

Cultural Heritage Science and the Material of Memory

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In this talk, the author explores the link between cultural heritage, cultural heritage science, and cultural memory, the latter of which is an elusive and evolving concept. While cultural heritage consists of tangible and intangible records of human activity---monuments, works of art, letters and manuscripts, folklore, music, technological inventions, etc., cultural memory is a more tenuous accumulation of past knowledge and ideas that is in constant flux with our identity and experience of the world. Cultural heritage can be thought of as the medium through which cultural memory is both expressed and delineated in so-called memory institutions such as museums and governments. Like an individual's memory, though, cultural memory is riddled with fallibility; it is not purely rational, but imbued with feeling and belief systems. Cultural heritage has a dynamic relationship with cultural memory, where the value of individual objects lies not only in their testimony to the past, but in their immense power to evoke vicarious experience and emotion through context: a place, a time, and a unique story that helps shape our understanding of who we are and where we come from. These objects, whether in heritage collections or public domains, are framed by cultural memory, but are, at core, true fragments of history. Their mere existence can combat revisionist history, especially in this age of digital misinformation. Obvious examples are the preserved Auschwitz camp or remnants of the World Trade Center.

As such, cultural heritage collections serve as vessels of memory. The author proposes that cultural heritage science plays a crucial role in maintaining an active dialogue with cultural memory through an analytical approach that provides objective facts about the physical materials of which objects are made. Working with conservators and curators, scientific examination and analysis of historical materials, whether aimed at their preservation or revealing historical information, at once enriches cultural memory and imparts much needed authenticity to slices of the past. Examples of cultural heritage science applied to museum and library collections are presented from the author's experience, including work on hand-written, inked documents and a collection of rare 19th-century flute musical instruments made of glass.



Leaded glass flute by Claude Laurent, 1813, gifted to President James Madison (Collection Library of Congress).