
Briet's Antelope:

Some thoughts on Suzanne Briet (1894-1989)

Renée-Marie-Helène-Suzanne Briet was born in Paris on February 1, 1894. Briet was a librarian and historian, and a pioneer of documentation. Before becoming a librarian she was a secondary school teacher, teaching English and history in Algeria. Ultimately she was employed at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and was one of the first three women librarians employed there. While librarianship has been a historically female dominated profession in the US, this was definitely not the case in France when Briet joined the staff.

In the 1920's Briet became involved in the international documentation movement. The legacy of this movement has been institutions such as the UNESCO Documentation Centre, the ICCROM Library in Rome, and to a great extent, the Information Center of the Getty Conservation Institute, originally based on the UNESCO model. Documentation as a movement was viewed as a progressive Internationalist effort to codify knowledge and make it accessible as a means of facilitating peace and prosperity. Information and access to information were viewed as having a positive transformational power.

Briet is significant today because her theories allow us to view a wide variety of information objects in terms of their relationships. Her theories are proving to be an important foundation to understanding these relationships and suggesting ways in which they can be used to make diverse bodies of related information accessible. In the United States, the term document is generally understood to mean a text. Briet understood the term "document" in a different sense that included photographs, sound recordings, and cultural artifacts. Each of these was viewed as meaningful containers of cultural content that placed them in the framework of human knowledge.

"Documentation" for Briet was a scientific activity of the greatest importance. The process of documenting the world and codifying knowledge was viewed as the foundation of all scientific endeavor. Today, we view much of this activity as a colonial enterprise that seeks to categorize the world into a framework that serves the needs of the "developed world."

As a democratizing force and as an instrument of social justice the documentation movement has been a failure. Similar hopes have been raised for the Internet that sound remarkably like those raised by the documentarians. Whether or not the Internet will serve as an information dissemination vehicle promoting social justice globally remains to be seen. Today, the picture is mixed but it is likely that the Internet will increasingly serve as the latest media outlet for the cultural colonialism that dominates much of the world today. Ironically, documentation of the use of this new medium has become the latest surveillance tool for governments concerned about terrorism and potentially dangerous dissent. It is also a powerful means of analyzing the habits and desires of consumers. I am confident that this would seem to Suzanne Briet a perversion of the hopes and dreams cherished by her and her colleagues.

Briet's Questions

Briet is best known today for her provocative questions. It is worth quoting from Briet to illustrate this point. Writing in 1951 Briet stated the following :

"In our age of multiple and accelerated broadcasts, the least event, scientific or political, once it has been brought into public knowledge immediately becomes weighted down under a "veil of documents" (Raymond Bayer). We admire the documentary fertility of a simple originary fact:

For example, an antelope of a new kind has been encountered in Africa by an explorer which has resulted in the capture of an individual that is then brought back to Europe for our Botanical Garden (Jardin des Plantes).

A press release makes the event known by newspaper, by radio, and by newsreels.

The discovery becomes the object of an announcement at the Academy of Sciences.

A professor of the Museum mentions it in his lectures.

The living animal is placed in a cage and cataloged (zoological garden).

Once it is dead, it will be stuffed and preserved (in the Museum).

It is loaned to an Exposition.

It is played on a soundtrack at the cinema.

Its voice is recorded on a record.

The first monograph serves to establish part of a treatise with plates, then a specialized encyclopedia (zoological), then a general encyclopedia.

The works are cataloged in a library, after having been announced at publication (publisher catalogs and the French National Bibliography).

The documents are recopied (drawings, watercolors, paintings, statues, photos, films, microfilms), then selected, analyzed, described, translated (documentary productions).

The documents which relate to this event are the object of scientific sorting (fauna) and of ideological sorting (classification).

Their ultimate conservation and utilization are determined by some general techniques and by sound methods for assembling the documents—methods which are studied in national associations and at international Congresses.

The cataloged antelope is an initial document and the other documents are secondary or derived."

Culture and Documentation

Briet is describing here the cultural apparatus that creates meaning. Meaning must serve social aims or it becomes meaningless. An antelope grazing in Africa unseen by Europeans may have been known to indigenous people for thousands of years. They have a name for it, and it has a place in their culture. When one of these antelopes is taken to Paris and placed in the Jardin des Plantes, it is described and assigned a scientific name based on its anatomical characteristics and placed in a relationship to all other living things. It becomes a subject of study and is embedded in our culture. The same creature may mean very different things in two human cultures. Ancestors of Briet's antelope identical to her example probably trod the earth many, many years

and conservation documentation by Mitchell Hearn's Bishop

before human beings devised culture with its taxonomies and functional descriptions. Human beings are naturally concerned with the meaning they create and few are interested in any sort of meaning transcending the utility of the world for human beings. Taxonomies reflect cultural values and are functional. We often assume that they are expressions of some basic set of facts beyond culture, but they are in fact, social constructs. Even the most rigorous forensic examination or scientific analysis is subject to interpretation.

So who cares, and what does this have to do with conservation?

Documentation is then understood to be cultural activity. It tells a story about what it documents, and the fundamental premises of that story are embedded in the way that the culture understands and relates to the world. In an article by Orlofsky and Trupin in *JAIC* 1993 the way in which culture influences conservation treatment has been amply demonstrated. They give examples such as the Shroud of Turin and the shirt worn by the Lindbergh baby at the time of the kidnapping. Obviously these objects are treated very differently because of the "awe" inspired by their associations. Similarly, it is unlikely that a conservator would remove bloodstains from the garments Abraham Lincoln wore to Ford's Theater on the night of his assassination.

Conservation documentation per se is a recent phenomena as Moore pointed out in 2001 article in the *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*. It has not been codified by any means and is heavily influenced by context and practical matters such as who is paying for the conservation.

Documenting Human Beings

An interesting way to understand this process is to look at instances in which human beings have been documented in the past. As mentioned before, this is relevant because documentation objectifies what it documents as part of the documentation process. If I document you, our relationship changes. I become the actor and you are acted upon. I see you as the subject of an attempt at "scientific" analysis or description. As a result, I may miss or ignore intangible or subjective aspects that are vitally important to you and really cannot be ignored if I am to document and understand you as a subject. I may also turn a blind eye to unpleasant things that I feel I cannot control or influence or of which I may simply disapprove.

The inhibiting effect of being observed and the function of observation as a means of social control has been eloquently stated by Foucault in his history of prisons. The rise of discipline and the internalization of discipline to increase the utility of human beings to the state and to industry seems to have also given rise to an anthropological and sociological urge to document the undisciplined. It records those who have never come under such observation or regulation or those who are outside it, the criminal, the insane, and the uncivilized. One thinks of Rousseau's "Noble Savage" and how eager Europeans were to find him or her and document their unobserved, and presumably undisciplined lives.



15-5403
Ishi, full face
Place: Southern Yana
Date: 9/11

UC Berkeley, Hearst
(Phoebe A.) Museum of
Anthropology, Kroeber
(Alfred L.) Ethnographic
Photographs of California
Indian and Sonora Indian
Subjects, 1901-1930.

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Let us look at a story about an event that took place somewhat less than a hundred years ago.

Early in the morning of August 29, 1911 Ishi, the sole surviving member of the southern branch of the Yana Indians, wandered into the corral of a slaughterhouse a couple miles outside the town of Oroville in Northern California

At the time, my grandfather Lewis Melvin Hearn's was trying to raise a growing family in Oroville by reclaiming gold from the tailings left by gold miners in the area working as an electrical engineer on a dredger. What he thought of Ishi's arrival on the scene is unknown. He was an enthusiastic citizen of the Progressive Era and an eager participant in the cultural process of categorizing the world into a positivist taxonomy. He certainly would have been aware of the event since once word got out that the sheriff was holding a "wild man" it was a sensation, and people flocked into town to see the starving "wild" Indian who had wandered into town speaking no known language. Not knowing what else to do with him, Sheriff J. B. Webber handcuffed him, loaded him into a wagon, and took him into protective custody.

The anthropologist Alfred Kroeber and a young linguist Tom Waterman made the trip from Berkeley to Oroville, and Sheriff Webber handed his prisoner over to them. Waterman and Kroeber identified Ishi as a Yahi Indian, and Waterman was able to communicate with him. Kroeber later christened Ishi as "Ishi" which simply means man in Yahi. His real name is unknown. Ishi took up residence in the Museum of Anthropology and performed at the San Francisco Panama-Pacific Trade Exhibition, chipping arrowheads and demonstrating other feats for visitors. As an attraction he was a hit, but he contracted tuberculosis and died in 1916.

In spite of his wishes an autopsy was performed and his brain was preserved. Kroeber was on the east coast when Ishi died, and a letter instructing his colleagues not to conduct the autopsy but to cremate the body arrived too late.

Ishi's brain was sent to the Smithsonian, and the remains of his body were cremated and placed in a Pueblo Indian jar in a cemetery in the Bay Area. In 1999 his brain was rediscovered at the Smithsonian and repatriated after a request was made by Art Angle, the Chair of the Butte County American Indian Cultural Committee. The brain was returned and cremated. It was reunited with Ishi's ashes and was buried secretly by representatives of the Pit River Tribe on August 8, 2000.

To quote Suzanne Briet, "We admire the documentary fertility of a simple ordinary fact." After his appearance in Oroville, Ishi was indeed weighted down with a veil of documents. In fact, Waterman believed that the linguist Edward Sapir's "overworking" of Ishi was a contributing cause to his death. Sadly, some of the wax cylinders of Ishi's voice have melted and are no longer functional.

Kroeber changed the focus of his anthropological work after his friend's death. It appears that a major crack had appeared in Kroeber's scientific objectivity. Kroeber had also been working on "salvage ethnography" of the California Indians funded by Phoebe Hearst. Apparently, documenting genocide had precipitated a personal crisis.

When we document human beings, some interesting things happen. Usually the people being documented lose their humanity and become objects. Simple concepts like privacy are no longer theirs to claim. For instance, their wishes in regard to what is done with their bodies after they die can be disregarded.

It is easy for us today to look back on anthropologists of this period and judge them harshly. They worked among scenes of genocide and incredible human suffering and were seemingly unmoved. Earlier in his career Kroeber had worked with a group of Inuit brought back from Greenland by Robert Peary. He had been involved in staging a fake traditional funeral for the Inuit Qisuk while the actual remains were spirited away for dissection and the skeleton prepared for exhibition. In spite of a campaign in the press, his son Minik was unable to obtain his father's body. Kroeber was not a monster; quite the contrary, he was just doing what his peers did and ignoring any personal misgivings he may have had. For the rest of his life he was unwilling to discuss Ishi but toward the end of his life he did collaborate with his second wife Theodora Kroeber on her landmark book about Ishi.

As bad as the case of Ishi appears today, worse examples can be found.

Ota Benga was what was known as a "forest pygmy" and was brought back to the United States by a missionary. He was originally exhibited at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904 and subsequently transferred to the New York Museum of Natural History where his "restlessness" led to his being moved to the Bronx zoo where he was exhibited in a cage with an Orangutan. He was quite small and his teeth were

filed to a point, which was considered beautiful by his tribal group. Europeans and Americans assumed it was a sign of cannibalism. Black ministers and some of the more humane members of the public tried to put an end to this racist sideshow, and Ota Benga eventually moved to Lynchburg, Virginia, had his teeth capped, and lived as a respected member of the black community. He committed suicide in 1916. Why he did so is unknown.

Documenting Intangibles

So, where does this leave us as conservators? Anthropologists have had to come to terms with a dilemma, can you simply study human beings whose lives and cultures are being destroyed and fly the flag of scientific objectivity? Is one obliged as a human being to become involved and intervene? If so, does this mean, by abandoning professional objectivity and detachment, one loses all professional credibility?

I think we can take this as a cautionary note and start to think more carefully about our own documentation. If there is no such thing as truly "objective" or "scientific documentation" perhaps what we as conservation professionals can do is to be more explicit about our point of departure and the influences we work under. We also need to be more sensitive to the subjective aspects of the things we document.

As an example we can look at an old tombstone in a small private cemetery near Mendocino California.



Upon examination, we see that it has been very clumsily mended by some well meaning person with a very goopy epoxy repair. Obviously this interferes with the appearance of the tombstone and could have been done in a vastly better manner.

When I visited this cemetery several things occurred to me. While unsightly, the presence of the gloppy repair is evidence that someone at one time deemed this headstone worth repairing and preserving. Many of the older graves such as this one had plastic flowers placed on them, apparently to dress up the cemetery. While I was there, a steady stream of people came through the cemetery to look at

a very picturesque sinkhole adjoining the cemetery that connected to the open ocean. At some point in the not too distant future, possibly after heavy rains and a big storm, part of the cemetery will undoubtedly fall into the sinkhole. Eventually all of it will.

If I were charged with the care of this cemetery, I would have a number of concerns. I would be concerned about the overall state of the place, broken and missing tombstones, the imminent danger of erosion, the stream of people wandering through who seemed to be using the place for a variety of purposes. There is currently legislation in California which seeks to protect and repair such cemeteries which are an important cultural resource for the state. This is a pioneer cemetery and each tombstone a historic document.

However, what is the purpose of this cemetery? New burials are not taking place. It appeared that few, if any, family members were visiting the cemetery. It has become a kind of de facto public park. If money was to be spent to "restore" or "conserve" it, what is the desired appearance? Should all the stones be reerected perfectly level and perpendicular? Missing pieces replaced by appropriate reproductions? Inappropriate repairs taken apart and redone properly? A new picket fence painted white or a wrought iron one painted black? Should this be informed by present day use or by the way it would have been used one hundred years ago?



Another cemetery, another kind of use, different historic documents. In the photo on the left we see what was probably a stone of some cultural significance to traditional Hawaiians. A hundred years ago it was turned into a Christian grave marker. This cemetery is in downtown Honolulu and is very well maintained. It contains the graves of many early Christian missionaries and many members of the Royal family from the period of the Hawaiian Kingdom.

Clearly it is used as a historic site and presented as such. However, some use is going on which is actually rather puzzling. You may notice that a lei has been draped over the shaft of the monument. Was this simply an impulsive commemorative gesture by a visitor? Is it a 20th-century Hawaiian practice I am unaware of to drape leis on gravestones? If I were the custodian of the cemetery, I would be less than happy about this since the leis die and dry. When it rains, they stain the marble and the other stones they contact.

How would I document these cemeteries? What would be my management plan? What are the cemeteries for? Who uses them? Is this use appropriate? I can't answer these questions but if I were responsible for this cemetery or the one near the sinkhole, I would have to do my best. The people paying me might prescribe a basic premise that I didn't agree with or that did not fit my observations. All I could do is to try to take all these things into account in my documentation and try to be sensitive to all the subjective elements, the conflicting interests of those who feel they have a stake in what I document.

Documentation is a "surrogate artifact"

Mary Brooks and Dinah Eastop tell their students at the Textile Conservation Centre at the University of Southampton that documentation is a "surrogate" artifact. What we know of Ishi and Ota Benga is from the documentation we have of them and their lives. In the cemeteries I showed examples from, the short documents in the form of headstones or markers are probably the only surrogate artifacts for the people who lie beneath.

A surrogate functions best when it bears witness and tries to present a faithful and well rounded representation. A bibliographic citation is a surrogate for the book it describes, a head stone is a surrogate for the person it commemorates, a photograph of an antelope is a surrogate for the antelope. None is perfect or complete but simply represent the view of whoever made the surrogate artifact and his or her intentions and limitations.

Conservation Documentation's Surrogate Function

Conservation documentation is a surrogate artifact, it is an interpretation of the artifact. In effect, a new "artifact" in the form of documentation is created to serve as a surrogate for the artifact (the initial document in Brietian terms). To use contemporary language, this new artifact "samples" and "appropriates" content from the original in the creation of an interpretive surrogate (the secondary or derived document) whose purpose is to present the artifact in light of conservation concerns.

It is specific to the time and place when it was created and as such is a subjective interpretation. Embedded with it is information about who did the documentation both explicit and implied. While "baseline" documentation intends to document the state of the artifact, structure, monument, or site being conserved prior to intervention, it is also subjective. It usually enfolds and draws from a variety of related documentation such as relevant archaeological, historical, or art historical documentation from other sources.

"Technical Art History" has been proposed as a term to encompass information about a work of art that relates to what it was made of, how it was made, and the techniques employed by the person or persons who made the object. For buildings, monuments, or archaeological sites there can be many other areas or disciplines from which we draw information.

We must also understand that the borders of “conservation documentation” are not neatly defined. Where conservation documentation ends and other forms of documentation begin can vary depending on the outlook and education of individual practitioners. Disciplinary points of view can also cause radically different variations. An architectural conservator's view of conservation documentation will differ from that of someone who conserves easel paintings.

As advocates for the objects they conserve, conservators speak for the objects and structures they care for and must explain their role in this regard, as well as the boundaries of their involvement and the function of their profession, its ethical posture, and their specialty.

Architectural conservators and conservators of electronic media are currently working to revise the documentation guidelines in the AIC Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice to accommodate the unique nature of their work. This effort illustrates the authorial nature of conservation documentation in that it must frame its purpose and point of view to fulfill its ethical mandate. It is important to understand that this shapes the authorial voice or intent in conservation documentation. This is rarely stated but usually underlies the text. The audience for these texts is unclear but seems to presuppose an audience of other conservators, conservation professionals, or a knowledgeable curatorial staff.

Let us look at a few examples to understand how documentation influences treatment and how the surrogate role of documentation plays out.

Consider a 15th-century panel painting created as part of an altarpiece in a church lit primarily by candle light. Today it may be separated from its companion pieces and viewed in strong artificial light. In a case such as this, good and complete documentation, for instance noting evidence of original structure, can contribute to explaining the context and function of this object to a surprising degree.

This information can have a dramatic effect on how the painting is conserved and how the piece is displayed. Inadequate or poor documentation, on the other hand could radically alter the treatment. This is the sense in which the documentation serves as a surrogate for the painting. It frames the painting contextually.

The documentation itself, however, is an intellectual construct subject to reinterpretation by varying individuals over time. When the initial document, or the painting, is still available for examination and documentation, it can be reinterpreted by subsequent viewers and will serve to contextualize the existing documentation. Frequently, panel paintings are treated many times over the years by a succession of conservators. These conservators may have different information available to them, such as the documentation of their predecessors, and may come to different conclusions or may have techniques and materials available to them that their predecessors did not.

Let us take another, more extreme example. For instance, a hypothetical wall painting from a Central Asian Buddhist grotto.

Perhaps it had been removed from the wall of the cave and placed in a museum in Dresden where it was destroyed by the Allied bombing of that city during the Second World War. Imagine also that extensive documentation of the expedition that discovered that painting and its removal from the cave wall existed in the British Museum and survived the Blitz.

In this case, the only evidence that the object ever existed would be the documentation. The surrogate, the secondary or derived document, is all that remains. The artifacts commenting on the artifact take on a new role and new importance. Since it documents an absent object, it becomes a presence evoking the initial document, i.e. the physical painting that was destroyed.

The great Buddha at Bamiyan, destroyed by the Taliban, is now largely absent. While it may be reconstructed from the rubble, the images that remain are now surrogates for that object and have taken on a meaning and a story completely different from that intended by the people who created it and the religion for which it speaks. (See AYMHM, p. 26, Ed.)

All too often, documentation is the only conservation that can be done under extreme circumstances, particularly with immovable cultural property. When this happens the original artifact, the initial document, can no longer be examined. It is in this way that the documentation, the secondary documents, become very important and are subject to being reinterpreted. An image of the Buddha becomes a symbol of the Taliban's iconoclasm and hostility toward all conventions regarding World Heritage.

How these texts or stories relate to the original is a question of relationship. If we are to recover a satisfactory understanding of the original, these relationships must be documented or retained as Suzanne Briet understood.

Stories told by conservation documentation may be intended as scientific, objective, and descriptive but culture, past and present imbues them with messages that represent the time when they were created, viewed, or reused. After all, the conservation of cultural property is about conserving material whose value, both cultural and financial, is not fixed and is, in fact, assigned and reassigned by subsequent generations.

Over time, these narratives are reused and turn into passion plays, stories of loss and redemption, or evocations of absences; absent humans, absent beliefs, absent works of art. These absences, like Suzanne Briet's absent antelope, are originary facts of great documentary fertility. As these documents drift through time and space further from the originals for which they are the surrogates they become increasingly weighted and culturally ornamented and are repurposed as needed.