“To Infinity...and Beyond”: What’s the Message?

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The catch phrase of the title is taken from Toy Story and seems particularly apposite for the conservation profession. The preservation of things, usually old things, so that they may be enjoyed (infinitely?) and conserved for people in the future is, after all, our ultimate, if unattainable, goal.

Conservation professionals fulfil a wide variety of roles, from technician to scientist, administrator to advocate and consultant to teacher. Conservators have traditionally viewed their responsibility for cultural material from the point of view of the object, but we should remember that conservation is not an end in itself. This means thinking about how we can use and enjoy the collections today as well as preserve them for future generations. As a conservator, it is easy to forget that it is people that have needs and not objects. People understand, use and enjoy objects in many different ways and it is incumbent upon us to understand and respond to those needs.

The familiar museum model of largely hidden reserve collections makes it easier for conservators to be perceived in their traditional role as defenders of the object. This idea has been described as placing the museum professional in the role of key holder or gate guardian. There is no doubt, however, that some conservators are beginning to understand the nature and complexity of their role in the relationship between objects and people.

The role of conservation in communicating with and engaging a wider audience is one that is recognised by ICOM-CC. The formation of an ICOM-CC Task Force - rather than a working group - on Public Engagement in Conservation acknowledges that this issue cuts across conservation disciplines. A programme that addresses the three key constituencies - public, political and professional - is being developed.

There are cogent arguments for the conservation profession to develop a broader understanding of its role in society. Projects such as the symbolic public action in Berlin in 1986 to excavate the former Nazi Headquarters at the Prinz-Albrecht site illustrate the potential for public engagement and the socio-political dimension of preservation. We should not be afraid to simplify the message to suit the audience and the media, it is not a case that one message fits all.

Cultural material forms the landscape of our lives and conservators are uniquely placed to contribute to society by helping people understand and enjoy their objects. So what is the message? I believe it is that conservators contribute to society by giving people the opportunity to enrich their lives through experiencing the things that we treat and care for, but they can only understand what we have to offer if we talk to them.

Any examples, ideas or views relating to the issues discussed here will be much appreciated.

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