

Rethinking Conservation:

Implementing a Living Heritage Approach at Paradise Garden

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A core tenet of an art museum and or foundation is to preserve. Each year, these institutions receive hundreds of millions of dollars to ensure that every painting, sculpture, and assorted ephemera are protected from the always encroaching “wrath” of decay. Western European culture is determined that no piece of their chosen history is allowed to fade. As these institutions attempt to pivot in favor of sustainable practice, it is vital to realize that creating and maintaining collections is inherently unsustainable. This sentimental behavior and desire to care for objects is not wholly a poor practice. Archives and museum collections allow for further understanding of humanity’s past and maintain the legacy of great works. However, space, funds, and other essential resources are finite. At some point, the collections reveal themselves as hoards and are unable to be maintained.

Recognizing the flaws in this seemingly vital behavior for museums sparks concern for both professionals in the field and average visitors. If museums do not have collections, what will become of them? How will society remember great people, events, and creations without these objects? While major institutional change is difficult, one must come to terms with the fact that all things, living and nonliving, are ephemeral. Artworks from centuries ago, or even just a few decades ago, were produced with materials that would one day return to nature’s grasp. Many cultures across the world have created beautiful heritage sites or intricate works of art made to be used, engaged with, and brought to life rather than stay hidden in a climate controlled storage unit. The Western perspective to constantly save and preserve is not universal and is not a permanent solution. However, full abandonment of this system across museums in favor of a practice of decay is also unlikely. Though it may be unavoidable down the line, the shift is too abrupt to take on immediately.

Beginning a shift from strict conservation to natural decay requires that a middle ground be found. What best fits this concept is allowing room for growth. Scholar and professor at Ahmedabad University, Dr. Ioannis Poullos identifies these ideas as “living heritage,” which allows for changes, renewals, or replacements to be made to prized collection objects in order to promote continuity.¹ Trials of a living heritage practice have been applied across the world in recent years. However, their main focus has been on colonized sites as autonomy is returned to Indigenous populations.² Taken more broadly, this concept can begin to grow and apply to art environments or, more broadly, all targets of conservation.

In order to illustrate a potential site of implementation for a living heritage perspective in a Western art environment, this essay will investigate self-taught artist Howard Finster’s Paradise Garden in Summerville, GA. For the purpose of this work, the common term “folk art” will be substituted with “self-taught art,” as it honors the difference in training and skill without condescension. Considered a major part of Finster’s lasting legacy, his personal, outdoor museum and art space in Northeast Georgia began to actively decay in the later years of his life. With recent reorganization, grants, and donations, Paradise Garden is now beginning to undergo immense restoration processes. Finster’s practice was centered around community engagement. Allowing his longest work to become a monument frozen in time would remove his own intention for the space. As Paradise Garden is in a fundamental shifting period of its life, it is an ideal case study for how living heritage can be implemented to promote growth rather than strict conservation or decay.

¹ Ioannis Poullos. “Discussing strategy in heritage conservation: Living heritage approach as an example of strategic innovation.” *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development* 4, no. 1 (2014): 16-34. doi: 10.1108/JCHMSD-10-2012-0048 (21)

² Poullos (23-24)

Since the formation of the typical Western museum, emphasis has been placed upon collecting, preserving, and displaying objects to an audience. This precedent is built out of the *Wunderkammer* or “chamber of wonders” which contained organized specimens both natural and manmade.³ As museums continue to assert their power within contemporary society, a shift has begun. Rather than an inward, collections-based focus, the institutions are expected to center their attention on the audience.⁴ In this change, however, collections still play a central role. As scholar and collection care specialist Suzanne Keene explains, the role of the 21st century museum is to provide education and opportunities for active engagement for museum visitors.⁵ By maintaining and presenting large collections, institutions are equipped with materials to produce insightful content and fulfilling experiences.

The International Council of Museums Committee on Conservation (ICOM-CC) establishes the standards that are followed by a global network of institutions. During the 2019 conference in Kyoto, Japan, their research and discussion centered around the question: “What is the essence of conservation?”⁶ As voiced in their publication’s introduction, ICOM-CC recognizes that a Western perspective on conservation and preservation rests upon the idea of authenticity.⁷ In a Eurocentric view, authenticity is evaluated by the presence of the undisturbed, original material of the object.⁸ Conversely, other cultures frequently make replacements and updates to art, archival works, and heritage sites.⁹ Western practice once behaved similarly, but

³ Lorraine Datson and Katherine Park, “Wonders of Art, Wonders of Nature,” in *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (New York: Zone Books 1998), 260.

⁴ Suzanne Keene. *Managing Conservation in Museums*. Jordan Hill: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central. 4

⁵ Kenne 12-13

⁶ François Mairesse and Renata F. Peters, “What is the essence of conservation?” in *What is the Essence of Conservation?* ed. by François Mairesse and Renata F. Peters (Paris: ICOFOM, 2019) 9-13.

⁷ Mairesse and Peters 9

⁸ Mairesse and Peters 10

⁹ Mairesse and Peters 10

the precedent of strict protection of original material was set during the 20th century.¹⁰ As conservation becomes more and more entangled in social and ethical concerns, a diversity of perspectives are now being encouraged. While ICOM-CC's conference is largely an open discussion rather than examples of practice, these conversations show a recent, field-wide push for rethinking the role of conservation and preservation.

Throughout these shifts in conservation ideas and practices, there has been a growing interest in the opposite option: decay. Most scholarship recognizes the need to mediate the breakdown of collections rather than abandon the practice of conservation altogether. Still, the allowance for any deterioration directly endangers what scholar Caitlin DeSilvey calls the "Noah Complex," which describes the Western perspective that the material past is "always endangered" and needs saving from conservators or other professionals.¹¹ Instead of hoarding these objects, hoping they will one day prove useful, DeSilvey instead argues that "perhaps we need to develop modes of care that help us negotiate the transition between presence and absence."¹² When institutions realize that there is an opportunity to control decay, the idea appears more palatable and achievable. In fact, "care without conservation" allows for institutions to "unshackle [themselves] from the instinctive leap to save at all costs" and allows for truer control of the material past.¹³

DeSilvey's work builds upon Poullos' idea of a "living heritage" practice. As his work shows, this approach "does not aim at preserving the fabric, but at maintaining continuity, even if in certain occasions the fabric might be harmed."¹⁴ Essentially, a conservation model centered

¹⁰ Mairesse 10

¹¹ Caitlin DeSilvey. "Beyond Saving: CARE WITHOUT CONSERVATION." In *Curated Decay: beyond Saving*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2017.) 178.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1kgqvb5.10>.

¹² DeSilvey 179

¹³ DeSilvey 184

¹⁴ Poullos 23

around living heritage values the community's connection to the object much more than its material originality. In addition to building and empowering community, this view also recognizes the importance of many historical objects lies within their direct interaction with others, not just its existence. Conservation professionals still have a role, but the priority is placed upon the community.

In much of Poullos' scholarship, examples of living heritage in practice come from returning land or objects to Indigenous peoples.¹⁵ The best case study of living heritage in action comes from the International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Conservation of Cultural Property (ICCROM). In the early 2000s, ICCROM established the Living Heritage Sites Programme, which focused its work in Southeast Asian countries.¹⁶ These projects include the Temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy, Sri Lanka and the establishment of a community-based, heritage management committee in Phrae, Thailand.¹⁷ Throughout each project, ICCROM has empowered locals to create unique opportunities for fostering engagement within their particular heritage site. ICCROM's work shows what communities are capable of achieving when empowered and how living heritage can translate into any site. While this often means traditional, Western conservation practices are abandoned, what matters most is that the voices of those most impacted are prioritized.

Heritage scholars Jennie Morgan and Sharon Macdonald provide further vocabulary for this shift in collection mentality. Through research among curators at collecting institutions, they have shown a greater push for conversation around "de-growth" of collections, particularly in the last 5 years.¹⁸ In response to the seemingly ever-growing hoard of objects by major museums,

¹⁵ Poullos 22

¹⁶ Poullos 22

¹⁷ Poullos 22

¹⁸Jennie Morgan and Sharon Macdonald. "De-growing museum collections for new heritage futures." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 26, no. 1 (2020), 56.

curators have expressed feeling burdened by the number of objects and the work required to maintain them.¹⁹ Now there are more frequent discussions and actions of deaccessioning works in creative ways. What is most innovative are the ideas that “encourage perspectives where letting go is not considered an ending of an object’s lifetime but perhaps a kind of rebirth.”²⁰ By ‘re-localising’ works within the community and providing opportunity for engagement, museums can both reduce their encumbering collections and provide unique access to and interaction with works of art often hidden from the public eye and hand.²¹ Here, Morgan and Macdonald have recognized the beginnings of a new value system applied to the material past. As audiences and communities gain more respect from institutions, there are increased opportunities for creative engagement that promote sustainability, education, and access.

As evidenced by contemporary research and scholarship, museums are already forced by the circumstance of their place in society to consider the future of their conservation habits. It is painfully clear to most that the current attempt to save every material possible is unsustainable and unrealistic. To better evidence this issue, as well as suggest the adoption of new perspectives, now begins a case study of Paradise Garden. This site, as mentioned prior, is located in Summerville, GA and is home to the incredible art environment built by self-taught artist Howard Finster. Beginning in 1945, the artist filled swampland with canals, buildings, plants, animals, and collections of his own interest in an attempt to create a roadside attraction for local passersby.²² In 1976, his famed artist awakening story took place, when Finster reports sticking his thumb in white paint, seeing a face, and hearing God instruct him to “paint sacred art.”²³ Thus

¹⁹ Morgan and Macdonald, 56.

²⁰ Morgan and Macdonald, 62

²¹ Morgan and Macdonald 63

²² Anna Lockhart. "Resurrected and Revised: Howard Finster’s Paradise Garden." *Bitter Southerner*, September 15, 2020. <https://bittersoutherner.com/features/2020/finster-finsters-paradise-garden-resurrected-and-revised>.

²³ Howard Finster. “Oral History Interview with Howard Finster,” interview by Liza Kirwin. *Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution* June 11, 1984.

began the prolific career of Howard Finster. As he painted, he created what is known in the study of self-taught artists as a “yard show.” These spaces are often found in impoverished, marginalized communities and allow autodidacts to display their masterpieces in a more secluded fashion.²⁴ According to the Grassroots Art Center in Lucas, KS, about 90% of these yard shows are destroyed after their creator dies, partially caused by their exposure to the environment.²⁵ These ephemeral sites hold within them key works by self-taught artists and provide deeper understanding of their practice. However, due to their locations and lack of resources, they are often left to fade back into their natural environments.

Paradise Garden was beginning to meet the same fate even prior to Finster’s death due to his astronomical rise to art world stardom in the 1980s.²⁶ By his death in 2001, much of the site was covered in mud, vines, and in a quickened state of decay due to the Northeast Georgia climate.²⁷ Rather than accept this fate, Finster’s youngest daughter Beverly Finster-Guinn took charge, created the Paradise Gardens Park and Museum, and began a lengthy clean up process.²⁸ While the Howard Finster Paradise Garden Foundation was established in 2012, there have been many difficulties with funding, property ownership, and leadership that have delayed conservation efforts.²⁹ This site’s environment requires specific expertise in the restoration process, which takes time to source. In addition, the operations of non-profits and grant writing are particular skills that can be difficult to fulfill in a rural, impoverished area such as Summerville. After a long, at times chaotic, road, current executive director Tina Cox has taken over and orchestrated a series of grants and gifts to conduct a massive restoration process which

²⁴ Lockhart

²⁵ Lockhart

²⁶ Lockhart

²⁷ Lockhart

²⁸ Lockhart

²⁹ Lockhart

began in May 2021.³⁰ Despite over 20 years of difficulty and disarray, the community support of Paradise Garden has ensured its legacy will not fade.

This urge to save the site is rooted in sentimentality and the Western tradition of archiving historical materials. Thessaly La Force, features director of *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*, unpacked this sentiment well in her article “What Should an Artist Save?” Archives assert authority over the narrative of history, but their immense size and scope create a collection that essentially says “here lies everything we can’t remember but should never forget.”³¹ Paradise Garden’s revival and restoration acts similarly to an archive’s purpose. Self-Taught artists have often been ignored in the art historical canon and the fading away of their art environments is a side effect of their omission. The community wide effort to ensure Finster’s creation is maintained for years to come demonstrates the importance of material preservation in sustaining significance in the United States’ artistic and societal history. While there remains a cultural reliance on original, physical objects, Paradise Garden’s role in the community opens doors to consider other means of engaging with Finster’s legacy.

During the conservation process, Cox has led the Howard Finster Paradise Garden Foundation to consider potential programming opportunities. As of now, the Foundation does offer an annual arts event called FinsterFest and an Artist in Residence program, which both engage the site.³² Some of her new examples include education events, concerts, offering event rentals, and other ways of engaging the local community to create “exactly what Howard envisioned”.³³ Though typical of programming for museums and other art sites, these options are

³⁰ Lockhart

³¹ Thessaly La Force. “What Should an Artist Save?” *The New York Times Style Magazine*, August 6, 2019.

³² “The Foundation,” Paradise Garden Foundation, accessed October 25, 2021, <https://paradisegardenfoundation.org/history/the-foundation/>

³³ Lockhart

great ideas to support Summerville's cultural engagement and speak to Finster's purpose in creating Paradise Garden.

As evidenced by Finster in a 1984 interview with the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art:

As for me, I'm just passin' through this planet. Like some people come there and they'll see me takin' [*sic*] a little money in and they talkin' about "what you goin' [*sic*] to do with it when you get rich" and all. I said, "Listen: you listen to me." I said, "A lot of people has come here and they've died and left mansions and millions. Howard Finster has not come here and leave mansions and millions. I'm going to leave something for the people but not mansions and millions. I wasn't to leave all the inventions of mankind with the people. I want to leave all the creation of God can find with the people. And then I want to leave all of the Bible with the people. The oldest book we have." You asked me a question putting it on the fence and why did I get into commercial art, I didn't really get into the commercial art, I didn't even choose to be an artist, I've never even asked for no kind of publicity or to be in a book. I never asked for this interview, I never asked for nothing like that ... ³⁴

Here Finster showcases his intention of always being community centered and sharing his faith practice with the world. When he became an artist, the ideas of fame and fortune were never at the forefront. Rather, Finster wanted a way to communicate his values and perspective to others. His artistic discovery, while valuable for rural artists and autodidacts, was unprovoked. Cox's imagining of community events and further engagement honors his purpose and the core tenets of his practice, ensuring that his legacy is maintained.

The work done by the Howard Finster Paradise Garden Foundation shows an immense commitment both to Finster's intentions and to engaging the Summerville community. While their projects are fruitful, there is much room for the site to push further into innovative territory. Paradise Garden is an ideal place to implement a living heritage approach to conservation. This would allow them to lead the US in adopting more engaging, sustainable techniques and

³⁴ Finster

influence the future of collection and preservation tactics. One potential program is continuing Finster's practice of showcasing US self-taught artists. As he shared in his interview, "if you're a artist and you got a piece of your work and you want the buyers and people to see it that comes there, you just send it to me and I'll put it on the wall with your address and you name and everything on it."³⁵ Expanding this further, the Foundation could develop a program that allows artists to create using the site, potentially expanding Paradise Garden with new buildings or large scale artworks. Rather than spend their limited funding on long-term restoration, some funds could move towards efforts that allow Summerville to build onto the environment or create weekly community art events that honor Finster's dedication to promoting fellowship. These could be Christian-based events, as his identity as a Christian is essential to his practice, or they could expand to include other faith practices as well. The purpose here is to recognize the artist's wishes and the importance of change in how Western art institutions preserve art.

Continuation of current Western heritage and collections practices are inherently unsustainable. Though it has taken time for scholars and museum professionals to come to terms with this reality, acceptance is quickly growing across the field. The next steps will be painful, but also open doors for growth that can create something beautiful. As Finster said, "It's worth a lot to everybody to go backwards and look at everything, and look at the present. [...] we need the past, we bring it up to the future, and we bring the future back in the middle with the present and we compare 'em and arbitrate what we're gonna do next."³⁶ With Paradise Garden undergoing a vital stage in its restoration process, it is perfectly positioned to lead the US in adopting new practices. Living heritage allows for a caring practice that renews current works, uniquely activates the local community, and honors knowledge from the past while looking to

³⁵ Finster

³⁶ Finster

the future. Present preservation habits are unable to continue forever. By leading this necessary change, Paradise Garden will further Howard Finster's legacy and leave a lasting impact on the art world.

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