

The Value of Posterity

An assessment of significance is a precept that begins any conservation proposal. In making one, historical, social and aesthetic values are placed upon the relevant heritage asset. Whence come these values and who assesses them?

Heritage consciousness arose in the 19th century, quite recently, as compared to the study of history itself which, for western civilization, dates from Herodotus (c. 430 BCE). It developed alongside the proliferation of history books and the growth of a literate middle class that increased the breadth of audience for them. A sense arose in many countries and the UK in particular, that there was a national heritage, a body of property and goods that belonged to the people in common, even if financial rights to that property were ascribed as private property to individuals or groups. At that time universities and the professions institutionalised. Those academic bodies and professions took on the role of identification and custodianship of the national heritage and the values they placed upon it were deemed to be authoritative. Implicitly those custodians were guardians of the heritage for subsequent generations and it was assumed that the values placed on the objects were those of posterity, that is to say universal, unchanging and enduring.

The reality was a little more nuanced than that short outline but nevertheless in stark contrast to our current situation. Whilst heritage has become ever more popular and spawned an industry, assessment of significance has increased in complexity. Historians themselves, are aware, that however objective they seek to be, their descriptions and assessments of the past will always be selective, and that the history they write will always be the product of its time and place. Similarly the values we place on heritage assets will be so too. Moreover there has been a disaffection from the view that history is a matter of great universal structures. The study of history has fragmented into a series of subdisciplines that reflect multiple audiences and viewpoints. This is allied to a growth in identity politics. As a consequence the body of heritage assets has expanded from the surviving artefacts of a past ruling elite, such as castles and great country houses, historically interesting as they may be and fun though they are to visit, to include those of significance to other group histories, for example Brixton Market. This trend can clearly be seen as a benefit, being more widely representative of the past. However one can also ask, as interest groups proliferate, what would not be a heritage asset? At what point does the notion become too diluted?

Today the significance of an object is clearly seen as temporal and consequently changeable. Our assessments quite properly change upon further knowledge but should they change because the popularity of a subject wanes? We would of course say no but fashions change and, in the absence of consensus or a single authority, it is easy for subjects to fall by the wayside as a default. Assessment of significance is highly politicised, as it involves the allocation of public resources and dispositions of property. Assets that no longer garner support will be under threat.

Of course there are institutions that can still claim authority. Ironically in the UK there are more professional historians than ever. There are national bodies too that have formalised the assessment of significance such as Historic England and the Church Buildings Council. However the countercurrents are strong whether they be the distrust of experts, the pressure of multiple interest groups vying for recognition, or the present interest in the particular rather than the universal.

What any generation neglects may be destroyed or damaged for those to come but do our attitudes to assigning value risk unintentionally celebrating esoteric aspects of our history, those that are in fashion and those that are important to the interest groups with the loudest voices? Is there a role for universal enduring values, those of posterity, to be asserted in this discourse and, if so how should that be done and who should do it?

Sherry Bates

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