment of the imagination ... charged with very diverse meanings”* (France-Lanord, p. 245).

Conservation and restoration processes are some of the most high risk periods for objects. Not only are they subject to the potential for accidents or well intentioned but poorly executed repairs, they also run the risk of being devalued in the estimation of scholars and museum audiences. It has been said of painting conservation that “A retouching pushed until it is almost invisible, illusionist, has at times been condemned in principal, since it would constitute a fake” (Philippot, p.337). The introduction of new materials into technological objects should only be undertaken in ways that are clearly identifiable to anyone wanting to study an object in detail. At the NMA all introduced material is either clearly and permanently marked with the letters “NMA” and the date, or where this is impractical, is manufactured from materials clearly distinguishable from the originals. To do otherwise, that is, introduce new parts as if they were the originals, degrades the meaning of the object as a whole. People feel very different about replica objects compared to originals. Creating a replica by a slow process of attrition, one piece at a time, is none the less creating a replica. A

technological object that is a confused jumble of original components and difficult-to-identify later additions is little different to a painting that has been overpainted a dozen times, with only remnants of the original composition showing through.

Arguments about the impact of conservation treatments on the way an object is perceived are not new. In many cases they have been developed over decades. They tend to reside in the writings by historians and conservators of fine art. While our methods and materials may differ wildly, it is clear from this passage by Van De Wetering that technological object conservators do not need to reinvent the philosophical wheel:

*“... it is specifically the signs of natural aging and of wear that often provide us with the significant information about the material of which an object is made. These signs also provide instant information about the meaning of an object and about the ways and means in which it was used; they even let us know the extent to which it is valued – or neglected ... Both the signs of aging and the signs of wear may be disturbed severely in the course of restoration; even if they are consciously respected by the restorers, an alien effect may result. The surface acquires a look that does not occur “in nature” ... the objects have thus become, through such treatment, stylized objects of our own time”* (Van De Wetering, p. 417-418).

In 1926 an Australian adventurer named Francis Birtles used a rudimentary four cylinder car manufactured by the British Bean Car Company to break the Darwin to Melbourne land travel time record. In 1927-28 the same vehicle was used to make the first car journey from London, England to Sydney, Australia. The nine month “endurance trial” across the English Channel, down through Europe, the Middle East, India and South East Asia is one of the epic adventure stories from early motoring history. At the conclusion of the journey the Bean company donated the vehicle to the Australian government for display in a yet to be built National Museum, a process that was to take over seventy years.

The conservation of the Francis Birtles Bean car for display meant making decisions about how we wanted objects represented to the Australian and wider public. This Bean had driven from London to Sydney before there were roads. Its significance was inherently linked to the fact that it had travelled this journey and was given to the Australian Commonwealth as an operational vehicle. Decades of pre-museum storage had resulted in a vehicle that no longer operated and was in critical need of stabilization. One of the early questions which arose in discussing a conservation treatment plan was “should the car be operational now?” The arguments about use causing wear and risk of loss are well travelled. Some people ignore them, others go to extreme lengths to mothball and preserve form. Our decision was built around arguing what was significant about this object. A factor that could not be ignored was that this vehicle was not towed into Sydney, it did not come in as a pile of parts on a wagon, it drove in. On this basis we took a decision that the vehicle should be capable of operation. There is a distinction here. Because the car is capable of operation does not mean that it must or should be operated. There would be no logical reason, for instance, to attempt an anniversary re-creation of the journey. But in the minds of visitors to the museum the realization that the car in front of them still operates after making that journey all those years ago adds meaning to the experience.

Visitors to the Bean almost immediately notice the drip trays and small puddles of oil. As a museum professional it is interesting to stand in the background and watch

visitor reactions. For many people, used to the drip free modern motor vehicle, this is cause for alarm. “*What is wrong with it, why didn’t they fix the oil leaks?*” Others smile knowingly, confident in their knowledge that most English vehicles of the period pretty much had a part number for the oil leak, but that they know how to fix them – “*better than the museum*”. We at the NMA are proud of the Bean’s oil leaks. We also could fix them, but have taken a deliberate decision not to. The car retains its leather, felt and slinger seals, it leaks oils from its haphazardly machined gasket faces, and when it runs it drips oil and water in ways that offend modern car owners. Our conservation processes were intended to preserve the limitations and failings of the car’s design, as much as its success stories. The car tells a more accurate story by showing off its faults, and for many people provides an entirely new experience of what motoring was like in the 1920s. Most people’s experiences of vintage cars are the immaculately restored and pampered examples owned by fastidious collectors. Enthusiasts have collected the premium models, added all the best period accessories, and made contemporary engineering improvements to improve reliability. These vehicles run the risk of misrepresentation, creating a world where an ideal glamorized interpretation comes to be assumed to be the way things were. In fact these cars were expensive, smelly, sprayed oil and water at inopportune moments, were difficult to start and were mechanically unreliable to the extent that many people found the horse a much more practical form of transport. By displaying the Bean “oil leaks and all” we keep alive an understanding of where our commuter society has come from. Many of the world’s record breaking vehicles are displayed in museums in lovingly restored conditions, some having been restored several times over. This Bean is one of the very few examples of these early record breaking vehicles that has been left to tell its own story. Its body has literally broken in half from metal fatigue, the early aluminium castings exhibit stress fractures from the “cold” casting processes and the side of the vehicle has scorch marks from where an auxiliary fuel tank was accidentally set alight. The vehicle tells the story of a very difficult passage through time, of only just barely completing its journey and then of surviving its progression to national icon and museum display item.

In conserving the Birtles Bean we were conscious of avoiding the fatal mistake of treating the object and losing the history it represented. As a technological development the vehicle held negligible significance. It was the journey it undertook that gave it a place in history and significance. What we sought to preserve was the journey. This meant that the polymerized oil, mud and grass adhered to the underside of the engine and gearbox were not something we wanted to remove, but a feature we wanted to preserve. To remove this material would be akin to straightening the leaning tower of Pisa - it would take from the object the very thing that made it different and precious. Similarly the engine mechanicals were covered in spots of red paint. These were not an outrage of carelessness, but precious clues to the authenticity of the car’s mechanical components. By Raman Microscopy analysis, these specks of paint could be matched to the originally red bodywork. The by-product of paint application had given us a method of forensically identifying which parts of the vehicle had made the trip, and which were the result of later repair attempts. Potentially the seeds and soil grains still adhered to the cars underside will be able to validate stories about the route Birtles took on his journey. It is these tiny specks of information on an object that combine to validate it as an item of significance. Every time one is carelessly removed the chances of the object telling an even greater story are diminished.

We go a step further with our approach. Our goal is that the vehicle be preserved as more than sculpture, and that its functionality be preserved. Our arguments for doing this are both philosophical and preservation based. The NMA has been conducting work over a number of years to evaluate the best methods of preserving functional objects. Part of our work on inhibiting technological objects is also presented at this conference.

Corrosion inhibition in museum vehicles can be effectively achieved in vehicles that retain functionality. The NMA is conducting work to evaluate both static and functional preservation. To date our work has shown that structured functional maintenance programs are far superior to simple storage programs at preventing deterioration, and may be as effective as conventional mothballing techniques. The science behind this is discussed in our other publications. At the NMA objects that are required for periodic short term display are preserved as functional objects. By selecting specific oils, cooling system inhibitors, shut down and start up procedures we believe that the short periods of structured and controlled use are less damaging than conventional storage techniques and no more damaging than mothballing techniques. There are strong philosophical and practical reasons for carefully constructing conservation plans which take into account the goal of preserving the significant features an object embodies. The ongoing maintenance approach has a key advantage of retaining the functional significance of the object. These objects can be more accurately interpreted and better retain their place in human history. Conservation is not just about preserving the form a piece of matter takes, it is also about ensuring its significance is retained and meaning perpetuated.

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