

---

Material Preservation and Its Alternatives

Author(s): David Lowenthal

Source: *Perspecta*, Vol. 25 (1989), pp. 67-77

Published by: The MIT Press on behalf of *Perspecta*.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1567139>

Accessed: 19/09/2008 11:05

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=mitpress>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We work with the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



The MIT Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Perspecta*.

# Material Preservation and its Alternatives

*David Lowenthal*

Preservation has become a rampant cult. All over the world, individuals and institutions save more and more from every possible past. The resources devoted to salvaging and celebrating surviving remnants mount exponentially. Few cultures are exempt from, few individuals uninfected by, the mania for memorabilia.

Why is this so? It reflects a wider modern preoccupation with the past – the nostalgic temper that makes each new film a reprise of an older one, the search for roots that swamps the genealogical archives, the reverence lavished on oral histories, the insatiable appetite for historical romance. Disappointed expectations of progress and looming fears of decline and impending catastrophe feed all these attachments to the past. Preservation's particular focus also reflects the global diffusion of nationalism and capitalism. Both make material relics precious symbols of power and icons of identity.

Historic preservation arose in conjunction with early nineteenth-century European nationalism. Old buildings in particular and physical relics in general for the first time became valued, not merely as emblems of private property or of religious faith but as tokens of a shared identity, uniting present communities through felt continuity with an ancient past. Nation after nation legislated to safeguard material remains as crucial elements of their heritage.

Since the Second World War, ex-colonial Asia and Africa have followed Europe and America in celebrating antiquities as national icons. Under UNESCO's aegis, scores of states seek to repossess heritage lost to the West along with pre-colonial autonomy through looting, plunder, or sale. The heritage restitution crusade, the brouhaha over World Heritage sites, and infamies of the art and antiquities markets attest to the power and pervasiveness of attachments to material relics.

Preserving things also creates wealth. Modern technology and consumer manufactures turn all goods into money, all values into exchangeable commodities. Uniqueness or rarity enhances the material value of heritage items to the detriment of traditional, spiritual, or aesthetic values. Antiquities are collected and preserved less for their meaning or beauty than for their investment potential. Crowds flock to the museums less for aesthetic thrills than to take a gander at all that money hanging on the wall. And traditional societies must bid for their own heritage in Western-dominated markets.



*Iris Temple, Philae, Egypt*

Commodity values also reflect the materialization of memory. Oral discourse gives way to printed histories, memorial monuments, and other material evocations of the past. Collective memories get consigned to history books, museums, commemorative occasions, and preserved precincts. We create archives, mark anniversaries, protect historic localities, and save things generally because memory has been truncated.

The range of things preserved has also expanded. Our predecessors saved only grand heroic treasures; today everything – the typical as well as the unique, the neighborly and the exotic, the relics of the wicked as well as those of the good – is saved for many new motives. Among these are a *cult of the representative*, ascribing merit to things typical of their time; a *cult of the folk*, seeking reminders of unsung masses who left few artifacts and no written words; a *cult of the familiar and the recent*, as tokens of continuity against obsolescence and dislocation, that makes 1930s linoleum and 1950s toasters as collectable as Georgian tea caddies; a *cult of escape* from a soulless, monotonous, or fearsome present, a perennial nostalgia now given added edge by the placeless sameness of global goods and the grim austerities of much modern architecture; a *cult of economic gain*, that ranges from conserving energy and materials to pandering to tourism.

I do not decry material preservation. Its benefits are manifold. It endears the familiar, reaffirms purpose, validates custom, enhances identity; it guides, enriches, and diversifies life. But it also exacts costs and engenders problems. And material preservation virtually excludes other ways of valuing tradition. Before exploring some alternative modes of appreciating our legacy from the past, let us look at some of the contradictions inherent in material preservation.

#### CONTRADICTIONS OF MATERIAL PRESERVATION

Endurance in perpetuity is preservation's guiding aim. But nothing lasts forever, and however faithfully protected, everything always departs more and more from its original state. Indeed, for all preservation's emphasis on original substance, we identify and cherish most things for their form or genetic continuity, not for the stuff they are made of. Though erosion and accretion ceaselessly transform them, a building or pair of shoes remains that building or those shoes from the moment of their making until the building falls into rubble, the shoes into rubbish. Living things likewise keep their identity despite obvious development and physical change. "An oak, that grows from a small plant to a large tree, is still the same oak," as Hume put it, "tho' there be not one particle of matter, or figure of its parts the same."<sup>1</sup>

Preservationists have done little to resolve the dilemma Plutarch made famous to philosophy as the "ship of Theseus." Brought into port for repairs, every old plank in Theseus's ship was replaced by new planks. Was it still the original ship? Brian Smart's variant sharpens the issue: a builder commissioned to supply two ships, an old one restored to seaworthiness and a new one made of old materials, sees a way of selling the two ships for the cost of one. In drydock A, each old board of Theseus's ship is replaced by a new one, until the entire ship is refurbished. Meanwhile, each old plank is put into a new frame at adjoining drydock B. When a fire destroys drydock B, both buyers sue for the delivery of the original ship; but which one is it? On the grounds that identity inheres in an object's continuing form, not in its fragmentary and ephemeral substances, the court ultimately awards possession to the buyer

1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), bk. 1, pt. 4, sect. 6, in *The Philosophical Works*, edited by T. H. Green and T. H. Grose, vol. 1 (Aalen: Scientia, 1964), p. 538.

of the surviving ship at drydock A. Each new plank in it has at once become part of the old ship, while the old plank it replaced forms part of the new ship just coming into being. Being a part of Theseus's old ship was only a temporary phase in the lifetime career of the old planks. Does the importance of the original historical treasure lie in its identity as a boat or in its being a collection of planks?<sup>2</sup>

Material substances may help to authenticate an object's provenance, but it is genetic properties (maker, period, history) that distinguish authentic from fake or replica objects of art and nature alike. A child values a teddy bear because they share a history of interaction; only the teddy bear he has always cuddled will satisfy him, not even a molecule-by-molecule reproduction will do.<sup>3</sup> The worth of what we preserve depends ultimately on the various and sometimes conflicting intentions of its creators and subsequent guardians and restorers.

Material preservation is thus at bottom an illusion. Felt historical continuity takes precedence over strict material authenticity, which is itself impossible to achieve or sustain. What matters in preservation may be continuity of form, of substance, of texture, of color, or whatever. And because material objects are continuously transformed, every stage in preservation forces choices among these many valid but irreconcilable criteria. No preservation decision is logically right, let alone permanently appropriate.<sup>4</sup>

Another difficulty of material preservation is the stress engendered by multiple claimants. Relics and monuments are treasured not only by the cultures that created them and the states that now possess them, but also by individuals, by other localities, and by the world as a whole. The Parthenon is precious not only to Greeks in general and Athenians in particular, but to all admirers of classical culture; Jerusalem is sacred alike to Jews, Christians, and Muslims. But a material relic can be in only one place at a time.

Competition may enhance preservation worth. But the more widely valued such objects are, the more fraught the struggle to possess them – and the more prone they are to theft and vandalism, as assaults on the Louvre's *Mona Lisa* and the National Gallery's *Virgin of the Rocks* attest. Indeed, scarcity value promotes destruction, as with Mayan temples cut up for illicit export. The avid appetite for antiquities undermines their protection in situ, in context, and in their integral wholeness.

The threat of loss to a supposed rival has, to be sure, spurred heritage consciousness into preservation action. The precursor of the French antiquities service came into being following real (though unfounded) fears lest British antiquarians transport neglected Norman monastic ruins across the Channel. The Netherlands' monuments agency was born out of scandalized reactions to a British museum's purchase of a hitherto little regarded sixteenth-century Dutch rood-screen. The felt need to forestall the transatlantic export of Tattershall Castle put teeth in the British Ancient Monuments Act of 1913.<sup>5</sup> But the felicitous results of rivalry are outweighed by its ill consequences: the whiplash between sudden inflation and speedy decline of interest; the mercenary nimbus or patriotic penumbra that obscures aesthetic, pedagogic, and historical values; the time and energy spent, the enduring bitterness engendered in squabbles over possession. Whatever decision is reached, there can be only one winner and there will be many losers.

2. Brian Smart, "How to Reidentify the Ship of Theseus," *Analysis* 32 (1972): pp. 145-48.

See also Francis W. Dauer, "How Not to Identify the Parthenon," *Analysis* 33 (1972): pp. 63-64;

Lawrence H. Davis, "Smart on Conditions of Identity," *Analysis* 33 (1972): pp. 109-10; Brian Smart, "The Ship of Theseus, the Parthenon, and Disassembled Objects," *Analysis* 33 (1973): pp. 24-27; Theodore Scaltsas,

"The Ship of Theseus," *Analysis* 40 (1980): pp. 152-57; David Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), pp. 92-94; Theodore Scaltsas, "Identity, Origins, and Spatio-temporal Continuity," *Philosophy* 56 (1981): pp. 395-402; Hugh S. Chandler, "Plutarch's Clothes-pin," *Analysis* 44 (1984): pp. 55-58.

3. M. Pabst Battin, "Exact Replication in the Visual Arts," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 38 (1979): pp. 153-58.

4. David Lowenthal, "Art and Authenticity," in *Themes of Unity in Diversity*, Acts of the Twenty-sixth International Congress of the History of Art (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 1988), pp. 637-41.

5. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 393-94.

6. Christopher Chippindale, "Stoned Henge: Events and Issues at the Summer Solstice, 1985," *World Archaeology* 18 (1986): pp. 38-58.
7. David Lowenthal, "Conserving the Heritage: Anglo-American Comparisons," in *The Expanding City*, edited by John Patten (London: Academic Press, 1983), pp. 225-76.
8. Frank Johnson, "Ruritania Here We Come," *The Times* (London), 23 June 1981.
9. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun*, originally published in 1859 (New York: Signet, 1961), pp. 219-20.
10. Leonard Courtney, quoted in Charles Dellheim, *The Face of the Past: Preservation of the Medieval Inheritance in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 91.
11. Roy Strong, "Taking the Age Out of Heritage," *The Times* (London), 24 September 1983, p. 8.

Even when location is not at issue, guardianship and access may embroil rival celebrants. Stonehenge is a case in point. To preserve the monument, to pacify local landowners, and to cater to a seemlier tourist clientele, English Heritage and the National Trust, which "own" the prehistoric stones and the land they sit on, in 1985 banned the customary annual solstice visits of hippies and of Druids; the result was armed combat with many casualties. Only on one point are all parties agreed: to relieve the pressure by constructing replicas would be fruitless folly, for there can be only one meaningful Stonehenge. Fame and need may spur demand for this or that material relic, but materiality itself inexorably limits the authentic supply.<sup>6</sup>

Preservation costs and benefits are largely unresolved, for most of its values are matters of feeling and attachment not amenable to cost-benefit analysis. Preservation sometimes saves materials and fuel, but the more that is preserved, the greater the effort required and the sacrifice of new construction foregone. Preserved structures and milieus may defray some costs through visitor receipts, but thereby write off other economic choices and incur other social costs. In any case, only a small fraction of what is preserved pays for itself through tourism. Ultimately one cannot keep the nineteenth let alone earlier centuries without paying for it in the twentieth.<sup>7</sup>

The cost of preservation transcends repair and maintenance charges. Saving old things runs counter to the very spirit of modern enterprise. In Britain today many fear the cult of preservation may create a nation valued only as a relic. They are leery of becoming full-time purveyors of their past, quaint old codgers in a fairy-tale historyland. "Tourism reduces all nations to Ruritania," warns a critic. "It encourages their citizens to become hucksters and grovelers after tips."<sup>8</sup>

Preservation is charged not only with preventing progress but inducing moral and social decay. Gentrified villages conserve old houses only by destroying the old community. Restoration block-busting in quaint old American neighborhoods typically displaces low-income residents. It is still mainly the rich who wish to save old buildings – and get grants or tax benefits for doing so.

Others censure preservation for crippling initiative. Americans felt this burden of the past long before preservation became practice. "All towns should be made capable of purification by fire, or of decay within each half-century," wrote Hawthorne in a typical tirade against the old. "Otherwise, they become the hereditary haunts of vermin and noisomeness, besides standing apart from the possibility of . . . improvements."<sup>9</sup> This complaint was soon leveled against preservation, and not only by Americans. "We cannot allow our lives to become overburdened and crushed down by the mere accumulation of the dead things of the past," said a member of Parliament in 1878.<sup>10</sup> A modern director of the Victoria and Albert Museum echoes the point. "Worship of the past and what it has created has been taken to an extreme unknown to any previous century. . . . Nothing is deadlier than dead heritage and there is too much dead heritage around. The past has swallowed us up."<sup>11</sup>

Preserving architecture is particularly felt to inhibit creativity, to foreclose the future. Old buildings pre-empt talent as well as space; regard for antiquity stifles innovation. "If we let the paranoid preservers manoeuvre us into keeping everything," charges an architectural

historian, “we shall bring the normal life-process of decay and replacement to a halt, we shall straightjacket ourselves in embalmed cities of the past.”<sup>12</sup> Had preservation so ruled in the past, structures now thought splendid or sacrosanct would never have been built. “Conservationists rob us of our cultural self-confidence,” runs a typical indictment. “We can no longer create, construct, imagine something new. We have to conserve, preserve, restore.”<sup>13</sup> These complaints may exaggerate preservation’s influence, but they reflect pervasive misgivings about attachment to relics.

Preservation also segregates the past. Salvage encumbers the landscape with artifacts that no longer attest to a living antiquity but celebrate what is dead, replacing traditional stream-of-time continuity with a separable and salable past. Museums expressly aim to sequester relics so as to save and display them. But outside the museum, survivals adapted to new uses are also apt to be set apart from present-day things; their anachronisms are highlighted, their antiqueness is emphasized, the obsolescence of the original use is underscored.

Museum perspectives suffuse preservation work, for we tend to “see our historic towns as ‘pictures’ somehow divorced from the reality of everyday life,” in a planner’s words.<sup>14</sup> Seen from this perspective, preservation actually underscores our freedom from antiquity. Our very eagerness to save its vestiges shows how much we have overcome it. The vogue for preservation reflects the victory of the modern. Relics are enjoyed all the more because they matter so little; it is their felt remoteness, their lack of consequence for the present, that lends preserved things much of their charm.

Setting preserved things apart forecloses other ways of using them. Such remnants seldom inspire new creation; they are valued as sacred relics, not for how we might reshape them. We protect ancient structures rather than make new ones after their example. Unable to use the past creatively, we further isolate what we preserve; what we make may conform with treasured relics but seldom extends their virtues; what we save is property and artifacts rather than ideas or culture.

Is material preservation our only option? What else might secure the benefits we associate with it? Can the difficulties I have sketched be avoided or mitigated by putting less emphasis on material preservation or perhaps forswearing it altogether? Three modes of action, customary in some societies but not now common in our own, suggest alternative ways of coming to terms with a legacy.

#### FRAGMENTS

Saving fragments rather than wholes has obvious practical advantages. They take up less space; they are less costly to maintain. And because they are already reduced from their original state, they come to us with a presumption of change that should allow their caretakers greater latitude: fragments do not demand the same obsessive fidelity to original integrity as wholes.

Yet fragments are not less efficacious as reminders. The merest traces of the past, as Adrian Stokes has put it, “keep us in touch with our own development.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, their very fragmentariness helps to evoke the past. What survives is always a fragment of what existed. Even the intact entities visitors see at historic sites or in museums are in a significant sense fragments of what used to be some greater assemblage. Europeans of the Renaissance disdained fragments

12. Reyner Banham, “Preserve Us from the Paranoid Preservers,” *Observer Magazine* (London), 21 October 1973, p. 15.

13. Douglas Johnson, “Not What it Used to Be,” *Vole* 5 (1978): p. 43.

14. Roy Worskett, “New Buildings in Historic Areas,” *Monumentum* 25 (1982): p. 150.

15. Adrian Stokes, *The Invitation in Art* (London: Tavistock, 1965), pp. 60-61.

on philosophical and aesthetic grounds as incomplete, incoherent, asymmetrical, and reminiscent of death and decay. Just as humanists reassembled the mangled body of classical learning – Thomas Traherne’s “worthless shreds and Parcels” – into an “Intire piece,” so they restored mutilated antique remnants to lovely wholeness. Restorers reconstituted scattered classical fragments; sculptors made facsimiles to fill in anything that was not whole, adding new heads and limbs to bring antique torsos alive.<sup>16</sup>

16. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, pp. 169-71.

17. William St. Clair, *Lord Elgin and the Marbles* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 151-53; Benjamin Robert Haydon, *Diary*, edited by W. B. Pope, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 120.

18. Friedrich Schlegel, quoted in Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 24.

19. André Malraux, *The Voices of Silence* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1954), p. 635.

20. Stephen Owen, *Remembrances: The Experience of the Past in Classical Chinese Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 66, pp. 70-73.

Romantic sentiment, picturesque taste, and the cachet of authenticity began to lend fragments greater prestige by the late eighteenth century. Connoisseurs of the “aesthetics of rupture” scorned modern repairs to ruined buildings and armless torsos. The Elgin Marbles exemplify the aesthetic revolution that transformed fragmentation from a defect into a virtue: as late as 1805 Lord Elgin and others took it for granted the sculptures would be restored, and sought out Canova and Flaxman to make men, horses, and centaurs whole; by 1820 it seemed right to leave the sculptures as they were. “How broken down they are, a’ant they?” Benjamin Haydon overheard one viewer of the marbles in the British Museum remark. “Yes,” his companion replied, “but how *like life*.”<sup>17</sup>

Fragments seemed lifelike because they exemplified living processes. And the taste for fragments spread to other works of art, new as well as old. Literary creations like Goethe’s *Faust* were advertised as “Fragments.” “Many works of the ancients become fragments,” wrote Schlegel, “many works of the moderns are so at their genesis.”<sup>18</sup> Even the tragic abbreviation of such modern lives as Byron’s and Shelley’s lent these “fragments” a luster of romantic mortality.

Fragments surpass wholes in joining the past dynamically with the present. Mutilated and incomplete, they impart a sense of life “from the evidence of their struggle with Time,” in Malraux’s phrase.<sup>19</sup> The decrepitude of many Christian relics underscores the miracle of their immortality. The charred and fragmented bones, the scattered remnants of wood and cloth, express the eternal power of the saints they enduringly incarnate. On the other hand fragments that are merely transient evoke the past with peculiar intensity. Seeing the un-reconstructed fragments of mutilated paintings, for example, shocks the viewer into a double apprehension, of its presumed original state and of its ineluctable decay into *bricolage*.

In thus engaging the viewer’s imagination, fragments activate myriad connections between what is and what was. “The fragment points backward,” notes Stephen Owen of aesthetic responses in China; “it draws our attention to the empty spaces around its jagged periphery”; it recalls what it came from, forming a bond between past and present in a way a whole does not, or does only when we recognize it as a “fragment” of the world that was. Such recognition enables us imaginatively to reconstruct the past. In the ninth-century poet Li Ho’s “Song of an Arrowhead from the Battlefield of Ch’ang-p’ing,” a wanderer contemplates the commingled debris – “Char of lacquer, powder of bone . . . three-spined, broken wolf’s fang” – left by the carnage. The encrusted lump he holds “clearly *was* something but . . . now has no form, category, or definition . . . char or ash, something that remains after burning; powder of bone, relics of death, . . . the physical survivor that recalls a shattering and a dissolution.” Fragments not only reveal what is missing, ghost presences of their past, they also refer to their re-discovery. Thus the fragment implies “the history of both its deposit and its recovery.” Implicating so many surrounding realms, the fragment is invested with “repleteness and intensity.”<sup>20</sup>



The function of fragments in dynastic China parallels their role in the Renaissance. Humanists regarded bringing together fragments of ancient buried texts as a laudable act of healing, recalling the heroic career of Hippolytus. Resurrected fragments became nutriment for new metamorphoses. And in restoring the fullness of the past the humanist reassembled himself as well, reconstituting out of the fragments of his own memory, his own history, an identity that combined an old consciousness with a new one. Such resurrection demanded not simply the rebirth but the replacement of the past, for “the dead must be devoured and digested before new life can ensue.”<sup>21</sup> In organizing fragments, the present preserved and transmitted a reshaped past.

For the Chinese, fragments served to encapsulate and magnify the past; for the Renaissance, fragments served as vehicles for restoring and translating the past. Both preserved fragments not for their own sake but, the one to contemplate a wider inter-temporal world, and the other to reconstitute a world to be out of a world that was. In both cases, preservation was creative rather than passive.

#### PROCESSES

A focus on preserving fragments does not connote a reduced regard for preserving material substance; on the contrary, it implies a heightened respect for its now altered and attenuated form. Those who strive to preserve not materials but processes of manufacture honor the past not by saving traditional relics but by replicating them. The world’s most renowned instance is the wooden Ise Shinto temple in Japan that has, over the past millennium, been dismantled every twenty years or so and then replaced by a faithful replica built exactly as before. When traditional construction materials are highly perishable, as in Japan, it makes sense to repeat rather than to perpetuate, to bow to the mortality of matter while aiming to secure immortality in the process of replication.<sup>22</sup> As prized transmitters of cultural heritage, the traditionally trained craftsmen who thus perpetuate the techniques and rituals of re-creation are themselves designated “Living National Treasures” by the Japanese government.

That things must be periodically destroyed as a prelude to their re-creation is implicit in this emphasis on process. Many societies thus combine preservation with creative emulation or even outright innovation. The use of *malangan* in tribal New Ireland illustrates how demolition contributes to the wellsprings of creativity and to its social functions. Traditional social interaction involves the periodic exchange and destruction of carved or woven ritual artifacts. It is not the material durability of *malangan* that matters, but the artifacts’ family resemblances to bygone and future *malangan*. Only those who acquire *and then destroy them* gain the right to replicate their form in new *malangan*; the right is in abeyance as long as the previous object still exists. Thus museums and Western collectors who acquire *malangan* reduce the range of forms available for replication and hamper patterns of social interaction. Among these islanders, the material destruction of previous ritual objects is part and parcel of conserving social bonds.<sup>23</sup>

Destruction and preservation are, in the most profound sense, bound up in a cyclical process. A story by David Ely describes Britain after it has been destroyed in a nuclear accident. The massive effort of total restoration has had the useful corollary of reducing international tensions. Perhaps “the vaporization of Britain was logically necessary,” muses an expert, “to express the dual impulse of our age – vast devastation coupled with equally vast

21. A. Bartlett Giamatti, “Hippolytus among the Exiles: The Romance of Early Humanism,” in his *Exile and Change in Renaissance Literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), pp. 12-32; Terence Cave, *The Cornucopian Text: Problems of Writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), pp. 37-46, pp. 69-73.

22. Bunji Kobayashi, “The Case of the Ise Grand Shinto Temple in Japan,” in *Nessun futuro senza passato*, Acts of the Sixth General Assembly of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (Rome: ICOMOS, 1981), pp. 185-91.

23. Susanne Kuechler, “Absent Meaning: The Death and Resurrection of ‘Objective Value,’” paper presented at symposium, Making Exhibitions of Ourselves: Limits of Objectivity in Representations of Other Cultures, British Museum, London, 13-15 March 1986.

24. David Ely, "Time Out," in his *Time Out* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), p. 101.

25. Alan Randall, "Human Preferences, Economics, and the Preservation of Species," in *The Preservation of Species: The Value of Biological Diversity*, edited by Bryan G. Norton (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), pp. 79-109; David Lowenthal, "Conserving Nature and Antiquity," in *Man, Nature and Technology: Essays on the Role of Ideological Perceptions*, edited by Eric Baark and Uno Svedin (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 122-34.

26. Pierre Ryckmans, *The Chinese Attitude Towards the Past*, Forty-seventh George Ernest Morrison Lecture on Ethnology (Canberra: Australian National University, 1986), pp. 2-4, pp. 7-9; Wang Gungwu, "Loving the Ancient in China," in *Who Owns the Past?*, edited by Isabel McBryde (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 175-95. See Joseph A. Reaves, "The 'Uglification' of Beijing's Past Glory," *Preservation News* (July 1987): p. 5.

reconstruction." Other social benefits also ensue. To "ease the population pressure and provide a harmless outlet for human energy both at the same time," he concludes, "ultimately it may become desirable to vaporize and then restore one nation every generation."<sup>24</sup>

Where living entities are at stake, preservation must concern process rather than substance. All organisms are mortal; little is to be gained by prolonging any life much beyond its natural span. Once it is dead, neither mummification nor taxidermy can preserve what was most valued in the living creature. Nature preservation efforts hence focus on species, on aggregates rather than individuals. As with malangan, it is the ongoing process that counts, not any substance (unless one considers a gene pool to be a substance). To some biologists even species preservation seems fruitless, since extinction is in any case the ultimate fate of most if not all species. What these scientists consider worth preserving is not species but ecosystems, which may be unique assemblages but are in no sense individual entities. And some biologists would protect neither species nor ecosystems, but only whatever biosphere conditions maintain evolutionary processes. For evolution continually replaces species and ecosystem losses with new realms of living organisms that are no less diverse and adaptable.<sup>25</sup>

#### REPRESENTATIONS

Fragments and processes offer more flexible alternatives to preserving material objects in toto. Images of the past, whether preserved in paint or print or simply as memories in the mind's eye, may serve as adequate surrogates for original material entities, and on occasion offer a heritage in many respects preferable to the "real" thing.

In China, for example, devotion to tradition in language and ideas has long gone hand in hand with recurrent destruction of physical remains. Mao's orders to demolish most of China's ancient monuments proved easy to carry out, for few historic structures had survived the incessant iconoclasm of millennia past. Revering ancestral memory and written tradition, the Chinese hold the past's purely physical traces in small regard. That most antiquities and art works were hoarded in central dynastic collections sped their periodic demolition; they succumbed to the iconoclasm of those who toppled each dynasty in turn. The relics of "ancient" vintage that Chinese sages refer to having seen rarely date back beyond a century or two. Indeed, Chinese scholars agree that old works of art must perish so that new ones can take their place. It is the memory of art objects rather than their physical persistence that suffuses Chinese consciousness and stimulates new works. However grievous their destruction may be to individual owners, it is felt to be no serious loss to the nation.

In fact, the Chinese ideal discourages material possession as a burdensome, imprisoning vice. To amass, classify, house, and protect art objects and other relics reduces creation to commodity, demeaning both object and owner. Only the loss and ultimate dissolution of those objects can rectify the psychic damage their possession has inflicted.<sup>26</sup>

How material possession degenerates into a lust for acquisition and into dehumanized hoarding is the lesson of Li Ch'ing-chao's "Afterword" to her dead husband's monumental study of epigraphy, written in 1132. Chao Te-fu shared with his wife a love of antiquities – old books, rubbings of inscriptions, calligraphy. For the pleasure of acquiring some treasured item, they lived in cheerful frugality, even pawning their clothes for a painting or calligraphic work, "chewing over" old writings and antiquities in companionable contentment.

As Chao Te-fu's career as a provincial official prospered, their collection grew. Items were classified, organized, put in perfect condition, to the point where they required a separate wing in the house, now so valuable they had to be kept under lock and key; to gain access to it, Li Ch'ing-chao herself had to ask her husband's permission. "From a connoisseurship of knowledge and appreciation, we have moved to an almost mercantile connoisseurship of possession"; now it was no longer what was in the work that counted, but "the work as object," in Stephen Owen's gloss on this tale. "The transformation of books and art into objects is part of a system of possession, which in controlling, organizing, ranking, regulating, and locking things away, corrupts a genuine relationship to the past, just as it corrupts the relations between human beings in the present" – for Li Ch'ing-chao now learns that she, too, is valued mainly in relation to the collection.

As Tartar invasions threaten the collection with scattering and destruction, Chao Te-fu sets up a hierarchy of worth to save as much as possible. And the collection shows its ugly face, not as knowledge and pleasure but as a mass of objects that enslave their owners. As the wife transports the more precious moiety to supposed safety, her husband reminds her of the order in which she must save things: "abandon the household goods first, then the clothes, then the books and scrolls, then the old bronzes – but carry the sacrificial vessels for the ancestral temple yourself; live or die with them; don't give *them* up." Thus, writes Owen, "she too has her place in the catalogue – along with the sacrificial vessels, the last to go," commanded by her husband "to die gloriously and willingly with her arms full of bronzes." Ironically, her own poignant account of its corrupting influence is what secures the collection's immortality in historical memory.<sup>27</sup>

Material preservation may engender corruption in the objects preserved as well as in their collectors. A revealing parable of the misuses of preservation is the focus of Siegfried Lenz's novel *The Heritage*. His protagonist, Zygmunt Rogalla, founds a museum to preserve and display local arts and folkways in the Masurian borderland of East Prussia. Successive invasions by German and Russian armies again and again constrain Rogalla to "remold the museum in the spirit of the new times," now weeding out artifacts of Germanic provenance to emphasize Masurian links with Slavs, now eliminating Slavonic relics to reveal Masuria's essentially Teutonic heritage. A German commander insists the collection be rearranged "to demonstrate that the Masurian has always seen himself as the advance guard of the Germanic spirit in the East"; then Russian reconquest renders once-favored Teutonic relics not only tasteless but incriminating, while the decorated butter-crock and the toothed flax-scutcher from the Vistula take on heightened significance.

At the end of the Second World War, the surviving remnant of the Masurian community flees to Schleswig. Rogalla re-establishes his museum there as a focus of Masurian identity and a reminder of the homeland. But even here German nationals and Polish visitors exert pressures that influence what is displayed and how it is attributed. Their chauvinist zeal subverts authenticity until Rogalla realizes that his relics will never be allowed to attest historical truth. In despair, he at length sets fire to the lot, so as to "bring the collected witnesses to our past into safety, a final, irrevocable safety, from which they . . . could never again be exploited for this cause or that." Originally preserved so as to bear witness to the realities of the past against the violations of the present, Rogalla's heritage collection finally succumbs to the very corruptions its retention was meant to prevent. Better no material witnesses at all, Lenz warns us, than relics that can so readily be turned into lies.<sup>28</sup>

27. Owen, *Remembrances*, pp. 90-92.

28. Siegfried Lenz, *The Heritage* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 266, p. 452, p. 458.

To be sure, immaterial witnesses to the past are no less malleable. Current recall can warp memories even more easily than physical relics. But immateriality exempts them from most corruptions that possessiveness and commodity market greed engender, and spares them the pretenses that cloak material remains with a spurious validity.

Wang Xizhi wrote his archetypal calligraphic “Preface of the Orchard Pavilion” to mark a day of festival during a spring ritual in the fourth century. Instantly famous, “Orchard Pavilion” was copied again and again. The seventh-century Emperor Tang Taizong avidly collected these copies and was reputed ultimately to have acquired the original. Buried with the emperor in 649, the original “Orchard Pavilion” has not since been seen. But it has been continually copied, with new stone tablets carved from copies, then new rubbings taken from the stones; the pedigree of these copies of copies of copies is itself a complex, arcane discipline. Some five centuries later, “Orchard Pavilion” gained still greater influence through another calligrapher of genius, Mi Fu, whose own creations based on Wang’s style became famous. But few “pure” exemplars even of Mi Fu by now remain.

Refracted for over a millennium only through the medium of increasingly remote emulations, Wang’s original now turns out to be a probable fiction. In 1965 an archaeologist demonstrated that the form and style of “Orchard Pavilion” were much later than supposed; hence it could not have been written by Wang Xizhi. Thus “the sublime model which inspired the entire development of Chinese calligraphy,” in Pierre Ryckmans’ words, “may in fact never have existed.”

29. Lothar Ledderose, *Mi Fu and the Classical Tradition of Chinese Calligraphy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Ryckmans, *The Chinese Attitude*, pp. 10-11.

Perhaps this is less cause for chagrin than for congratulation. The Chinese “capacity for metamorphosis and adaptation” over three and a half millennia, as Ryckmans suggests, “may well derive from the fact that this tradition never let itself be trapped into set forms, static objects and things, where it would have run the risk of paralysis and death.”<sup>29</sup>

30. Ryckmans, *The Chinese Attitude*, pp. 11-12.

Another such immaterial witness is a sixteenth-century Ming poem celebrating a landscape garden, a literary form then common. The Wuyou Garden was this one’s name – literally, “the garden that does not exist.” The poet observes that most famous gardens of the past now survive only in literary memory, their plantings and physical traces having wholly disappeared. But should it matter that they ever actually existed? Why not dispense with the preliminary earth-bound garden and begin with the literary recollection which is, after all, their ultimate end? It is tedious to search out and care for vestiges of the original garden, now long overgrown, its trees aged and its composition obscured; it is pedantic to dwell on comparisons between what it now is, what it once was, and what at various times has been portrayed. Material reality lumbers the mind, hobbles the imaginative spirit. Freed from the prosaic constraints of physical heritage, the garden in the mind’s eye is fructified by memory.<sup>30</sup>

In the famous old city of Soochow there are no ancient ruins. “We in the West tend to equate the antique presence with authentically ancient physical objects” observes a Sinologist. “China has no ruins comparable to the Roman Forum, or even to Angkor Wat,” not because the Chinese were unable to build with hewn stone, “but because of a different attitude about how to achieve an enduring monument.” Ancient cities such as Soochow became repositories of the past by embodying or suggesting associations whose value lay beyond the material realm:

"The past was a past of words, not of stones." China did not feel "its history as violated or abused when the historic monuments collapsed or burned, as long as these could be replaced or restored and their functions regained. . . . The real past of Soochow is a past of the mind; its imperishable elements are moments of human experience."

Soochow's Maple Bridge is a famous topic in Chinese literary history. But the bridge has little importance as an object. "No single poem refers . . . to its physical presence; . . . its reality to them was not the stones forming the span" but its associations realized in words. Men achieve immortality not by building imperishable stone monuments but by cultivating their capacities to express themselves in imperishable words or by the act of revering someone else's enduring thoughts.<sup>31</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Preservation is an impulse innate to life. But our need to preserve coexists with a no less urgent need to innovate. Preservation's extension into widening realms of nature and culture threatens to upset delicate balances between saving and changing, balances crucial to individuals and to social groups alike.

The alternatives to material preservation described above are not options freely open to modern Western culture. Preferring fragments to wholes, processes to material entities, written or painted or mental images to physical objects, all imply perspectives on the past, on the present, and on life in general that are quite unlike our own. They are modes of behavior that are enacted only by dint of long immersion within congruent cultural features; they are patterns that derive from habit, not from deliberate adoption. We make our past, as Marx said, but we do not make it just as we choose: we are constrained by cultural circumstance, over which we have little control.<sup>32</sup> So too with modes of preservation: we may study how alternative commitments operate with an eye to re-examining our own, but not with a view to seeking substitutes for them.

Culture and circumstance enforce our commitment to material preservation. Nonetheless, awareness of other cultures' different modes of defining and preserving pasts useful to them may help us to extend the forms and functions of material preservation. Re-using artifacts in ways that transcend pure museumization, on the one hand, and purely contemporary utility, on the other, offers one engaging prospect. Preservation today is normally polarized between idealized pasts that are wholly antiquarian and those that are wholly usable, to the caricaturing detriment of both extremes. Preservation advocates should realize that most preserved objects occupy places along a continuum between these extremes, in some measure subserving the interests of both immediate utility and long-term heritage.

To confine consideration of preservation only to our own narrow traditions disserves the treasures and diminishes the pleasures the past has left us to enjoy. It should be remembered that preservation is only a means to an end; when it becomes an end in itself it ceases to advance its prime functions of use, of instruction, of delight.

Whatever may be its authentic etymology, "preserve" also carries with it the meaning of "pre-serve." It is an act that preceded some aim to be served through it. Preservation is not action or epilogue; it is only prologue.

31. F. W. Mote, "A Millennium of Chinese Urban History: Form, Time, and Space Concepts in Soochow," *Rice University Studies* 59, no. 4 (1973): pp. 49-53.

32. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte" (1852), in *Selected Writings of Karl Marx*, edited by David McClellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 100.