

# Toward an Aesthetics of Degradation

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## The Puzzle

On March 3, 2001, the two of us spent time together at the Art Institute of Chicago looking at tomb figurines. They are polychromed wooden sculptures that are about twenty inches tall, made in China sometime between 480 and 221 BCE.<sup>1</sup> We both felt instinctively that a considerable part of the aesthetic interest of these figurines was the way in which they had disintegrated. To be sure, the figurines are in remarkable condition for two-thousand-year-old polychromed wood. But even the most cursory inspection reveals breakage and considerable erosion and fading. We continue to be convinced that this degradation of materials is an important part of what makes these figurines aesthetically compelling. Degradation is what lends their surfaces complexity and depth; it enhances the figurines' attenuated elegance, and it softens their forms, rendering the facial features and the drapery subtle and nuanced. We wager that these figurines are better off, aesthetically speaking, because of the so-called ravages of time than they were in their pristine state, although of course this claim relies on a counterfactual that no one can confirm.

Let us consider another example. The Peplos Kore (Acropolis Museum, Athens) is a white Parian marble female figure dating from approximately 530 BCE that was excavated on the Acropolis, Athens, in 1886.<sup>2</sup> Although damaged, the statue bears traces of original paint. It is common knowledge that many Greek and Roman marble statues were originally brightly colored. The traces of paint on the Peplos Kore have allowed German archaeologist Vinzenz Brinkmann to propose a reconstruction of the original polychromatic paint scheme. That reconstruction, along with others, was included in the exhibition *Gods in Color* at the Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and elsewhere, in 2007–8. The color is more than merely surprising. We do not wish to imply that color in statuary should necessarily be associated with barbarism, but we find these colors loud, brassy, garish, and lacking any subtlety. Indeed, many people (ourselves included) find the polychrome replica of the Peplos Kore—ostensibly presented as the original would have looked—aesthetically inferior to the statue in its current state. Much the same can be said for the many other examples of Greek and Roman statuary excavated from the fifteenth century onward that were originally brightly polychromed.<sup>3</sup> We suggest that the attenuation of colors through deterioration above or below ground is an aesthetic gain.

We have just used the term “aesthetic,” which is treated with suspicion in some circles outside philosophy. Although “aesthetic” is a hotly debated concept in philosophy, we do not mean anything especially abstruse or highbrow by the term. We mean to construe “aesthetic” quite broadly. Aesthetic properties, on our view, are to be found in “high” art, popular culture, and quotidian things, both human-made and in nature. The sorts of positive aesthetic properties we have in mind are not limited to beauty. Other aesthetic gains occasioned by deterioration include allusiveness, coherence, complexity, depth, expressiveness, evocativeness, harmony, ineffability, integrity, lucidity, parsimony, poignancy, subtlety, unity, unpredictability.

Why are these observations interesting? To begin with, we should note that decay and degradation hold an ambiguous place in much contemporary European-derived thought. On the one hand, people across the world take a nostalgic, sentimental, and even an admonitory delight in ruins, while on the

other hand, people and institutions strive to arrest, and even to reverse, the ravages of time on a wide range of tangible things. Conservators are among the foremost in consistently battling the ravages of time.

“The ravages of time” is a telling phrase. It occurs in the founding documents of both the Massachusetts Historical Society (1791) and the American Antiquarian Society (1813).<sup>4</sup> All those things mentioned as serving to “rescue the true history of this Country from the ravages of time” (MHS) or to “retard the ravages of time” (AAS) are subject to curatorial and conservation care in these and many other institutions. This is still the institutional norm, even despite an increasing recognition that to “use things up” selectively may be better than not to use them at all. The dominant ideal of such depositories as libraries and museums remains to preserve their collections in perpetuity. The difficulties, as we see them, lie not only in addressing contradictory attitudes toward decay and degradation—admired in some circumstances, regretted in others—but also in adequately describing and explaining these phenomena themselves. When do aging and degradation aesthetically improve an artifact, and when not?

Our point is that although scholars in various disciplines—notably art history—have at times discussed the aesthetic value of degradation, the European philosophical tradition, to our knowledge, lacks any theorization of aging or degradation as positive aesthetic values. By contrast, Japanese aesthetics, for example, has a concept for the aesthetic value of temporal degradation, for it is an element of *wabi-sabi*.<sup>5</sup> This tradition also incorporates a celebration of repaired damage by drawing attention to the edges of mended ceramic shards with gold: *kintsugi*.<sup>6</sup> Inspired by these notions, we are attempting to identify and lend some precision to the contours of the aesthetic value of degradation in all its varieties, and to offer considerations that lend the phenomenon credence in terms of our own philosophical, historical, art historical, and museological understanding.

We aim to ascertain how degradation, aging, and temporality more broadly can play a positive aesthetic role in tangible things. We think it worthwhile to raise a number of questions here, which are related to other areas of inquiry in the *Conserving Active Matter* exhibition, even though we are not yet in a position to address all of them adequately. How might the very fact of permanence or impermanence, durability or fragility, endurance or destruction, stasis or change, affect a tangible thing aesthetically? When and why are decay and decomposition worthy of admiration, and why do these sometimes become features of objects to prevent or repair? How do some artists include markers of temporality—in particular, aging and deterioration—in their works? How should conservators deal with works as they deteriorate, even if deterioration has led to aesthetic improvement? How should conservators deal with works that are designed to deteriorate?

In the course of attending to such questions, we hope to argue for our central thesis that artifacts can improve aesthetically *precisely because* they age, degrade, or deteriorate. More specifically, we argue that certain sorts of decline, which involve worsening along some axis, can nevertheless result in positive aesthetic worth of some sort. Degeneration to an ostensibly inferior state is the very process that can lead to positive aesthetic improvement. This is the seeming paradox at the heart of our inquiry.

## Some Distinctions and Definitions

### *Temporal Change*

We distinguish between *normative* and *nonnormative* ways of conceiving of temporal change (hereafter *change*).<sup>7</sup> Normative conceptions of change contain or imply an evaluative standard regarding what is good or bad, desirable or undesirable, fit or unfit. Nonnormative conceptions of change do not imply any evaluation, even of the weakest sort. There is not some state that a thing *ought* to occupy, nor is there a state toward or away from which a thing transforms (so nonnormative change concepts are also nonteleological). Examples of nonnormative change concepts are those that delineate bare-bones physical, chemical, and nuclear changes. Below, we discuss various kinds of change. Items in the exhibition exhibit some or all of these, and we invite viewers to look out for them.

*Physical change* is an alteration of the extensive properties of a substance: its shape, or whether it is solid, liquid, gas, or plasma (to confine discussion to the four states of matter in everyday experience). Its molecular constituents remain constant, although parts may be subtracted or other substances added without affecting the molecular structure of the material to which any addition is made. Such changes are theoretically, though not always practically, reversible.

*Chemical change* comes in two types: the combination of two or more materials to make a new, distinct material and the decomposition of a material into two or more distinct materials. Both involve a recombination of atoms into new molecular structures that were not previously present. Chemical changes, whether inorganic, organic, or biochemical, cannot be reversed other than by further chemical changes. Some processes of change productive of the appearance of aging are simple, whether physical or chemical; others are complex, involving one or more identifiable constituent changes that may be either chemical or physical, or a combination of both.

*Nuclear change* is a change in nuclear structure, which occurs when an atom or its nucleus splits (fission), when two or more nuclei combine (fusion), or when an unstable nucleus loses energy by radiation.

Physical, chemical, and nuclear change can entail one or more of the following observable phenomena in any given tangible thing (hereafter *thing*).

*Subtraction*: When a given thing is subject to loss, as when solid parts are worn away by friction by wind-borne particles, water, or other solids. Similarly, solid parts may be dissolved by the chemical action of acid rain or inadvertent spillages. The radiation of subatomic particles can be a form of subtraction.

*Plasticization*: The deformation of a solid by means of tensile stress (ductility) or compression (malleability) with or without increase in temperature, and without fracture.

*Substitution*: Substitution may entail a change of shape or surface without loss of mass or volume, as when the surface of a solid thing reacts chemically with another substance to produce a new surface, such as patina, rust, or tarnish.

*Accretion*: An increase in mass or volume by the addition of a substance, whether chemically, physically, or by nuclear fusion, that was not previously present.

*Disintegration*: The disaggregation of some or all of the physical, nuclear, or chemical constituents of a thing, as when a dry leaf crumbles to dust.

Many things are subject to one, more, or all of these phenomena consecutively or simultaneously. Change is rarely simple.

In contrast to these nonnormative temporal change concepts, normative temporal change concepts do posit a state that a thing ought to occupy or instantiate, or a state toward which or away from which the thing is transforming. Consider, for instance, our many teleological change concepts according to which a thing is either on its way up—it is *growing, developing, composing, organizing, maturing*—or on its way down—*declining, degrading, decomposing, disorganizing*.

### ***Rates of Change***

Second, we distinguish a variety of *rates-of-change* concepts. Change—much if not all—can be accelerated, delayed, arrested. What is important to notice about these is that they are normative in the sense that the change described is relative to some norm—a norm which can be provided by the goal or end state (as with normative change concepts), or derived from the type to which the thing belongs, or given by the needs of the preserver. For example, acid paper is said to age prematurely; that is, faster than paper ought to age, but not faster than *acid* paper ought to age—so the norm appealed to here is not derived from *its* type (that is, not from the type *acid paper*) but, rather, from some ideal that is approximated by comparable types such as *acid-free paper*.

Therefore, we should make a distinction between first, those things that are changing faster or more slowly than others of their type, and second, those things that are changing faster or more slowly than others of a comparable type. To be clear, here we are comparing *types*—albeit neighboring types, types comparable along some axis. There are two different sorts of reason to set one type as the norm for the other(s) (for instance, to take acid-free paper as the norm against which one assesses the longevity or durability of other papers containing acid). First, one type fulfills its function better than another. Second, one type fulfills some needs of appreciators better than the others. (This said, there is a small subset of objects, in particular those made as art, that have no function other than that of meeting the needs of the appreciator. But we want to emphasize that this is a very small subset of the tangible things that exist in this world.)

### ***External and Internal Change***

Third, we would like to introduce a distinction from conservation and archival sciences between externally generated change and what has come to be called *inherent vice*. Inherent vice is the tendency of a thing (whether artifactual or natural) to deteriorate because of the fundamental instability of its components. While all things (*living* and *nonliving* in European-derived terms) obviously have some degree of inherent vice owing to entropy, the term is meant to pick out inherent features of objects that make them particularly unstable and prone to self-destruction. We have already mentioned acid paper, which is one example. Another is cellulose acetate film, which

eventually becomes brittle, shrinks, bubbles, and discolors. As is clear from the term “inherent vice,” this is an explicitly normative concept.

### ***Further Distinctions***

Mention of cellulose acetate film prompts mention of Bill Morrison’s movie *Decasia* (2002)—a compilation of reproduced decayed film footage—which brings us to another pair of distinctions.<sup>8</sup> We distinguish between *represented degradation* and *actual degradation*. Morrison’s work is a representation of actual degradation. A slightly different relationship exists between actuality and representation in another photographic project, the portfolio *Right to Return*, by photographers Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick. Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Calhoun and McCormick recovered a group of water-damaged color photographic negatives in New Orleans. They created a body of photographic prints from this detritus from the floodwaters. They exhibited these richly degraded images at the Venice Biennale in 2015.<sup>9</sup>

We also distinguish between *intentional degradation* and *inadvertent degradation*. Without the degraded cellulose acetate film and the flood-damaged photographic negatives—both the result of inadvertence—the creators of *Decasia* and *Right to Return* would have been unable purposefully to produce these works. Other artists contrive and plan for a certain degree of degradation of the works they conceive and make. The sculptor Richard Serra, for instance, purposefully allows for a certain degradation of the surfaces of his works in COR-TEN steel, a steel alloy developed to acquire a stable surface oxidation through weathering or artificial treatment. Many other things made of iron or steel, however, rust inadvertently, whether desirably or not. Furthermore, some works in bronze have suffered from the undesired, inadvertent, and irreversible degradation known as bronze disease.

The final set of distinctions we should like to introduce encompasses the variety of ways of valuing an artifact on account of its having aged and degraded. (These are conceptual distinctions that are not meant to deny overlap in the case of actual artifacts.) Some of these categories follow, but there are surely others.

*Rarity*: Things considered more valuable because of their scarcity, where this is a direct effect of their being quite old and so there being fewer of that type extant. Examples are antiques and old postage stamps.

*They-don’t-make-’em-like-they-used-to*: Older things valued because they were made according to higher standards with better materials or workpersonship than those that characterize contemporary items. Examples include hand-sewn dresses of natural fabric cut on the bias, hand-forged stonemason’s tools, and books with sewn gatherings and bindings. All these may show signs of wear that add to their perceived character.

*The Stradivarius phenomenon*: Things that improve with age according to a functional standard. Many wooden musical instruments, for instance, sound better with age. Here we just mean to distinguish things that improve with age in the sense that what you can do with them is improved by their accrual of age.

*Sentimentality*: Value ascribed to things simply because they have been in one's possession for a long time or belonged to people with whom we associate them. A worn cigarette lighter or a faded family photograph are examples.

*The test of time*: A thing's appeal lasts because of that thing's superiority. This is not quite a case of valuing something *because* of its age, but its age (in conjunction with lasting approval) is taken as a marker of the thing's value, of its having stood the test of time. Vinyl long-playing records, even if scratched, are in this category.

*Authenticity*: This includes things viewed as traces of the past that open us to the past, especially if they exhibit the ravages of time. These include a wide variety of archaeological finds, as well as personal possessions of identifiable persons, whether well-known or not.

*The driftwood phenomenon*: Things that become more beautiful with age through wear or the acquisition of a patina; or, as in the case of driftwood, things that were once not beautiful but that become so with age and its attendant degradation.

The phenomena we have just listed are conspicuously, though not necessarily invariably, Eurocentric. However, we do not mean to exclude things valued in other societies owing, at least in part, to perceptible age value. To cite just one example, from Aotearoa (New Zealand), these might include certain Māori *taonga* (significant artifacts and other things endowed with personhood) that instantiate and evoke *whakapapa* (lineage), *kōrero* (orally transmitted knowledge), and *mana* (spiritual power). One example would be a worn nephrite figurative *tiki* (*hei-tiki*), or pendant neck ornament.<sup>10</sup>

### Final Remarks

What we offer here as the foundations of an aesthetics of degradation does not begin to address the question of active matter, the topic of the exhibition. We are not concerned here with defining the activity of matter, for we addressed this in our contribution to the "Philosophy" section of the accompanying publication.<sup>11</sup> There we attempt to sharpen the concept of *active matter* by comparing and contrasting it with neighboring concepts involving material change, and by then exploring the various kinds of change of which matter is capable. Only in the light of such an analysis might we begin to ask, as we do here, when the activity of matter might be something to attempt to prevent, avoid, or arrest, and when it might be something to celebrate, exploit, or even facilitate.

After all, the work of the conservator is invariably in vain, eventually if not immediately, so might we not reconceive it in a more or less radical manner that leads to an explicit appreciation of conservators' interventions as, at best, doomed heroism?

The English poet John Dryden expressed those concerns that preoccupy us, not in philosophical terms, as we would attempt, but in verse. In his 1694 poem about the principal painter to King William III, "To Sir Godfrey Kneller," he claimed in conclusion:

More cannot be by Mortal Art exprest;  
But venerable Age shall add the rest.

For Time shall with his ready Pencil stand;  
Retouch your Figures, with his ripening hand.  
Mellow your Colours, and imbrown the Teint,  
Add every Grace, which Time alone can grant;  
To future Ages shall your Fame convey;  
And give more Beauties, than he takes away.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Art Institute of Chicago lists four such items, each as Standing Attendant (Tomb Figurine), wood with traces of polychrome pigment, Eastern Zhou dynasty, Warring States period (480–221 BCE), 1986.1303 (<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/65902/standing-attendant-tomb-figurine>), 1986.1304 (<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/65904/standing-attendant-tomb-figurine>), 1986.1306 (<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/65909/standing-attendant-tomb-figurine>), 1986.1307 (<https://www.artic.edu/artworks/65911/standing-attendant-tomb-figurine>).

<sup>2</sup> Attic workshop, The Peplos Kore, ca. 530 BCE, Parian marble with traces of polychrome pigment, Acropolis Museum, Athens, Acr. 679, <https://www.theacropolismuseum.gr/en/statue-kore-akr-679-peplos-kore>.

<sup>3</sup> Johann Joachim Winckelmann in *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* enshrined the European assumption that classical statuary must have been originally plain marble, and hence generally white. As Nell Irvin Painter in *The History of White People* argues, eighteenth-century Europeans came to associate color in statuary with barbarians and whiteness with civilization, and this attitude has endured to the present, reinforcing white supremacist ideals.

<sup>4</sup> "Constitution of the Society," 2: "The preservation of books, pamphlets, manuscripts and records containing historical facts, biographical anecdotes, temporary projects, and beneficial speculations, conduces to mark the genius, delineate the manners and trace the progress of society in the United States, and must always have a useful tendency to rescue the true history of this Country from the ravages of time, and the effects of ignorance and neglect." Thomas, "Account of the American Antiquarian Society," 30–31: "A depository like this, may not only retard the ravages of time, but preserve from other causes of destruction many precious relicks of antiquity, many specimens of the work of nature, and those of modern art, which once lost could never be restored."

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Juniper, *Wabi Sabi*. Yuriko Saito defines *wabi* as "celebration of irregularity, imperfection, incompleteness, and insufficiency." *Everyday Aesthetics*, 171.

<sup>6</sup> For further references, see Saito, "Aesthetics of Repair."

<sup>7</sup> We set out our fundamental thoughts on change, both nonnormative and normative, in [Gaskell and Eaton, "Active Matter."](#)

<sup>8</sup> *Decasia: The State of Decay*, written and directed by Bill Morrison (2002), 70 min., <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0303325/>.

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<sup>9</sup> For *Right of Return*, see Calhoun McCormick (website), <https://calhounmccormick.com/portfolios/uncategorized/right-to-return-river-road-nola-now/>. We should like to thank our colleague Jennifer Mass for bringing Calhoun and McCormick's work to our attention.

<sup>10</sup> For these terms and others, see Tapsell, "Flight of Pareraututu." It is not possible to assign aesthetic properties in the European sense pertaining to degradation a definite role in the Māori appreciation of human-made *taonga*, but aesthetics clearly plays a set of sophisticated roles in widely shared Māori evaluations of artifacts.

<sup>11</sup> [Gaskell and Eaton, "Active Matter."](#)

<sup>12</sup> *Annual Miscellany*, 98–99.