



2021  
G.A., H.H., S.H., N.M.

# Invisible

The Fascination of Conservation



“Reconstruction, conservation, restoration, renovation and repair – all these techniques are available to us, but none is morally superior in itself. Only from the task itself can its application be explained”.

This is how David Chipperfield, the architect who rebuilt the Neues Museum, describes his attitude that guided him in the conception. With the Neues Museum, he has set standards for dealing with architectural fragments; 12 years after its opening, the building has already acquired an iconic character. It is precisely the lightness, which seems almost playful to many visitors, with which the new and the old, the complete and the fragmented interact in a way that creates a harmonious whole. Chipperfield and his team were not focused on highlighting the fractures, but on recovering a building that could be returned to its purpose as a museum after 70 years of interruption.

All the techniques mentioned above can only be implemented if a large number of highly specialized experts can be recruited to participate and if there are enough qualified and extremely specialized people to take on this challenge.

I am therefore very pleased that graduates of the Master’s degree programme “European Cul- tural Heritage” at the Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder), who are precisely such sought- after experts, are directing the visitors’ attention to the work of these specialists. The Neues Museum is the right place for this, not only because of its architecture. It is the relationship between exhibi- tion and building that captivates people here. More precisely, it is the combination of historical architecture and archaeological objects that forms a whole. Both are marked by history, their sur- faces are often damaged, their stability impaired and, if watchful eyes do not regularly control their condition and caring hands do not ensure their preservation, their substance is highly endangered.

I would like to wish the readers new insights during their tour through the museum with this brochure, which will provide a deeper understand- ing of the extensive tasks associated with the preservation of the architectural and archaeologi- cal heritage on the World Heritage Site Museum Island Berlin.

Prof. Dr. Matthias Wemhoff  
Director of the Museum of Pre- and Early History  
and State Curator

Since the reopening on the 16th of October 2009, the Egyptian Museum, the Museum of Pre- and Early History and the Collection of Classical Antiq- uities have been presenting their collections in the Neues Museum. It was badly damaged during the Second World War.

After the war, rebuilding the museum was not immediately on the focus of the decision-makers. It was not until the political turnaround in 1989 that hope became certainty: the rebuilding as a museum was decided and the question of “if?” was answered. The master plan by David Chipperfield Architects outlined the way to the “how?”. When I visited the “Master plan exhibition” at that time, I was able to identify a number of interesting architectural design approaches dealing with loss of substance and deterioration that challenge us conservators in our work on a daily basis. I truly appreciated the discussions on variants for a subtle treatment of damaged surfaces and constructions – historicity and authenticity on the one hand, contemporary modernity on the other. But: who will realize the very complex task with skills and knowledge of materials and tech- niques?

The Neues Museum became a place where almost 250 conservators worked intensively for six years. I am very happy and proud about this. One of the most beautiful applied sciences – con- servation – has helped to let a museum building “tell” us about itself and its destiny. The attentive observer will be able to discover numerous archi- tectural details that provide insights into the MAKING-OF – at the same time, he will also be able to feel the destructive energy of shell splin- ters, bomb damage and many years of building neglect.

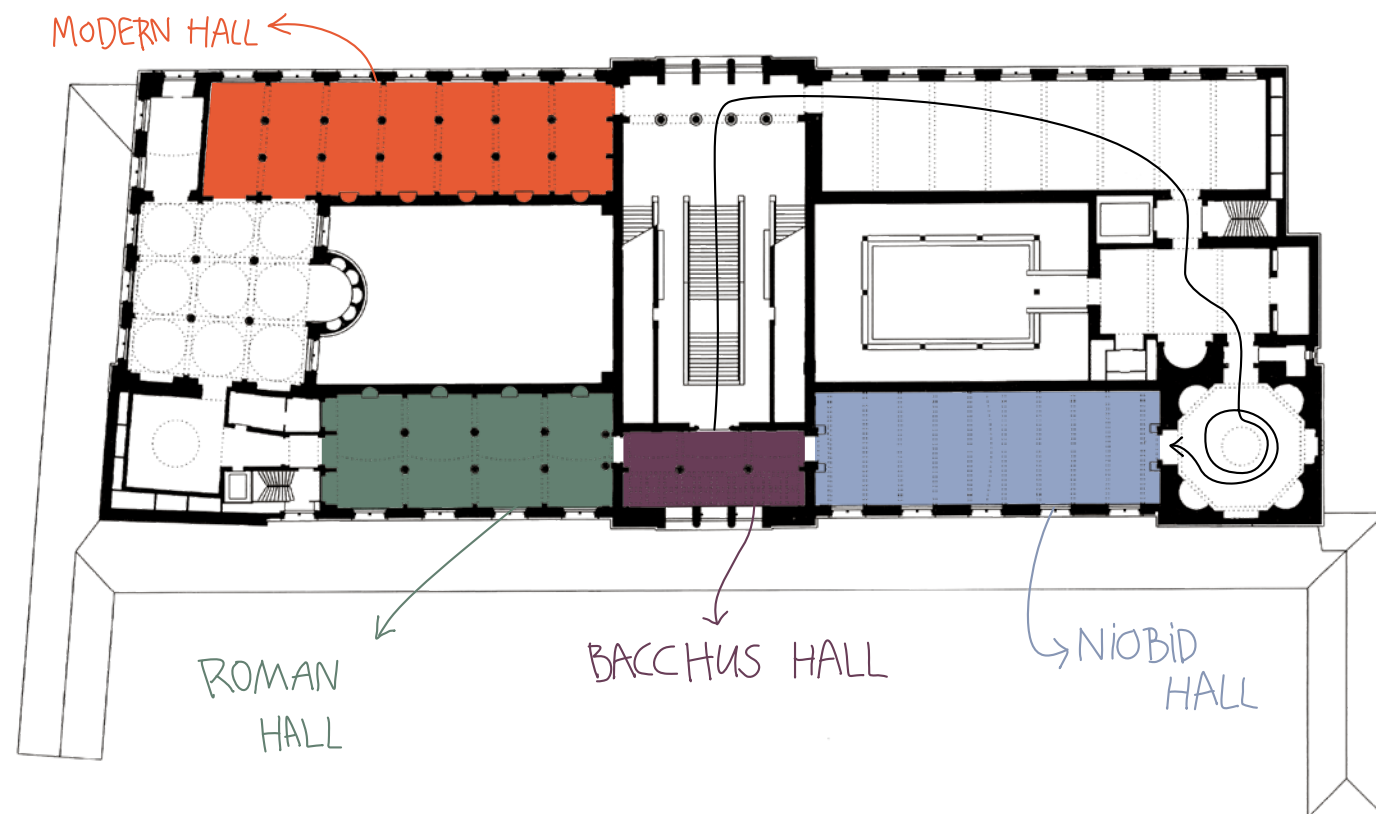
I would like to thank the students of the Master’s degree programme “European Cultural Heritage” at the Europa-Universität Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder) on behalf of the VDR for publishing the insights and observations on conservation gained in selected exemplary exhibition halls and for preparing them for the public in an easily understandable form.

I am also very pleased that this happens in a spe- cial year for the VDR: the year of its 20th anni- versary! Looking back on what has been achieved is important for orientation towards what is to come. May this brochure be a helpful companion for those interested in art and architecture on an enjoyable walk through the exhibition.

Sven Taubert  
President of the German Association of Conservator- Restorers (VDR)



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Historical objects are tangible manifestations of our history and make it possible to experience it with all our senses. At the same time, they provide us with knowledge about how we lived in the past. What kind of different objects existed? What techniques were needed to make them? And how were buildings constructed?

If we want to understand all of this, we have to look very closely at these buildings, artwork, or archaeological objects – as they tell us their individual story. The materials that were used, signs of weathering, such as deterioration or extensive damage allow us to draw conclusions about their original production or use.

Yet, how should we preserve all of these things? As witnesses of an eventful past with visible signs of age? Or should we restore them to their former glory? Is it better to dismantle what has been changed and reshaped, and to restore what has been destroyed, or should a ruin remain to avoid altering its history? Which conditions and layers of time are worth preserving?

These are precisely the questions that conservators deal with all the time. They investigate and preserve our cultural assets behind the scenes, which is why their work often remains invisible.

The material, history, usage, and condition of our cultural heritage are of great importance for the technical possibilities of their preservation, but also the aim of conservation is very significant. Today, international agreements define the standards of conservation and restoration of cultural heritage. Interventions, for example, must be kept to a minimum; all changes and additions must be identifiable; treatments that have already been carried out must be able to become undone. Documenting interventions makes them more transparent for future generations.

We would like to take you on a short tour through the museum's second floor and introduce you to the most important fields of conservation by showing you some selected objects and architectural elements. This includes conservation, restoration, and preventive conservation.



Conservation includes all measures that preserve the cultural object in its original state of preservation. Conservation interventions on an object, such as cleaning or consolidation, maintain the existing condition of the object to prevent or mitigate further damage.



Restoration, on the other hand, involves more than conservation measures and goes beyond the mere preservation of an object's original condition. Restoration aims to make the object more recognizable and comprehensible for the audience. Comprising, for example, additions or reconstructions, which are carried out very carefully and always in a way that is subordinate to the original substance.



Preventive conservation is a relatively young but important working field. Conservators try to influence the environment in which our cultural assets are presented. Temperature and humidity, light and radiation, as well as air quality are optimized and adjusted to each object to prevent damage in advance. Preventive conservation focuses on the long-term preservation of cultural heritage without having to physically intervene.

In the Neues Museum, one can see very different methods of conservation and restoration on both the historic building and the two archaeological collections that are shown here together. Join us on this tour and take a look at cultural assets from an entirely different perspective.

WE HOPE YOU ENJOY CONTEMPLATION AND DISCOVERY!





Nowadays, the **Niobid Hall** remains impressive in its historical splendor. This is mainly due to relatively minor wartime damage, the extensively preserved decorations on the walls and ceiling, and the restoration that left the hall in its authenticity. All the measures have been made recognizable, so the history of the place can still be sensed today. To keep the modern

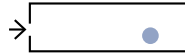
Niobid Hall



additions from taking center stage, conservators use our eye's ability to complement and unify things in context – even if they look different when viewed individually.

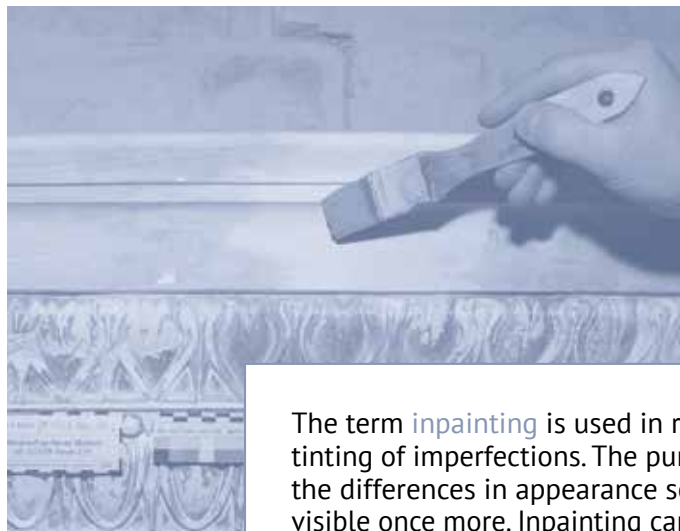
Niobid Hall





### Tone in tone

Inpainting is an example of such a restoration technique. We would like to illustrate to you through the colored wall and ceiling paintings that such a procedure can be carried out in many different ways. Most of the surface of the wall appears in a uniform shade of red. However, before the restoration, they were not so homogeneous. If you step closer to the windowless longitudinal wall, you can see transitions between the historical and the newly added coats of paint. New paint was also applied in a shade of red, but it has a slightly different hue. When we view them as a whole, our eyes complement these differences to create a uniform surface, so the wall appears relatively undamaged. This technique is called Normalretusche. It is used to harmonize heterogeneous surfaces and helps make the original concept of design recognizable again.

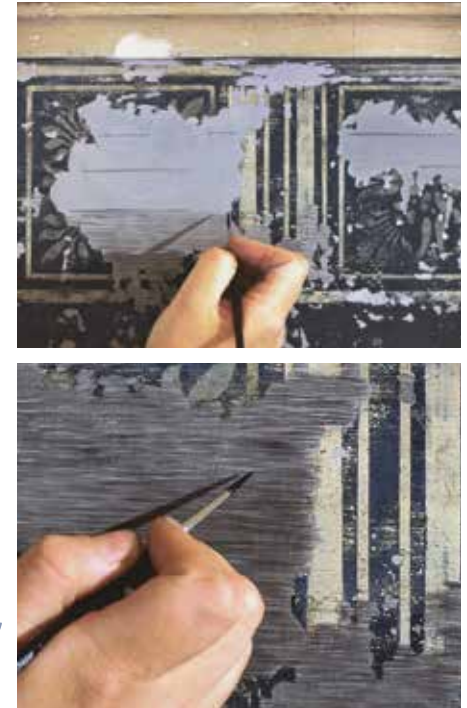


The term **inpainting** is used in restoration to describe the color tinting of imperfections. The purpose of inpainting is to harmonize the differences in appearance so that the original design becomes visible once more. Inpainting can be carried out in different ways using different techniques, depending on the object and context.



### One brushstroke at a time

The so-called "Tratteggio inpainting" is another type of inpainting that you can see in this room on the left side between the third and the fourth window. You can find the retouched spot shown here, in the middle of the blue flower frieze of the wall panel. In this case, imperfections are areas where the paint is missing because it has either come loose over time or been destroyed. The particular point about tratteggio inpainting is that imperfections are not closed overall, as in the case of the red wall, but by many small brush strokes. If you look very closely, you will notice the individual strokes in various shades of blue and gray. Our eyes help complement the fine strokes from a distance to form a uniform surface while maintaining the overall impression. Thanks to the stroke technique, the in-painted areas remain discreet to a large extent and fade into the background.



CAN YOU FIND  
THIS IMPERFECTION  
ON THE WALL?

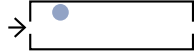


### Stencil painting

If you take a look up at the ceiling, another type of inpainting becomes visible. By use of a special stencil technique, the conservators have restored the flower-like circular ornaments by using a so-called "Totalretusche" method, or an exact color match.

The paint application consists of several layers. For each layer, the conservators had to make a stencil based on the existing painting, which they then used to recompose the ornaments. Finally, they applied the highlights, contours, and dots freehand with a brush. For the retouched areas, they chose lighter colors in a slightly grayish tone, so that there is no great contrast between old and new, but our eye can distinguish them despite the great distance.





**With needle and thread**

If you turn to the small display case on the window wall, you can see an archaeological object made from an extremely delicate organic material that has been preserved under very special circumstances. This textile comes from Egypt, probably from a tomb. It has been preserved in the soil over centuries in the dry desert climate, which is an archaeological exception.

The dry soil conditions protected the textile from sunlight and fluctuations in humidity, allowing it to maintain its structure and color intensity. In order to preserve the fragile object and make it accessible to the public, conservators applied a preservation technique using needle and thread, known as the “sewing preservation technique”. A supporting base must first be created, on which the fragment is aligned and fixed with very fine and elastic silk threads. There are various types of stitches for which the conservators use extremely thin and small circular needles that were originally intended for surgical purposes. During this delicate work, they stitch marginal and defective areas of the fabric to prevent further damage to the intact areas and to avoid further mechanical stress. As a result, further material loss is prevented and the damaged fabric is stabilized and strengthened at the same time.

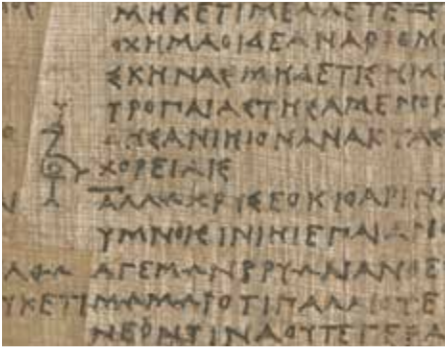


The **sewing stabilization technique** is used for the preservation of textiles. It is carried out with fine circular needles and thin thread made of silk, using different techniques and types of stitches, such as the tension stitch or the running stitch. The fine sewing material is dyed in advance with special textile dyes in an elaborate process to ensure that the fine silk threads visually fade into the background.



**Shown in the right light**

You might have already noticed that the Niobid Hall is relatively dark. Well, take a closer look at the papyri objects in the table show-cases. It is of paramount concern to protect these sensitive objects from light radiation. Material paper only lasts for a limited time. Strong and long-lasting illumination can cause severe damage to organic material, such as the papyri objects shown here. For this reason, the papyri are presented in special table showcases and only appear for a brief moment when you press one of the buttons. The consequences of light and radiation can be seen on the papyrus “Timotheos” in the first display case on the left next to the window if you press button number 1. In the center of this object is a slightly lighter-looking fragment with faded ink. These color changes occurred because the fragment was exposed at one point to strong light radiation for an extended period. The remaining fragments were protected in the dark depository, which is why they do not show such color changes. When the Museum was reopened on Museum Island, it was decided to show all fragments again together.



IF WE NOW TAKE OUR EYES OFF THE  
FINE PAPYRI OBJECTS AND ENTER  
THE NEXT ROOM ON OUR TOUR  
- THE BACCHUS HALL -  
WE CAN FOCUS AGAIN ON THE  
OVERALL SPATIAL CONTEXT.





The **Bacchus Hall** has a completely different look than the Niobid Hall: it appears more dynamic in its spatial appearance. The wall's surface attracts our gaze because our eyes cannot adjust to the different contrasts and focus them into an overall picture. The room shows us its turbulent history: During the Second World War, the roof was destroyed and exposed to the



elements for many years. We wanted to present different conservation measures on the wall and plaster surfaces, which focused specifically on the preservation of the historical substance.



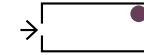


### Climate for cultural assets

Before we turn our attention to the room, please take a look at the showcases first. The climate in museums, meaning temperature and humidity, is particularly important. The demands of different object materials on relative humidity differ greatly from one to the other. Organic materials, such as wood or textiles, require higher humidity than some inorganic materials, such as glass or metal. Objects made of ceramics or stone are comparatively less sensitive. For this reason, it is challenging to show objects with different climate requirements together in one showcase. Therefore, you will often see objects in a showcase with corresponding climate requirements. An inadequate climate can cause severe damage to the objects. To minimize the risk of permanent damage, such as cracking or flaking, conservators try to keep the temperature and humidity as constant as possible. Climate-controlled showcases fulfill this purpose, as they maintain the required humidity over a certain period and mitigate fluctuations. Equipped with a climate measuring device, conservators can monitor and, if necessary, adjust the climatic conditions in the showcases.

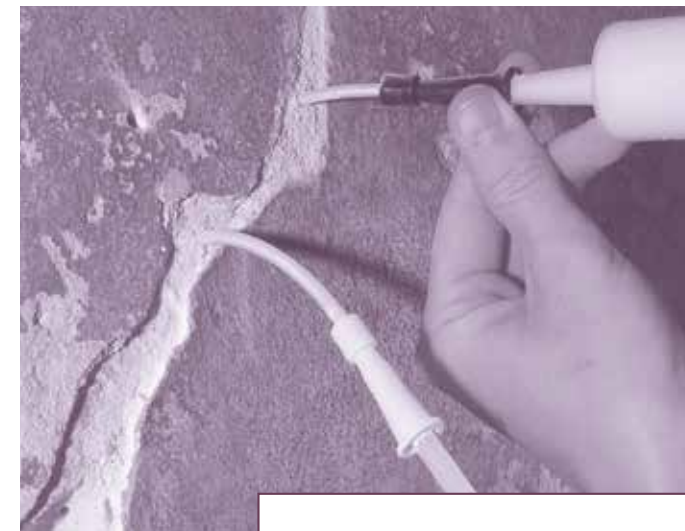


HAVE YOU ALREADY NOTICED  
THE CLIMATE MEASURING DEVICES  
AND THE DIFFERENT CLIMATES  
IN THE SHOWCASES?



### With needles and syringes

The wall plasters that you see here in the room were hollow and no longer connected to the masonry. They were in great danger of falling off. To strengthen these areas, the conservators had to first vacuum or blow out the cavities before they could fill them with a special mortar. They injected a liquid stone strengthener into the porous plaster areas with medical syringes and cannulas to strengthen these areas. Following this, the conservators could start working on the surfaces: first, they focused on the loosened layers of paint, some of which stood out like clods. A liquid consolidant was then applied by using a fine brush which pressed the paint layer gently back onto the surface. The mild heat of a special heating spatula made the painting layers flexible, which helped make it easier to lay down and adhere to the upstanding clods. Special papers protected the paint clods until they firmly adhered again. The conservators spent many hours on this step, with the remains usually unseen by the viewer.



Strengthening is a fundamental conservation technique that stops or at least slows down the deterioration process of an object. Depending on the material and condition of the objects in question, conservators use different techniques and materials. Glues, resins, mortars, dispersion, or synthetic resins can be applied in many ways. By way of illustration, they can be sprayed, injected or objects can even be soaked with them.





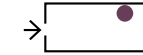


### Layers of time

The wall surface in this room has been painted over several times in the past. In other words, there are additional layers of paint on top of the original painting, the so-called primary coating. These subsequent layers, also known as coatings, were visible simultaneously due to damage on some wall areas. The coatings in these areas were in such poor condition that it was decided to expose the primary coating. The conservators used sponges and solvents for this process. The area shown here in the brochure can be found on the wall of the window, next to the right pilaster. You can clearly see the three different blue color coatings, which originate from different times.



**Revealing** aims to expose the original surface of an object, which can be hidden under subsequently applied layers or altered by material changes. It often intends to make the original appearance of an object or the historical color or painting concept visible again. However, it can only be carried out after detailed preliminary examinations and by considering the entire context, because the removed layers would be irretrievably lost.

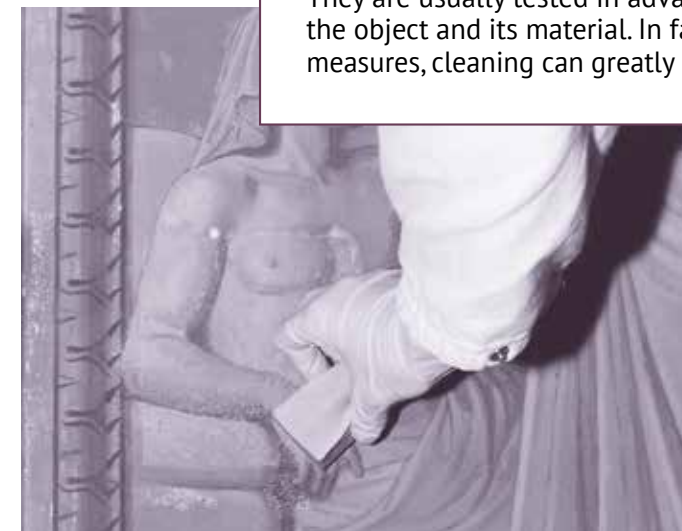


### Against the dirt

Please take a look at the painted pilasters on the window. The fact that the paintings still appear so colorful to you today is mainly due to the extensive cleaning work. Conservators used brushes, cotton swabs, and solvents to remove dirt and discoloration from the painted surfaces. As you can see in the pictures, they cleaned the surfaces with fine cotton swabs and brushes. You can see the cleaning effect on the arms and torso of the figures in the picture. On the right pilaster on the inside window side, you can see this fragment closely.



**Cleaning** is carried out not only for the sake of preservation but also for aesthetic reasons. The condition of an object or a surface can be affected or contaminated in many different ways. This is why cleaning methods and techniques are extremely diverse. They are usually tested in advance and individually adapted to the object and its material. In fact, unlike many other conservation measures, cleaning can greatly change the appearance of a surface.



NOW, LET'S MOVE ON  
TO THE NEXT ROOM:  
THE ROMAN HALL.  
THIS ROOM HAS  
SO MUCH TO TELL ABOUT  
A RESPECTFUL RESTORATION.





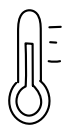


In contrast to the Bacchus Hall, the **Roman Hall** has a clear strictness and seems rather unfinished: severe damage caused by the effects of war and weathering can be seen. Nevertheless, the signs of history should not be distorted here. The fact that the extent of the former destruction still stands out today, after conservation, was achieved by the conservators



through a conservation method that is deliberately restrained. The preserved wall surfaces can be clearly distinguished: the carefully re-plastered surfaces are deliberately colored in a subtle shade of green. They appear as a restrained backdrop for the historic color scheme.





About showcases and other hazards

Most objects are protected in showcases. Nevertheless, objects in these small enclosed spaces can be exposed to significant risks. For example, some showcase materials that are used, such as adhesives or varnishes, can emit pollutants. When a lot of pollutants are in the air, they can harm the objects. Such damage can occur as changes in material and color. In order to achieve good air quality, conservators, therefore, attach great importance to the construction of showcases with non-hazardous materials. Therefore, modern showcases are not made from wood, as in the past, but from special metal, stone, or glass materials. The different showcase materials and modern design options can be seen throughout the museum. To test materials for their suitability for museums, conservators often use a relatively inexpensive test procedure – the so-called Oddy Test. This test, which you can see in the figures, allows them to determine whether and for how long certain materials can be used in exhibition rooms.



WOULD YOU HAVE THOUGHT  
THAT SUCH INVISIBLE DANGERS  
↓ ↓  
COULD LURK IN THE MUSEUM?



Stone by stone

About half of the floor mosaic in this room was lost due to the war. Fortunately, many of the historic mosaic stones had survived the war in storage outside the museum and could be used for conservation. The conservators completed the smaller missing parts with the original stones according to the original pattern. For the extensive areas of missing stones, they had to make new ones from a mixture of clay, sand, and pigments. The composition of the original stones was determined using a type of X-ray examination. In order to reconstruct the destroyed areas of the mosaic, the conservators used the original installation technique: instead of laying each stone individually on the sub-floor, they made tile-like slabs out of them by using mortar and laid them accurately on the screed floor.



Both additions and reconstructions are methods of conservation that differ in the extent of their intervention. In case of an addition, conservators add missing materials to the original. The aim is to stabilize the original and to make the original's context perceptible again.





### Cast into shape

If you look up toward the ceiling at the spandrels of the round arches – that is, the triangular areas between the two arches – you can see round, flower-shaped ornaments. Only a few of these ornaments, so-called rosettes, had been maintained. Conservators were able to use them to make molds to reconstruct the lost rosettes. First, they made a negative silicone mold of an original rosette, which they filled with plaster. Once the plaster cast had dried, it could be removed from the silicone mold and returned to its original position on the wall.

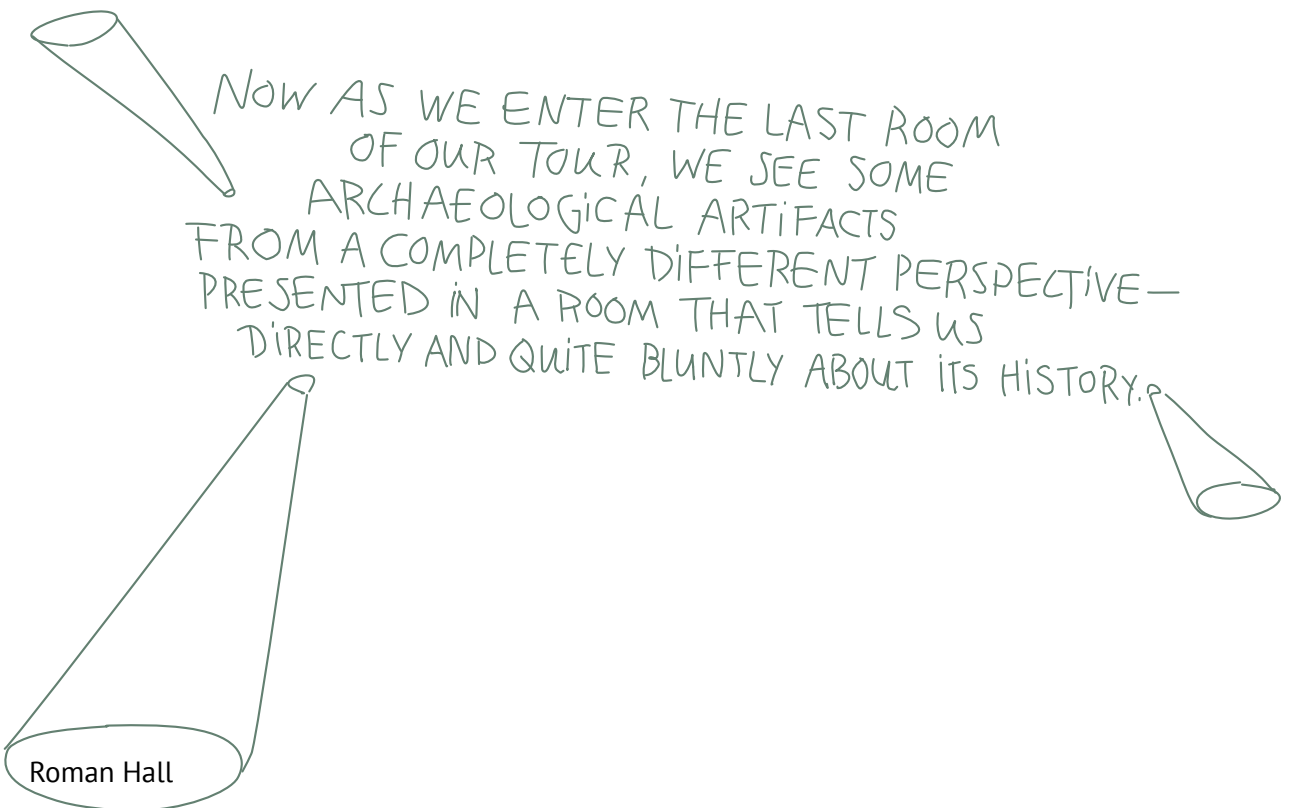


A **reconstruction** is carried out when large parts or the whole object itself have been lost. Primary sources documenting the original object serve as a basis for any reconstruction or addition. Both additions and reconstructions are done in such a way that they can be distinguished from the original on closer inspection.



### Fragments of sky blue

By looking at the ceiling, you can see a particularly careful type of restoration. Since such large parts of the ceiling paintings were missing, the conservators decided not to reconstruct them. Instead, they conserved the remaining original areas in form and color so that they can be preserved in their present condition. The damaged areas were filled with plaster making them appear less conspicuous and evoking a harmonized overall appearance. They indicated the geometric design of the ceiling afterward by drawing lines in the ceiling plaster corresponding to the former ceiling surfaces, which you can see in the figure. The stucco decorations and the color scheme are still missing. Therefore, the missing parts appear more balanced than before, but the extent of the damage remains visible.



NOW AS WE ENTER THE LAST ROOM OF OUR TOUR, WE SEE SOME ARCHAEOLOGICAL ARTIFACTS FROM A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE—PRESENTED IN A ROOM THAT TELLS US DIRECTLY AND QUITE BLUNTLY ABOUT ITS HISTORY.





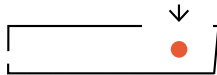
The severe destruction that the **Modern Hall** has experienced, we can still imagine today. It had lost its ceiling and large areas of the walls during the war. Unlike the Roman Hall, the basis for carrying out an addition or reconstruction was missing. The loss is also illustrated here by a strong contrast. The diverse and heterogeneous structure of the partially re-plastered



masonry and arches contrasts with the steel sheet pile ceiling, which does not conceal its modern materiality. Materiality should remain in focus during the observation: we take a closer look at some objects and their conservation here.



HAVE A CLOSER LOOK,  
ARE YOU ABLE TO LOCATE THE ADDITIONS?



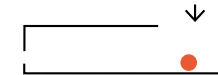
### A thousand and one shard

Right at the beginning, in the showcase in the center of the room, there is the late Roman glass jug shown here. Material glass preserves itself relatively well in the ground but often breaks into shards, some of which get lost.

In the figure, you can see that conservators were able to re-assemble the jug from many pieces. They stuck the pieces of glass together and added what was missing. The greatest challenge when conserving glass is not to change the original appearance of the fine material by applying adhesives. It is important to notice here that the adhesive joint fades into the background and the overall appearance is harmonized. The technique used here is called "infiltration bonding". The fragments were put together one after the other and fixed with small metal hooks. Afterward, conservators carried out the actual adhesion, after which they removed the metal hooks. The conservators made missing shards from the synthetic resin by using silicone moldings. By adding colorants, the color tone was adjusted to match the color of the glass. With the produced negative molds, the conservators were able to cast precisely fitting additions thus completing this puzzle of shards.



To reassemble shattered or broken cultural objects, conservators stick the broken pieces together. The aim is to make the object in its entirety perceptible and readable again. However, **bonding** can only be carried out if the original fragments are still there. Depending on the material and condition of the object, a wide variety of adhesives and techniques are used.



### Tough case, fine core

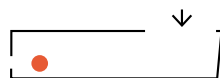
If you take a look at the showcase next to it on the window wall, you can see some richly decorated belt buckles made of iron, gold, and silver. These objects were buried under the ground for a long time. Iron is vulnerable to corrosion when in the ground. This degradation mechanism creates an orange-red layer, up to 5 cm thick, which you can see on one side of the belt buckle in the showcase. On the other side, this layer has been removed.

To ensure that conservators can get an accurate impression of the state of preservation, shape, and any manufacturing techniques of the object despite the corrosion layer, they first x-ray the iron finds. On the X-ray image shown here, you can see the metallic core under the corrosion layer as well as the decoration technique. Through such X-rays, conservators can get an impression of the object itself and they can remove the thick layer of corrosion. This process is also known as revealing or exposure. Conservators use various fine tools for this purpose, which originate from dentistry.



**X-ray examination** is a method that uses the ability of X-rays to penetrate materials. Different materials absorb X-rays to different extents. For this reason, the shape of metallic objects as well as certain manufacturing and decorating techniques made of noble metals can also be made visible under the corrosion layer.



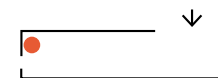


### Conserved for eternity

At the end of the room on the left side of the window, you can see wood discoveries in the showcase. These were found during an excavation in Berlin-Spandau. Wood is rarely preserved in soil over a long period. However, under very special conditions the organic material can survive. For example, in soils that permanently contain a lot of water and only a little oxygen, as in a bog. For this reason, such wood is damp and saturated with water. Conservators must react quickly after excavation because uncontrolled drying of wood would result in complete decay: the wood cells would collapse. Until wet wood preservation can be started, conservators keep the finds wet after excavation and keep them moist. There are different methods of wet-wood preservation. However, they all pursue the same goal: the water must be removed without damaging the object and the wood cells must be stabilized. Conservators achieve this by soaking the object in a soaking bath with a stabilizing agent. The process can take a very long time, sometimes up to several years. Afterward, the objects are gently dried, for which the conservators use controlled drying methods.



HOW FRIGHTENING,  
THAT ARCHAEOLOGICAL WET WOOD  
SIMPLY DECAYS WITHOUT  
ADEQUATE PRESERVATION.



### The return of an image on the move

To conclude the tour, let's turn our attention once again to the building. Look at the north wall to the right wall medallion. This architectural element has received very special treatment.

It was removed from the wall in the 1980s and stored in a depository to protect it from further damage. During the conservation of the museum building, the removed medallion was treated by conservators in their workshop so it could be transferred back to its original place in the masonry. The conservators had to take precautions for the retransfer: they first secured the painting with a special protective layer to prevent further damage from the following measures. They encased the wall medallion in a supporting structure and strengthened and supplemented the old plaster. To be able to fit the medallion back into place, the conservators transferred the depiction onto a foil and used this for exact alignment on the wall. With the help of custom-made supports and anchors, they were able to return the painting to its original place.



**Retransfer** means the reattachment of art or cultural assets that were previously removed from their original location. Removing them from their original location serves to protect the art or cultural assets if they are in danger of being damaged. They are temporarily stored in a depository until they can be safely returned to their original location.



Now we have reached the end of our little tour. Like everything created by humans, our cultural heritage says a lot about us. About how it was made, but also what we see in it today. Conservators work on and investigate our architectural and cultural assets. They are always looking for new methods to preserve and maintain them. Thus, all the objects exhibited here are not only a testimony to the times in which they were created. They also reflect ourselves, our society, and what is meaningful to us. They not only contain ideas, thoughts, and values; but the desire to preserve, explore, appreciate and make them available for future generations. We hope that a look behind the scenes into the world of cultural heritage preservation may have helped you look at our architectural and cultural heritage from a different perspective and to see things not only as they have been prepared for you, but also to sharpen your perception of what they truly mean.

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Museum für Vor- und  
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