

"WHY PRESERVE THE PAST?"

A series of six programmes based on recordings made at a seminar organized by Unesco and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington

PART 6

Harold Plenderleith, former Director of the International Centre for the Study of the Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM), recounts some of his experiences during forty years' work as a museum scientist.

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Produced: April 1985 by Erin Faherty, assisted by Vaiju Mahindroo

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Opening and closing announcements are recorded.

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FAHERTY: The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization presents the last in a series of six programmes entitled "Why Preserve the Past?".

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FAHERTY: Harold Plenderleith, former Director of the International Centre for the Study of the Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Property, has behind him more than forty years as a museum scientist. A special guest at the seminar organized by Unesco and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington under the title "Why Preserve the Past? - The Challenge to Our Cultural Heritage", Dr. Plenderleith, in a talk over lunch, recounted some of his adventures and war-time experiences.

PLENDERLEITH: Well, it's very nice to be here. Peacefully, I was hibernating in my native Scotland some two or three weeks ago, when the mail arrived and to my delight there was a letter from America. And to my even greater delight it was an invitation to come and attend this important conference, which instinctively I decided I would do. But, as often happens, there was a sting in the tail. Further on in the letter there was an invitation to write a paper for the conference, of finite length, on a subject which I couldn't, for the life of me, see was anything but infinite! (laughter) I haven't got it here... oh, yes, it was "The Crises Facing Cultural Preservation Around the World" in, what was it? - twenty, twenty pages! (laughter)

Well, confronted with a problem like that, of course, the tendency was to shut the other eye and continue with the hibernation. But the more I meditated about it, the more I came to the conclusion that I wasn't being asked to supply the answer to all these crises, but to make a survey of them that might be helpful in the discussions here. And I have been most interested to see that that's precisely what we've been doing. So many aspects that occurred to me have been dealt with in a professional fashion, because I should say that anything I have to say about conservation will be said as from my limited experience as a museum scientist - not as an architect at all - but as a museum scientist who's devoted to conservation and who's been a very keen supporter of the international organizations since they started.

Now, I wrote this paper and now that I come back to look at it again, of course, it's not exactly the kind of thing that I should have presented at the conference at all. But you must realize that I was doing it from my own point of view which is that of the museum lab man, and that I began sixty years ago, in 1924, at the British Museum which is a holy of holies that kept scientists at bay. And the reason why I was there at all was that after the First World War, when they dug out exhibits that they'd had in the Underground, they found them all covered with woolly hairs and crystals and things, and were surprised and much perturbed by the fact that they'd suffered more from being put in this war-time repository than they might have suffered if they'd had a direct hit from a zeppelin bomb! (laughter) And someone suggested that the only way to deal with the problem was to have a museum laboratory. It must be in the museum premises because of the laws pertaining there, and as you can imagine, a scientist was looked at askance by the scholars of the British Museum who regarded him as a very dangerous man who dipped things in acids and made them fizz. So I went there.

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PLENDERLEITH: And the first point I want to make: in facing a crisis of whatever nature, we instinctively have two, three things things we might do - either ignore it, or else try and assess the importance of the threat and then marshall such forces as we have to combat it. And what I've done is to try and analyse this title a bit and approach the subject in that manner. And I would like to say that, to begin with, my experience was entirely on the collections in the British Museum, most of which were under the table in a pile, taken out of their boxes. Some were mouldy, the metals were corroding, the wooden objects were softened and damp a little bit, the papers were stained. In fact everything, to my innocent condition at that time - knowing nothing about preservation of objects - was a mess. And of course the Trustees were terribly embarrassed and surprised by all this and so was I when I learnt that there were priceless things among the specimens which somehow had to be examined and methods had to be worked out for treating them.

Well, it took a little time to soften the hearts of my colleagues but we soon had them interested in our approach, when they saw that we were interested in doing our best for the specimens. And I should say, at that time the alternative to treatment by a scientist was treatment by a restorer. At that time anybody could stick up a sign above his shop saying "Restorer" - "Picture Restorer", and he could take it into the back shop and repaint the picture - because they had secret methods. They used their own pet formulae and many of the substances they used, well, they should not have been used on a thing like a valuable painting at all.

Well, from the very beginning, we decided we can't do that. We've got to try and make a success of this and publish all the results. And that we did. And it took us some time again to win the hearts of the restorers, but eventually they found that it paid them to be friends with us and we could listen sympathetically to what they were prepared to tell us about their methods and perhaps suggest improvements. I was once called to York Minster, for example, where a certain Clerk of the Works had decided that the only possible treatment for the beams that had fallen off the south transept right down onto the floor, riddled with death watch beetle, was to take them down and boil them in some solution, which was very much too expensive for anybody. And he had fitted up tanks for all this. It was all quite unnecessary but I listened patiently to him when he was prepared to speak to me about them, and I lent his son my new Leica camera to go and take some photographs with and so on, and we went and looked at the tanks and eventually I got a brainwave. I said to him "I can give you a formula that's just quite as effective and doesn't cost nearly so much". And then after he agreed to that, and I went into deep concentrated meditation again. And I said "I've had a wonderful idea. We'll add this and then you won't need to boil it, you see". And then, by teatime, he was quite prepared to leave the beams up where they were and squirt the stuff in, and that was good enough. (laughter) Well, the result was he knew how to deal with that and he was the world's expert on dealing with death watch beetle. So we gradually won him round and the main problems were dealt with.

And eventually we found out, for example, that just as it takes two people to make a quarrel, it takes two things to cause the deterioration of an object. The first is, well, the nature of the specimen itself, and the second is the environment. And it was the environment of course in the Tube that was responsible for all the trouble. We were interested in fungicides and insecticides and so on, and we were interested in the kinds

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PLENDERLEITH:
(contd)

of treatment that were reversible even at that time. And we were interested in using the materials that were as safe as possible and dilute as possible, and so on - moving very carefully. In fact, an awful lot was done with soap and water to tell you the truth, but that wasn't scientific so we didn't publish that. (laughter)

Well, the one thing - the one research that was called for urgently was what to do with objects that you want to put in a safe place; what sort of conditions do you apply, do you expect to find - and air. And we found that the main thing that we were fighting against was water all the time. Water - water's the most dangerous substance; it's made of hydrogen and oxygen, and oxygen's very dangerous too. But these things are very simple things. There's always moisture in the air and if you can control the relative humidity - keep it not too dry and not too wet - things survive pretty comfortably. At the same time, we played about with temperatures and when we were suddenly confronted with the Second World War we felt confident that we could establish an environment that was safe for these things.

But we were scarcely enthusiastic when, in the end, through the intervention of none less than Winston Churchill, we were given a Bath quarry, near Bath I should say, which had been used as a mushroom quarry. You can imagine the humidity in that place - quite hopeless, but ideal for our purposes. And the Office of Works said, well, we'll give you any temperature and humidity you like in that place, provided we can treat the walls satisfactorily with some salicious material that will exclude moisture coming through from inside. What would you like? Well, I didn't know quite what to say but I thought well, we'll take a medium thing; we'll maybe get near it and maybe we won't - say sixty percent relative humidity at sixty degrees Farenheit.

Well in a year's time they managed that. They had thermohydrographs set up in this quarry; they'd cleared out all the mushrooms and they'd painted it nice and white, fixed the dust and so on, and these hydrographs were drawing straight lines: sixty percent/sixty percent. And in that quarry we had a real Aladin's cave: the most valuable stuff from the British Museum, the Royal Collections, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and then from all over the country where there was something really special. I don't know what the value of the things would be in that place! And they survived the Second World War without a single accident. Only one thing happened. I had to go to Bath because they discovered a spider, and how a spider could get into the place I had to find out. It walked in under the door. That was the only problem we had! (laughter)

So, again, the National Gallery paintings were taken to a quarry in Bath where fortunately the temperature was such that when it was raised to sixty degrees the humidity was exactly - well, it was fifty-eight actually, fifty-eight degrees. So there was an ideal place for the paintings. And that was our main war effort.

So that we had, you see, as contribution facing these crises, we had the museum scientist working in his laboratory, we had the friendly contacts with architects and engineers whose job, I may admit at once, is much greater than ours in that they have not usually the possibly of controlling the environment as we would have it controlled.

Well, my paper has got one virtue: it starts with an abstract. If you read the abstract you needn't read anything else. (laughter) There's a conclusion which is a very sketchy thing at the end and between that there's the contents in which I give some ten examples of the field work of Unesco, which has been referred to in detail by experts this morning, so I needn't say anything about that.

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PLENDERLEITH: I decided then that I would try and make an analysis of the main crises that might be expected to confront us, and I came to the horrible conclusion that most of the crises are due to man-made causes. I also list ten or so natural causes, and come finally to the ultimate catastrophe which is, of course, the natural changes in the environment, which I needn't mention any more. But man-made changes in the environment that are caused by war and its attributes of course we've got to confront somewhere, sometime, and I was pretty certain that it wouldn't be dealt with at this meeting. (laughter)

And altogether this was prepared, you see, after I'd been retired for about ten years, so I was not quite up to things. But I had to try and skate through and not occupy other people's territory, you see, so that's what I've done. And that's why I'm so interested to find that so many of these things have been already alluded to this morning. Now, if you want to read anything - and I'm finished at this stage - don't miss the last sentence. I was awfully pleased with the last sentence. (laughter and applause).

FAHERTY: Harold Plenderleith, former Director of the International Centre for the Study of the Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Property.

Music - fade under

FAHERTY: That was the last of a series entitled "Why Preserve the Past?", based on recordings made at a seminar at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. The programmes were presented by Erin Faherty and produced by Unesco in Paris.

Music - up and out