Multiple Choice

The promise of an untouched object

Full exam-style task: one long text and six four-option questions, C2 Proficiency Part 5. Original independent practice, not an official exam paper.

Read the article. For questions 1-6, choose the answer A, B, C or D which fits best according to the text.

Visitors to the city museum often stop before a wooden chair whose damaged seat has deliberately been left unrepaired. Its label describes the marks of ordinary use as evidence of a life beyond the museum. Nearby, a much older ceremonial chair gleams beneath carefully adjusted lighting, its missing ornament replaced by a modern craftsperson. Neither treatment is concealed. Yet people frequently assume that the first object is more authentic because less appears to have been done to it. The contrast reveals an attractive but troublesome conviction: that an object speaks most truthfully when we leave it alone.

I once shared that conviction. As a trainee conservator, I associated restraint with intellectual honesty and an immaculate surface with institutional vanity. Experience complicated the opposition. A layer of grime can obscure marks that would tell us how a tool was held; removing it may recover evidence rather than erase it. Conversely, polishing a vessel to match a curator's idea of its original splendour may eliminate traces of later ownership. The decisive question is not whether intervention occurs, but which history the intervention makes legible and which it renders harder to investigate. There is no neutral quantity called 'less' that settles that question in advance.

The chair's unrepaired seat makes a persuasive exhibit because visitors can recognise the significance of wear. With an unfamiliar object, however, an equally restrained treatment may communicate almost nothing. A cracked fragment accompanied only by its date can make the past seem remote rather than richly ambiguous. Interpretation is then essential, but it too selects. A diagram showing how fragments once formed a vessel directs attention towards original design; an account of their excavation directs it towards a much later encounter. Both may be accurate. The difficulty lies in presenting one route into the object as though it were the object's entire story.

This is not an argument for overwhelming every display with competing accounts. When we redesigned a small exhibition of domestic metalwork, we tried precisely that approach, appending every plausible interpretation to every label. Visitors read diligently for a few minutes and then stopped reading altogether. Our conscientious accumulation of qualifications had become another obstacle to understanding. We eventually chose one clearly stated account for each object, with a visible indication of uncertainty and access to the evidence behind it. The account was necessarily selective; unlike the earlier abundance, it allowed readers to see where its boundaries lay and decide whether to look further.

Some colleagues worry that making uncertainty conspicuous undermines a museum's authority. I suspect the greater danger is authority that cannot survive a sensible question. During the metalwork exhibition, a visitor challenged our identification of a device as a kitchen tool. Her alternative was not ultimately convincing, but explaining why required us to articulate assumptions that had remained implicit in our internal discussions. We changed the label, not because her identification had won, but because our reasoning had become clearer. Public challenge can improve an account without displacing its conclusion; a correction to the argument is not always a

reversal of the finding.

Resources inevitably constrain these ambitions. Recording every conservation decision, preserving removed material and explaining uncertainty take time, and small institutions cannot pursue all three without limits. Nonetheless, scarcity is not a reason to describe an unrecorded decision as non-intervention. Even choosing to leave a chair exposed in a gallery changes its future: light, dust and visitors' expectations become part of its history. A modest record of what was considered and why one course was chosen may be more valuable to a future researcher than an ambitious declaration that the object has been kept untouched. Honesty need not require an exhaustive archive, but it does require acknowledging choice.

What, then, should we ask of the apparently untouched chair? Not that it grant direct access to a vanished household, unmediated by the institution that displays it. Its power lies in a more demanding relationship: it offers material evidence while inviting scrutiny of the decisions through which that evidence reaches us. The polished ceremonial chair can sustain the same relationship if its reconstruction is explained. Authenticity, in this sense, is neither a surface finish nor a reward for doing the least. It is a commitment to making our dealings with inherited objects sufficiently accountable that another person can question them.

Your answers

1. What does the contrast between the two chairs primarily illustrate?

A The public's preference for domestic over ceremonial objects.

B A tendency to equate limited visible intervention with authenticity.

C The museum's failure to apply consistent conservation standards.

D The greater historical value of evidence of everyday use.

2. How has the writer's view changed since being a trainee?

A The writer now considers practical expertise more reliable than historical evidence.

B The writer has concluded that cleaning inevitably destroys valuable traces.

C The writer now judges intervention by its effects on particular evidence.

D The writer believes institutions should restore an object's original appearance.

3. What reservation does the writer express about interpretation in paragraph three?

A It can obscure its own selectivity by appearing to tell a complete story.

B It inevitably makes ambiguous objects seem easier to understand than they are.

C It privileges original design over the circumstances of excavation.

D It is useful mainly when the object itself has been substantially altered.

4. Why does the writer consider the revised metalwork labels more effective?

A They leave readers with fewer reasons to question the official account.

B They make it unnecessary for visitors to consult additional material.

C They separate established facts from every possible interpretation.

D They offer a manageable account whose limitations can be explored.

5. What was the value of the visitor's challenge to the kitchen-tool identification?

A It supplied previously unknown evidence which overturned the museum's view.

B It prompted the museum to make the basis of its existing view more explicit.

C It demonstrated that non-specialists could identify objects more reliably.

D It persuaded the museum to remove a disputed object from display.

6. Which statement best expresses the writer's concluding conception of authenticity?

A It depends on preserving an object's earliest recoverable condition.

B It requires every decision concerning an object to be documented exhaustively.

C It rests on allowing the handling and interpretation of objects to be questioned.

D It can be established only by removing institutional interpretation from displays.

Answers & explanations

Question 1 | B - A tendency to equate limited visible intervention with authenticity.

The opening says people assume the first chair is more authentic "because less appears to have been done to it". B captures that inference from visible treatment. A introduces a preference between object types which is not established. C mistakes deliberately different, openly described treatments for inconsistent standards. D turns the visitors' assumption into the writer's judgement; the final paragraph explicitly allows both chairs to be authentic in the relevant sense.

Question 2 | C - The writer now judges intervention by its effects on particular evidence.

The key question is now "which history the intervention makes legible" and which it obscures. Cleaning can recover handling marks or destroy ownership traces, depending on the case. C expresses this contextual assessment. A invents a conflict between expertise and evidence. B ignores the example of recovering evidence by removing grime. D attributes the polishing policy to the writer despite the explicit criticism of its possible losses.

Question 3 | A - It can obscure its own selectivity by appearing to tell a complete story.

The warning is against "presenting one route into the object as though it were the object's entire story". A concerns the concealment of selection, not selection itself. B is too absolute: accounts may be accurate and ambiguity can be acknowledged. C describes one possible focus but overlooks the alternative excavation account. D reverses the example: even an object treated with restraint can require interpretation when it is unfamiliar.

Question 4 | D - They offer a manageable account whose limitations can be explored.

One clearly stated account, visible uncertainty and access to supporting evidence let readers "see where its boundaries lay" and choose to look further. D combines manageable presentation with openness. A contradicts the invitation to investigate. B confuses optional further reading with its being unnecessary for every reader. C overstates the achievement: the museum stopped listing every plausible interpretation and did not claim a complete division of all facts and possibilities.

Question 5 | B - It prompted the museum to make the basis of its existing view more explicit.

The visitor's alternative "was not ultimately convincing", but the challenge exposed implicit assumptions, and the label was changed because the reasoning became clearer. B preserves that distinction between improving justification and changing a conclusion. A contradicts the retained identification and invents new evidence. C generalises far beyond one exchange. D is unsupported: a label changed, not the object's display status.

Question 6 | C - It rests on allowing the handling and interpretation of objects to be questioned.

The final sentence defines authenticity as making dealings with objects "sufficiently accountable that another person can question them". C captures this procedural openness. A wrongly privileges original condition over later histories. B ignores "Honesty need not require an exhaustive archive". D proposes the unmediated access the writer explicitly rejects. The conclusion applies to both a minimally repaired object and an explained reconstruction.