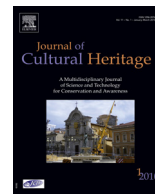




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Original article

Determining treatment priorities for ecclesiastical textiles using significance and conservation assessments



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ABSTRACT

The Benedictine monastic community at New Norcia, Western Australia needed an assessment of their historic textile collection as a preliminary step in gaining financial support to preserve the garments. The textiles were grouped according to functional use with sampling controlled by random number generation of the registers. The highest significance and conservation rankings were rated at 5 and the lowest in the categories was given values of one. The numbers in each category fell logarithmically as the significance values increased. The number of hours of work required to stabilise the objects increased logarithmically as the conservation ranking increased from 1 to 5. Analysis of the conservation needs indicated that nearly 84% of the collection, the sum of the level 1 and level 2 textiles can be stabilised with simple preventive conservation methods practised by trained volunteers, leaving the most significant items in the care of experienced conservators. Multiplication of the conservation and the significance values provides a treatment priority score to guide collection managers in determining which objects are treated by conservators. Data is also provided on the impact of light exposure on the deterioration of the coloured fabrics of the vestments.

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1. Research aims

Resource allocation for the management of museum collections has become an increasingly challenging issue for managers and museum directors. The extreme financial constraints of the monastic community at New Norcia in Western Australia provided an opportunity to see if it was possible to develop a method of determining how to prioritise treatment of the collection through knowledge of the significance and the conservation needs of the textile collection.

2. Introduction

The National Library of Australia provided the Benedictine Monastery at New Norcia, with funds to conduct an assessment of the significance and conservation needs of their collection of ecclesiastical vestments. This work took place in December 2011 and in February 2012. New Norcia is Australia's only monastic town-site and centre, which has an active membership that continues the traditions established by Dom Salvado in 1847. Details regarding

the vision of the founding abbot are recorded on the community website (<http://www.newnorcia.wa.edu.au/protecting-a-unique-heritage/the-story-of-new-norcia/new-norcia-pre-history.html>). A view of the present day complex and buildings that comprise the town-site is shown on Fig. 1. The textile collection is catalogued and the artefacts are housed in stable environmental conditions inside the main museum building.

Significance assessments criteria are based on a “broad framework of cultural and natural values relevant to the whole spectrum of collections in Australia; these criteria help determine how and why the item is significant” [1]. Previous significance studies have been based more on calculated risk levels of damage to collections [2,3]. The four primary criteria are historic, artistic or aesthetic, scientific or research potential and the social/spiritual values of the item. In addition, four comparative criteria are used to evaluate the significance and these factors moderate the principal criteria. The moderating factors are the provenance, rarity or representativeness, condition or completeness and the interpretive capacity. The four primary and four modifying factors do not necessarily have to be precisely documented in each case for the overall assessment of significance to be made. The ecclesiastical textiles at the New Norcia community all have an inherently high significance because of their previous liturgical use. However this association does not preclude assigning a low significance ranking to objects that have low values. Significant work has been done by Renée Lugtigheid on the categorisation of the textile collections in Dutch Catholic churches [4].

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Fig. 1. New Norcia church left and monastery on the right.

A significance ranking of 5 was given to items that were “Exceptionally significant at a national level”, items ranked at 4 were deemed to be “Very High”, while a ranking of 3 was “High”. Items at level 2 had a “Moderate significance” and level 1 is ascribed as having “Low significance”. The same numerical ranking scale was used in the assessment of the conservation needs of the collection items. The significance ranking considered the methods of construction, the nature of the fabrics, the depth of complexity in assembling the elements of the vestments and the history of manufacture. During this process the overall state of deterioration and conservation needs were documented and the conservation needs are summarised below.

2.1. Level 1

Minimal work required, repacking with acid free tissue or other inert materials for support, photographic documentation and storage in an appropriate archival box. This work is suitable for a volunteer with an approximate time of 1.5 hours for each item. It is estimated that five units can be completed per working day. The overall conservation condition would be excellent. An alternative to acid free tissue, which can slowly acidify [5] after contact with acidic objects, is to use a light mass polyester non-woven material or Tyvek®.

2.2. Level 2

Standard work as per level 1 but also requires custom response for supports, specialised storage, surface cleaning with vacuum or dry solvent cleaning for objects in very good condition. Work is suitable to an experienced volunteer such as a member of the Embroiderers' Guild with approximate time 4 hours per item. It is estimated that that two level two objects can be treated per day.

2.3. Level 3

Standard work as per level 2 plus attention to objects having significant soiled surfaces that requires a reducing type of bleaching of cellulosic textile elements and washing of brocaded fabrics. The condition is good to fair. Estimated time 17 hours of work required by a qualified textile conservator with several years of experience with two objects completed per week.

2.4. Level 4

In addition to standard work as at level 3, these textiles are showing significant signs of wear and need extensive needle work. Washing methods to be determined by the nature of the textiles and the decay patterns. These items are in a poor condition. The approximate time for each job at this level is 38 hours or 1 week.

2.5. Level 5

Standard works as at level 4: it is noted that the textile is severely degraded and needs to undergo intensive treatment to stabilise and consolidate the object. It is classified as frail or fragile. Approximate time for each job at this level by an experienced textile conservator is 118 hours or just over 3 weeks of work.

When the number of conservation treatment hours per object is plotted against the conservation ranking the data shows a dramatic rise as the degree of difficulty of stabilising the artefacts increases (Fig. 2). Plotting the logarithm of the number of hours as the ordinate scale, the curve is reduced to a linear relationship between the hours and the conservation ranking (CR) (Fig. 3) as seen in equation (1),

$$\log_{\text{hours}} = -0.2987 + 0.4769\text{CR} \quad (1)$$

The linear regression analysis for the logarithmic plot had an R^2 value of 0.9941 which gives a very high degree of confidence in

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