Available on: https://jsshrs.ep-journals.org/ E-ISSN: 3051-3561, P-ISSN: 3051-3553

Journal of Social Science and Human Research Studies

Volume : 02 Issue : 07 July-2026

Conservation of Cultural Heritage from A Hermeneutic Perspective

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Published Date: July 29, 2026 **Article DOI: 10.65150/EP-jsshrs/V2E7/2026-42**

ABSTRACT: The deconstruction and critical reflection of modernism have given rise to post-processual archaeology and new museology in the field of cultural heritage, thereby generating new hermeneutic demands for conservation theory that cannot be adequately addressed by existing frameworks. Drawing on the ontological perspective of philosophical hermeneutics as developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer, this paper examines the theoretical foundations of cultural heritage conservation and argues that cultural heritage, as a distinctive object possessing both aesthetic and historical dimensions, participates in and is unified by three interrelated processes: the disclosure of truth in artistic experience, the unfolding of effective history (Wirkungsgeschichte) under the fusion of horizons (Horizontverschmelzung), and the continuous development of tradition rooted in language. From an ontological-hermeneutic standpoint, conservation methodology is required to achieve three fundamental shifts: engaging in localized expression that respects the embeddedness of heritage in specific cultural contexts, cultivating critical reflexivity that enables conservators to examine their own situatedness, and integrating multi-layered pre-understandings that acknowledge the plurality of legitimate interpretations. This study seeks to supplement conservation theory with a hermeneutic dimension and to promote its theoretical deepening.

KEYWORDS: Philosophical Hermeneutics, Cultural Relics, Conservation, Ontology.

INTRODUCTION

Since the twentieth century, the humanities have undergone a significant and far-reaching postmodern turn, a transformation that has profoundly reshaped theoretical paradigms across disciplines including history, literary studies, anthropology, and archaeology. This intellectual movement, characterized by its skepticism toward grand narratives and universal methodologies, has inevitably influenced the field of cultural heritage studies, challenging previously dominant scientistic approaches that treated heritage objects as mere physical artifacts to be preserved through technical intervention. Conservation theory, particularly in the Chinese context, has long been dominated by a scientific conservation paradigm inherited from Italian conservation science in the 1980s; however, confronted with the irreducible complexity of aesthetic values, historical meanings, and cultural significations embedded in cultural heritage, a monolithic scientific methodology proves increasingly insufficient and urgently calls for new theoretical perspectives capable of enabling genuine ontological reflection.

Philosophical hermeneutics, since the publication of Hans-Georg Gadamer's seminal work Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode) in the 1960s [1], has become one of the most influential intellectual resources shaping the development of the humanities in the latter half of the twentieth century. Gadamer's philosophical project, which transformed hermeneutics from a methodological tool for textual interpretation into an ontology of human understanding, offers particularly fertile ground for rethinking the theoretical foundations of cultural heritage conservation. Against this academic backdrop, re-examining the theoretical foundations of cultural heritage conservation from a hermeneutic perspective serves not merely as a supplementary addition to existing paradigms but as a theoretically necessary response to the plural, contested, and culturally situated demands of contemporary heritage conservation practice.

CONTEXT: POSTMODERNISM, CULTURAL HERITAGE, AND HERMENEUTICS

Postmodernism emerged from within modernity itself, arising in tandem with the structural transformation of industrial society in the mid-twentieth century to mount a critique and transcendence of modernity's foundational assumptions. The core characteristics of postmodernism lie in its sustained critique of traditional conceptions of "subjectivity" as an autonomous consciousness, of rationalist supremacy as the exclusive criterion of valid knowledge, and of old metaphysics as the pursuit of timeless essences beyond historical particularity. Its theoretical telos, as the philosopher Zhang Shiying has argued, is directed toward the full realization of human free life—above all, the thorough realization of aesthetic existence as the genuine mode of human being [2]. Consequently, aesthetic inquiry and literary-artistic criticism became central discourses of postmodernism, displacing previously dominant concerns with epistemology and scientific foundations. Cultural heritage, as a significant object

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of human aesthetic experience and historical memory, naturally entered the theoretical purview of postmodernism, demanding approaches that could attend to its multidimensional significance beyond mere material preservation.

Philosophical hermeneutics furnished important theoretical resources for the postmodern turn and constitutes a key intellectual origin of postmodern philosophy of history, as Xu Hao has demonstrated in his analysis of the hermeneutic dimension in Western postmodern historical thought [3]. Hermeneutics, broadly construed as the discipline of understanding and interpretation, has evolved through three historically distinct stages, each representing a fundamental transformation in the understanding of what interpretation entails and what it achieves.

The first stage was traditional hermeneutics, initially manifested as biblical hermeneutics—a technical discipline for understanding and interpreting sacred texts through established rules of exegesis—which subsequently developed into legal hermeneutics in the field of law, serving as systematic rules and methods for the application of legal statutes to particular cases. The second stage, spanning from the first half of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, witnessed the efforts of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey to develop general hermeneutics (also termed methodological hermeneutics), elevating the aforementioned specific hermeneutics into a universal methodology distinguishing the human sciences from the natural sciences. Dilthey, in particular, argued that hermeneutics should become the foundational methodology for all disciplines concerned with human expressions and historical creations, thereby establishing the autonomy of humanistic inquiry against the encroaching hegemony of natural scientific models.

The third and most decisive stage was inaugurated by the publication of Gadamer's Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode, 1960) in the 1960s, an event that marked the birth of philosophical hermeneutics and its fundamental turn from methodology to ontology. Gadamer's philosophical project transformed hermeneutics from a tool for achieving correct understanding into an investigation of the ontological conditions of understanding itself. Its concerns extend beyond the methodological procedures of science and their modes of experience to encompass human world-experience and life-practice in their full historical concreteness, seeking to discover the fundamental relation between humanity and the world within the finite, historically situated mode of human existence. Thus, the central problematic of philosophical hermeneutics is to investigate experiences of truth that exceed the control of scientific methodology wherever experience extends and their legitimacy can be questioned—a project that has direct and profound implications for rethinking the theoretical foundations of heritage conservation.

These profound intellectual transformations directly propelled theoretical innovation in the domain of cultural heritage cognition and communication, specifically manifested in the rise of post-processual archaeology and new museology. These theoretical paradigms may be regarded as significant humanistic turns in heritage studies, representing a fundamental shift away from the dominance of scientistic cognitive models toward approaches that acknowledge the irreducible role of human subjectivity, cultural context, and interpretive plurality in the understanding and presentation of heritage.

Post-processual archaeology emerged from critical reflection on processual archaeology (also known as the New Archaeology), which was inaugurated by Lewis Binford's 1962 publication of "Archaeology as Anthropology." Processual archaeology's core theory, the "middle-range theory," treated the archaeological record as the product of a complex dynamic system, seeking to explain this system through ethnographic analogy and systematic observation under present conditions. From an epistemological perspective, processual archaeology may be viewed as an attempt to combine Dilthey's methodological hermeneutics with modern natural scientific methods in archaeological inquiry: archaeologists sought to reconstruct past human life through rigorous scientific analysis of material remains, attempting to "bracket" or suspend their present cultural standpoint in order to understand historical residues from what they imagined to be the perspective of actors in past contexts.

Yet while scientific methods undoubtedly provide important tools for archaeological research, they cannot exhaust the full significance of ancient remains as objects of human cultural creation and historical transmission. More importantly, as archaeologist Chen Shengqian has argued in his comprehensive analysis of the humanistic turn in archaeology, archaeologists as historically situated beings cannot achieve the value-free "bracketing" to which processual archaeology aspired [4]. Their understanding is necessarily conditioned by their own pre-understanding (Vorverständnis)—the historically accumulated horizon of meanings and assumptions that makes any understanding possible in the first place. This is precisely Gadamer's central and revolutionary insight: understanding is always already grounded in pre-understanding, and scientific methodology, however rigorous, cannot exhaust the truth-dimension of human world-experience. On the basis of this theoretical reflection, post-processual archaeology emphasizes critical examination of the scientistic paradigm, re-centering "the human" in archaeological inquiry, attending to the specific contexts and subjective participation of archaeologists in interpreting remains, and thereby generating new research branches such as gender archaeology and landscape archaeology.

New museology similarly arose from critical reflection on traditional museology. In 1989, Peter Vergo's edited volume The New Museology formally established the name of this theoretical movement. Like post-processual archaeology, new museology, under the influence of philosophical hermeneutics, broke down the binary opposition between museum institution and public audience, fostering a pluralistic, human-centered system of heritage communication and understanding. Specifically, Gadamer's concept of "play" (Spiel) in Truth and Method provided an important theoretical reference for this transformation. For Gadamer, the subject of play is not the player but play itself; the player is absorbed into play, entering a state of self-forgetfulness in which the rigid subject-object distinction dissolves. Applied to the museum context, the communication and understanding of cultural heritage is no longer a unidirectional transmission from museum to audience but a shared activity of meaning-generation in which museum and public participate together—an activity that itself constitutes part of the ongoing historical development of heritage rather than a mere external commentary upon it. Thus, the authoritative, monologic discourse of traditional museology is deconstructed, replaced by plural voices from different social groups and cultural backgrounds. Museums, influenced by this theoretical shift, began to attend more carefully to the needs of different communities, developing exhibitions, interpretation programs, and educational initiatives with greater sensitivity to cultural diversity, community engagement, and the ideal of lifelong learning [5].

These theoretical innovations have fundamentally reshaped the domain of cultural heritage cognition and communication, and they will inevitably exert profound influence on the theoretical foundations of conservation practice. Since conservation is necessarily premised on prior cognition and oriented toward subsequent communication, conservation theory must be systematically connected to the postmodern intellectual context and must

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establish corresponding interpretive frameworks capable of addressing the complex, multidimensional nature of heritage as an object of human understanding.

CONSERVATION AS SCIENCE: THE METHODOLOGY OF AUTHENTICITY

The mainstream concept of cultural heritage conservation in contemporary China can be traced to scientific conservation theory transmitted from Italian conservation science in the 1980s, a theoretical importation that occurred during a period of rapid modernization and opening-up in which Western scientific and technical approaches were broadly embraced across disciplinary domains. In this theoretical framework, which has achieved near-hegemonic status in Chinese conservation practice, the conservation of authenticity constitutes the absolute core principle, serving as the foundational value that justifies and orients all conservation activity.

The term "authenticity" carries multiple interrelated meanings—genuine, non-replicated, original, primordial—which in the heritage context manifest as two fundamental dimensions: first, that heritage must be a genuine product of its specific historical period rather than a later imitation or reconstruction, the dimension of "genuineness" or "truth to origin"; second, that heritage must possess a discernible, continuous historical transmission rather than being an isolated residue detached from temporal context and cultural genealogy, the dimension of "originality" or "integrity of tradition." As urban planners Ruan Yisan and Lin Lin have argued in their influential discussion of authenticity principles, authenticity represents a fundamental, non-negotiable attribute of cultural heritage without which its value as heritage collapses [6].

The concept of authenticity has undergone continuous historical evolution and international codification. It was first established as an international principle by the Venice Charter (1964), which articulated the foundational commitment to preserving the authentic material fabric of historical monuments. It was subsequently elaborated and significantly expanded by the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), a landmark document that specified its dimensions as "form and design, materials and substance, use and function, traditions and techniques, location and setting, spirit and feeling," and, crucially, first systematically addressed the complex relation between authenticity and cultural diversity, recognizing that different cultures may legitimately understand and evaluate authenticity in different ways. On this expanded foundation, UNESCO's Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention established authenticity as a core criterion for World Heritage nomination, encompassing "design, materials, craftsmanship or layout, and the characteristics and constituents of cultural landscapes" [7].

Under the framework of authenticity conservation, four core methodological principles have been systematically developed and institutionalized in conservation practice: preserving the original state, ensuring reversibility or re-treatability, practicing minimal intervention, and maintaining identifiability of additions. These principles, taken together, constitute a comprehensive methodological system designed to safeguard the authentic material and historical integrity of heritage objects against the potentially distorting effects of human intervention.

Specifically, conservation must be preceded by comprehensive investigation, assessment, and research into the "original state"—that is, the authentic condition bearing the full imprint of historical time—of heritage. At the operational level, in-situ preservation, environmental conservation, scientific application of conservation materials and techniques, routine maintenance, and preventive conservation all serve to safeguard authenticity against the relentless processes of natural deterioration. To prevent potentially irreversible damage from present intervention, the principle of re-treatability was established, requiring that conservation measures ideally be fully reversible; where complete reversibility is practically unattainable, re-treatability must at minimum be satisfied, meaning that current intervention must not impede or prejudice future conservation and research possibilities. Furthermore, the principle of minimal intervention demands that conservation actions achieve their protective goals while minimizing disturbance to the authentic material fabric and historical stratification of heritage, and the principle of identifiability requires that any added materials remain visually and physically distinguishable from original materials, ensuring transparency about the boundary between original and intervention.

Beyond the principle of authenticity, the scientific dimension of heritage conservation has been increasingly emphasized and, in certain respects, disproportionately expanded. In much contemporary conservation practice, particularly in institutional and research contexts, the substantive content of conservation is increasingly defined as scientific research into the physical aging of material substances, their chemical stabilization, and the technical retardation of deterioration processes. This tendency, as conservator Guo Hong has critically observed in his analysis of the content and methods of conservation science research, has led to the progressive narrowing of heritage conservation into a sub-discipline of natural science, with research programs focused predominantly on three technical domains: heritage preservation environments, material properties and characterization, and restoration techniques [8].

Under this scientistic paradigm, conservation is positioned as a purely scientific methodological inquiry: conservation experts employ direct observation, systematic induction, and controlled experimentation to discover universal laws applicable to conservation, which are then applied to new conservation situations through technical transfer. The conservator is conceived as a scientific technician whose task is to intervene upon material objects according to objectively established protocols, without need for interpretive engagement with the cultural, historical, or aesthetic dimensions of the objects under care. Thus, scientific conservation based on the rationalist tradition of modernity has become the dominant, indeed often exclusive, paradigm in both professional practice and academic training, with the result that the broader humanistic dimensions of conservation—its engagement with meaning, value, tradition, and cultural identity—have been systematically marginalized or entirely excluded from theoretical consideration.

REFLECTION: HERMENEUTIC CONSERVATION

Cultural heritage possesses the irreducible dual attributes of material spatiality and aesthetic-historical character. As physical entities with specific spatial extent—ancient human remains, architectural structures, archaeological sites—heritage has materially participated in local historical processes throughout its existence, bearing the physical traces of time, use, and environmental interaction. Simultaneously, the material appearance of heritage constitutes a distinctive aesthetic and historical field, a nexus of meaning that serves as a medium connecting past and present, enabling contemporary communities to encounter and engage with traditions and values that would otherwise be inaccessible.

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Current conservation theory, as we have seen, relies primarily on the principle of authenticity and scientific methodological practice, while ontological reflection on the nature of conservation as a mode of human understanding has long been conspicuously absent. It must be acknowledged that the materiality of heritage necessarily requires scientific content in conservation methods; the physical stabilization of deteriorating materials, the analysis of corrosion mechanisms, and the development of appropriate intervention materials are all legitimate and indispensable aspects of conservation practice. However, the full experience involved in conservation—particularly the experience of encountering heritage as an object of aesthetic appreciation and historical understanding—far exceeds what scientific methodology alone can encompass or articulate [9].

Particularly in the conservation of aesthetic values and historical meanings, conservators must necessarily engage in prior understanding and interpretation of heritage. They must ask not only "What is this object made of?" and "How is it deteriorating?" but also "What does this object mean?" and "How should we understand its historical significance?" The ideal of aesthetic cognition and historical understanding, as Gadamer has argued, is not pursued at the abstract level of universal laws but in the concrete, situated grasping of phenomena within the unique relation of their singularity and historicity. In other words, the activity of understanding in conservation aims not at verifying or expanding universal experience to achieve law-like knowledge but at the generation and communication of meaning within specific, unrepeatable historical situations.

Conservation theory therefore cannot remain at the methodological level of technical rules and procedural protocols but must proceed from concrete conservation phenomena to ontological reflection on what conservation is and what it achieves. At the practical level, every conservation behavior requires what Gadamer calls "tact" (Takt)—a specific sensitivity and power of judgment toward concrete situations and the actions appropriate to them, whose essence lies in the capacity to apprehend what cannot be fully articulated in general concepts or technical specifications. This tact is not a teachable technique but an acquired practical wisdom, a mode of knowing that operates in the space between universal principle and particular case.

This tact manifests concretely as the individual choices made by conservation experts within each specific conservation situation after mastering the general principles of authenticity and the methods of scientific analysis. Every conservation intervention, no matter how thoroughly planned, involves countless micro-decisions that cannot be determined by rule: the exact degree of cleaning, the precise tone of an inpainting, the specific method of structural stabilization, the appropriate level of interpretive intervention. The accumulation of these situated choices constitutes the process and outcome of conservation; through these choices, we glimpse world-experiences in conservation that cannot be exhausted by scientific methods, experiences that bear specific human claims to meaning and value. Confirming the legitimacy of these experiences from an ontological perspective—recognizing them as constitutive of what conservation is rather than as unfortunate deviations from pure method—is precisely the proper task of hermeneutic reflection.

Philosophical hermeneutics has profoundly influenced the theoretical trajectory of the humanities since the 1960s. The aesthetic and historical dimensions of conservation discussed above are precisely the core concerns of hermeneutics as an ontology of understanding. Therefore, introducing a hermeneutic perspective into conservation theory can provide systematic intellectual resources for the ontological reflection that this field has long lacked.

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics proceeds from the disclosure of truth in artistic experience (Wahrheitsgeschehen), and conservation practice, this paper argues, equally participates in this fundamental truth-event. Specifically, conservation actions typically alter the material appearance of heritage—through cleaning, consolidation, restoration, or reconstruction—thereby profoundly affecting its aesthetic content and its capacity to disclose truth. Following Gadamer's theory of "play" (Spiel), the subject of play is not the player but play itself; the player is absorbed into play, entering a state of self-forgetfulness in which the rigid distinction between subject and object temporarily dissolves. The game "plays" the players rather than the players controlling the game.

Similarly, in the conservation of heritage aesthetics, the decisive factor is not the conservator's subjective intention or technical mastery but the activity of aesthetic conservation itself as a mode of being. Conservation behavior constitutes a mode of existence for the aesthetic dimension of heritage, enabling its artistic truth to manifest itself through the conservation process. The conservator does not impose meaning upon the object but participates in the object's own self-presentation. In other words, the artistic truth of heritage resides neither purely within the heritage object itself as a fixed property nor in the mind of the conservator as subjective projection, but is dynamically generated through the interaction between conservator and heritage, in which both are transformed by their participation.

Extending from aesthetic to historical conservation, heritage conservation may be regarded as an event of effective history (Wirkungsgeschichte). Every conservation action presupposes a pre-understanding (Vorverständnis) of heritage, that is, the structure of "fore-having" (Vorhabe), "fore-sight" (Vorsicht), and "fore-conception" (Vorgriff) elaborated by Martin Heidegger and developed by Gadamer. Pre-understanding is not an obstacle to understanding that must be eliminated but a productive, positive factor bestowed by history upon the conservator, providing the specific horizon (Horizont) of understanding within which any encounter with heritage becomes possible.

This horizon constitutes the spatiotemporal field in which historical exchange between present humans and past heritage unfolds during conservation; the conservator's present horizon and the historical horizon of heritage enter into dialogue and fuse here (Horizontverschmelzung), forming an ever-expanding effective history that encompasses both. In this sense, the historicity of heritage is neither an objectively self-contained "historical reality" waiting to be discovered nor a "reality of understanding" purely subjectively constructed by the conservator, but a relational existence constituted by both in the ongoing fusion of horizons. Thus, historical conservation acquires a hermeneutic application-dimension: conservation is not merely the physical maintenance of historical remains but the active achievement of specific effects of understanding through the living dialogue between history and the present. Effective-historical consciousness (wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein) itself possesses an open logical structure, meaning that conservation practice always remains in an incomplete, future-open state of development, never achieving final closure.

The ultimate locus of Gadamer's hermeneutics, and its most profound implication for conservation theory, lies in the ontology of language. For Gadamer, all objects of cognition and statement are enclosed within the horizon of language; there is no access to reality outside or prior to

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linguistic mediation. Heritage is likewise understood through language—not merely the specialized technical languages of conservation science but the broader natural languages in which traditions of heritage appreciation, historical narration, and cultural valuation are embedded.

Drawing on Hegel's dialectic, Gadamer notes that wherever something can be "produced" (hervorbringen) by us and thereby "comprehended" (begreifen) through our conceptual mastery, being has not been truly experienced; only where what is produced can merely be understood, received in its otherness rather than dominated by our categories, is being genuinely experienced. Conservation practice is likewise profoundly influenced by tradition rooted in language—that is, by a shared world-experience transmitted through linguistic communities across generations. Therefore, the object of conservation is not merely the material entity of heritage itself, understood as a passive physical object, but the world of meaning borne by linguistic tradition, a world that continues to live and develop through the interpretive engagement of each new generation.

REFLECTION UPON REFLECTION

The ontological dimension opened by philosophical hermeneutics has undoubtedly provided new theoretical horizons for humanities research, yet it also possesses limits deserving critical examination. As Fu Yongjun has argued in his analysis of the Gadamer-Habermas hermeneutic debate, hermeneutics' emphasis on tradition, prejudice, and the finitude of understanding can, if pushed to extremes, lead to an uncritical acceptance of existing power structures and a disabling relativism that precludes genuine critique [10]. Hermeneutics' focus on the continuity of tradition and the authority of pre-understanding must be balanced by critical reflection on whose traditions are being preserved, whose voices are being excluded, and whose interests are being served by particular conservation decisions.

Conservation-theoretical reflection grounded in hermeneutics must therefore undergo further critical examination, drawing on the resources of critical theory and the legacy of the Gadamer-Habermas debate, thereby generating new demands at the methodological level that go beyond both uncritical traditionalism and technocratic scientism [11]. The goal is not to reject hermeneutics but to develop a self-critical practice of conservation capable of acknowledging the productive role of pre-understanding while remaining vigilant against its potential to mask power, exclude difference, and perpetuate injustice.

On the basis of the above reflection, conservation methodology must achieve three fundamental shifts if it is to realize the potential of hermeneutic insight while avoiding its pitfalls.

First, conservation must engage in localized expression that respects the embeddedness of heritage in specific cultural contexts. The historical existence of heritage determines its necessary embeddedness in particular local contexts, with their distinctive languages, customs, belief systems, and practices of memory. Therefore, in the fusion of horizons during conservation practice, active dialogue with local knowledge must be pursued, respecting local geoculture and the specific ways in which communities understand and value their heritage. This local horizon is intimately related to local language, customs, and conceptual systems; conservation behavior cannot rely solely on universal professional judgment but must incorporate the understanding and participation of local communities as legitimate partners in the conservation process.

Second, from the perspective of effective history and the ontology of language, conservation practice must cultivate critical reflexivity. This critique does not negate tradition but subjects it to reflective examination; it is the conscious awareness of human practical capability and its historical limits. Effective-historical events possess both necessity and contingency, and effective-historical consciousness itself contains the potential for self-critique, enabling conservators to maintain vigilance toward their own pre-understandings and to recognize that their understanding is always partial, situated, and open to revision.

Third, conservation behavior must integrate multi-layered pre-understandings rather than privileging a single authoritative interpretation. This requires conservation practice to move toward genuine pluralization, seeking innovation in conservation form and interpretive content to respond to the understanding needs of different cognitive traditions, social groups, and cultural communities. Heritage is not a monologic text with a single correct meaning but a polyphonic field in which multiple legitimate interpretations coexist and contest.

CONCLUSION

This paper has undertaken systematic reflection and reconstruction of conservation theory from the ontological perspective of philosophical hermeneutics. The study demonstrates that conservation is not merely the technical application of scientific methodology upon passive material objects but an ontological practice participating in the disclosure of artistic truth, the generation of effective history, and the continuation of linguistic tradition. While the principle of authenticity and scientific conservation methods constitute important and indispensable foundations, the long absence of ontological reflection has created deep and persistent predicaments in conservation practice: insufficient attention to meaning-interpretation, systematic exclusion of local voices, and weak critical reflexivity regarding the conservator's own situatedness.

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics provides key intellectual resources for transcending these predicaments. Through the concept of "play," we re-examine the subject-object relation between conservator and heritage, understanding conservation as a field in which the aesthetic dimension of heritage manifests itself through dialogical interaction; through the theories of "fusion of horizons" and "effective history," we grasp the historical essence of conservation behavior, recognizing each conservation action as a continuation of the living dialogue between past and present; through the ontology of language, we transcend exclusive focus on material entities, extending the object of conservation to the world of meaning borne by linguistic tradition and continuously renewed through interpretive engagement.

However, the introduction of a hermeneutic perspective does not negate the scientific conservation paradigm but supplements and deepens it. Just as post-processual archaeology did not replace the scientific methods of processual archaeology but incorporated them into a broader framework of humanistic understanding, hermeneutic conservation theory aims to establish what might be called a "scientific hermeneutics" or "hermeneutic science"—injecting historical consciousness, critical spirit, and plural dialogue into conservation while maintaining the scientific rigor necessary for responsible material intervention.

Future research in conservation theory may deepen along three promising directions: first, conducting concrete, detailed case studies of conservation practice to test the operability and explanatory power of hermeneutic theory in real-world situations; second, exploring productive

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dialogue between hermeneutics and traditional Chinese conceptions of heritage to construct a conservation hermeneutics with indigenous characteristics that speaks to Chinese cultural traditions; third, attending to the new challenges emerging in the digital-technological era, reflecting critically on how interventions such as virtual restoration and digital twins impact traditional conceptions of "authenticity" and hermeneutic frameworks of understanding [12].

The essence of cultural heritage conservation, perhaps, lies precisely in this never-ending, ever-renewed process of understanding and interpretation—a process in which the past speaks to the present, the present responds to the past, and both are transformed by their dialogical encounter.

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