two treatments: too much versus too little Brancusi and Man Ray contrasted

Two works. Both unreadable in their untreated state. Two diametrically opposed radically different treatments. Invasive non-reversible stain reduction versus an imagined digital reconstruction and no intervention. An instinctive proposal was made and followed for each work. Both require further research and neither treatment is considered wholly satisfactory.

Brancusi

Constantin Brancusi (1876-1957)

- Portrait of James Joyce, 1926
- Accession to the Moderna Museet collection in 2004 as part of the Pontus Hultén gift of another one thousand works.

Background and Treatment

Curatorial decisions to minimise the stain were immediately resisted. The wide dark band of graining across the lower left section drew the eye, distracting from the simplicity and form which is the essence of Brancusi’s work. Little was known about provenance except that it had been given to Hultén prior to Brancusi’s death and the donating of his studio to the Museum of Modern Art in Paris. The story behind the work is that it was a commission to depict James Joyce, a friend of Brancusi.

The treatment was executed over two and a half years and involved four phases of conserving the entire artwork with the exception of the central hole. No intervention took place in the central hole until the last stage when a repair treatment was undertaken.

The treatment was the result of many hours of staring intently at the glass of the window where the artwork is displayed. Light conditions were examined and the object was made to work with and against the light. A change in the object allowed the original ‘window’ to be opened up to its fullest potential.

What is real is not the appearance, but the idea, the essence of things. Brancusi

INSTINCT

I want just the flash of its spirit. Brancusi

Does instinct have a role in conservation treatment planning? A decision on the proposed handling was formed almost instantaneously for both of these objects on first encountering them. As the Brancusi was unpacked during installation there was no hesitation on our part to stop the conservation process and colour the handling was very much influenced by the feeling there was not much that could be done. Through personal experience and informal discussion it is not unusual that an immediate instinct is formed.

A colour photograph of the object further provided the initial inspiration with the background, taken by Man Ray c.1920.

The Man Ray digital reconstruction was based on intuition and aesthetics, while the actual intervention was based on objective and technical considerations. The positioning of the stain, spirals direction and angle for the sculpture. The positioning of the stain, spirals direction and angle for the sculpture.

Details of faded media on collaged letters.

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SATISFACTION

From the Latin satia – to be satisfied. Fulfilment, gratification, assurance beyond question.

Satisfaction in conservation is an interesting concept. Neither the Brancusi or the Man Ray treatment is considered entirely satisfactory by the author and they continue to be sources of self-query.

Should the stain on the Brancusi have been left as it was! Its deforming immediacy is reduced but was this justified? Conversely the treatment could have gone further – a decision to clean the object completely with a facing paper was discussed but rejected, for now, as ‘too interventive’. Has the aesthetic relationship between form and content, appearance and essence, been better connected through stain reduction?

Is there really nothing to be done to the Man Ray which remains powerfully disclosed, and how should it be presented? Currently housed in a heavy wooden frame the work becomes more of a shadow. The frame has long accompanied the work but its origin is unknown. Museum policy preserves original frames but at what cost? Providing museum visitors with an idea of how the work may have looked is interesting but should the digital reconstruction be presented with the work when exhibited, or as an information handout or wall text? A full-scale educational collaged facsimile is being made, printed onto newsprint, painted and mounted to board. Could this be exhibited or does that decrease the useful life of the object further? Should the work be left to speak for itself – a brief exposure, a ghostly impression comparable to the artists’ Rayograms? When does the increase of facsimiles and digital reconstructions go too far?

The fear of not being, or seen to be, satisfactory can lead to inaction, waiting for some theoretical future point when an ideal treatment option and technique will present itself. Is this more satisfactory? The temporary very often becomes permanent and the risk of no treatment in the foreseeable future has an added urgency with the already limited useful life of many deteriorating modern materials.

Theories are patterns without value. What counts is action.

Brancusi

Summary – More Questions than Answers

The author has presented these two case studies in an effort to look into and question the role of intuition in conservation treatment. The instinct of the author was to try and give a possible answer to this problem of an inevitable concept.

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