

The final product of this tent gallery is moving as well as informative. During my visit, as time and location changed around the tent, visitors gasped and sighed at the significance of what they were seeing. In an act of interpretive genius (spoiler alert), these lights give way to dimming exterior light, with what appears to be a single candle within the tent illuminating a tall, pacing figure with military bearing against the wall nearest the audience. Audience members gasped at this visit from the past to their present; many—including myself—wept. The interpretation elevates a rather simple old tent into an object of inspiration, connecting distant eras. That, like much of the Museum of the American Revolution, is excellent public history.

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Things Fall Apart exhibition and walking tour. Chemical Heritage Foundation, Philadelphia, PA. *Elisabeth Berry Drago*, Curator. June 17, 2017–April 7, 2018. <https://www.chemheritage.org/things-fall-apart>; <https://www.detour.com/philadelphia/things-fall-apart-the-walking-tour>.

The Chemical Heritage Foundation (CHF), a history of science organization based in Philadelphia, is a bit of buried treasure in the rich and contentious public history environment of Philadelphia. Among its many programs and functions, CHF has a fine and interesting museum of science and technology, rich archives, a Center City/Old City address, and a campus of different buildings located between the fabulous speculative reinterpretation of Franklin Court and the behemoth of the new Museum of the American Revolution. In other words, it is brilliantly poised to reach a large audience with its messages about the role of chemical science and technology in social history. On February 1, 2018, the Chemical Heritage Foundation became the Science History Institute, with its merger with the San Francisco-based Life Sciences Foundation.

Things Fall Apart, CHF's small exhibition on conservation, curated by Elisabeth Berry Drago, is a gem buried in the treasure chest. It does a wonderful job of projecting CHF's interpretive mission, which is "to build, preserve, and interpret the history of chemistry and technology, engaging scientists, engineers, and laypersons alike in understanding science's effect on our world" to the public, and literally beyond its walls.¹ A 1,600-square-foot exhibit tucked in the back of the museum's permanent installation of scientific and technological exhibits, *Things Fall Apart* (TFA) features modest and crafty curation and design exploring big, nuanced, fascinating questions underpinning the history of art and architectural conservation. It centers on questions of how we conserve and, importantly, the

¹ "What We Do," Chemical Heritage Foundation, accessed November 27, 2017, <https://www.chemheritage.org/what-we-do>.



Entry space of the exhibit *Things Fall Apart*, with display of the Eastern State Penitentiary locks in varied stages of decay, in the foreground case. (Photo courtesy of author)

decisions around what and why we choose to conserve. The result is a marvelous and adventurous exhibit that uses historical artifacts, text panels, deft displays, and commissioned artworks to unpack questions of decay and conservation.

The exhibit's message centers on recognizing the ubiquity of decay—things falling apart—and, in response, the broad cultural history of responding to decay by conserving. The title is refreshingly direct and literal (it is *not* a too-clever take on the eponymous Chinua Achebe novel). The show is spatially organized around vignettes focused on a particular object, modes of decay, and scientific tools and techniques for analyzing and conserving. Deftly, the curators walk a line between hewing to a scientific lens (one would fairly expect this of a science museum) and acknowledging the vagaries of conservation as a cultural practice. Ruins, decay, and conservation are framed as scientific questions and matters of aesthetic and artistic value.

Curators included a rich array of artifacts, representing both objects decaying and being conserved, as well as the tools and practices of conservation. The objects on display include historical artworks, everyday objects, and architectural fragments—including historic locks, paintings, Barbie dolls, plates, archaeological finds, and books with bookworms. The brass locks borrowed from Eastern State

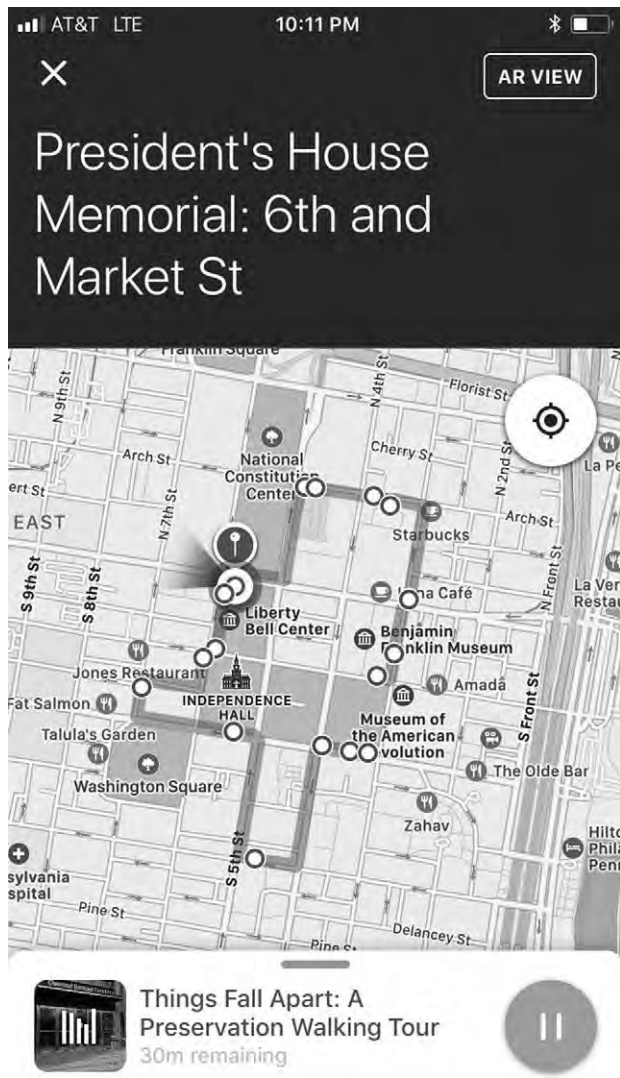
Penitentiary at the start of the show nicely tie the exhibit to the Philadelphia landscape beyond the gallery. Additionally, the exhibit “starts” in the lobby, with the teaser of an old door with cascading paint flakes, a nod to the flagrant but superficial decay of so many neglected row houses on Philadelphia’s streets (about which more below). But conservation and things falling apart relates not just to objects, nor just to buildings—the history of decay and preservation touches the whole material environment.

The exhibition design itself does not shy away from pure delight: in color, material, texture, and childhood memory. The beauty of decay touched me in the faded tray of a common drafting kit and the intimacy of worm holes chewed in a volume of Diderot. The curators attempted to not be didactic, clinical, and conclusive, and indeed TFA manages to be thoughtful, adventurous, and questioning in ways comfortable to the humanist or critic, while remaining faithful to the story of the application of chemical and physical science to solve society’s problems. The dynamic combination of art, artifact, and didactic label, arranged comfortably in the modest space, occasionally verges toward the overdesigned but, in the end, feels appropriately youthful.

The exhibit challenges the public to construct more complicated understandings of conservation and some of the conservation field’s most vexing and contested notions, such as degrees of authenticity and originality, the values of beauty and narratives attached to objects, etc. TFA rightly presents conservation as a practice combining scientific research, the eye of the connoisseur, the hand of the craftworker, and the cultural politics of the curator and historian. The exhibit brings the conservator into the realm of public history, just as it exemplifies the work of public historians.

TFA incorporates contemporary as well as historical art and artifacts (everything decays, after all, not just old stuff). The commissioned artworks are the one part of the exhibit that do not impress. The artistic qualities of the pieces don’t measure up to the strength of the curatorial idea, seemingly too eager to riff on some notion of decay or repair. The commissioned artworks help explain processes in the vein of sidebars, without provoking new interpretations or ideas in and of themselves (like the best art does).

Finally, and superbly, TFA extends the power of the exhibit by using a smartphone-based walking tour app (on the Detour platform) to take the core conservation ideas out to the streets. The walking tour is rich and detailed, unpacking social histories of conservation and preservation in the streets surrounding CHF—including Independence National Historical Park, CHF’s own workaday archive building, sites of LGBTQ protest, and more. The first-person stories deepen visitors’ understanding of the politics of historic preservation, adding an important social dimension to main exhibit themes—and of course big cities like Philadelphia have far too many examples of things falling apart! The distractions of the street provided a nice counter to the control characterizing the museum gallery. And the messages of the tour nicely parallel the whole idea of



Screenshot from the smartphone-based walking tour application Things Fall Apart: A Preservation Walking Tour. (Photo courtesy of author)

conservation as a marriage of science, art, craft, and humanities: as predictable and scientifically determined as are some processes, the role of politics and social change are undeniable.

The walking tour would ideally have been more integrated with the exhibit, not only an adjunct. It remains a little peripheral, or at least distinct; art conservation takes center stage in the exhibit and it rightly uses personal artifacts (book, lock, chamber pot), but a real opportunity was missed to link more robustly to the decay of buildings. Streets, blocks, and lives of a city, like any other object or artwork, fall apart and we are constantly trying to put them back together again.

As a historian of preservation and teacher of graduate students, I found the exhibit rich. So have my students. I suspect it would be ideal for school groups—especially high schoolers who would get the pop/high culture slyness of the curation, as well as be sophisticated enough to appreciate how smartly basic science is applied to the questions of conservation in a way that honors the artistic, cultural, and historic values of the objects.

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Only the Oaks Remain: Stories of the Tuna Canyon Detention Station. Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles, CA. December 10, 2016–April 9, 2017. <http://www.janm.org/exhibits/tuna-canyon/>.

The United States' incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II is an episode of US history that is not widely known by the general American public, nor is the number of incarceration sites that spread across the United States like sores that were symptomatic of the larger cancer called racism. Historians have spent years unpeeling the layers of this experience and have devoted many volumes of work to addressing the nuances of the incarceration, but there are still stories that are being uncovered seemingly every day. The San Fernando Valley Japanese American Community Center wanted to tell the relatively unknown story of the Tuna Canyon Detention Station in the outskirts of Los Angeles that held over two thousand people of Japanese, German, and Italian descent, as well as Japanese Latinos who were kidnapped from Latin America by the United States government. Located in Tujunga, California, this site was a converted Civilian Conservation Corps camp and became one of the first incarceration sites established by the US government following its entrance into war. *Only the Oaks Remain: Stories of the Tuna Canyon Detention Station* is the result of that desire to tell this story. The fundamental mission of this traveling exhibit was to create a museum-grade exhibition to commemorate the history of the site and to continue to explore the layers of confinement during WWII. This exhibit was made possible by a grant from the National Park Service Japanese American Confinement Sites grant program.

Only the Oaks Remain explores the intricacies of how the United States began the surveillance on immigrants in the United States prior to the war and how after its entrance into WWII the United States began incarcerating civilians in the Tuna Canyon Detention Station, an Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) camp, from December 1941 to October 1943. The exhibit brings to light the individuals who were imprisoned at Tuna Canyon and incorporates the story of Tuna Canyon into the larger context of the mass removal of Japanese Americans during WWII. This exhibit touches on many key points of the Japanese American incarceration experience to tie it into the existing narrative and elevate the story of this particular