

Theory of Restoration, I

C E S A R E B R A N D I

§1. The Concept of Restoration

Restoration is generally understood as any kind of intervention that permits a product of human activity to recover its function. . . . [L]et us consider the variety of products of human activity to which the particular intervention we call restoration should be applied. There will be restoration relevant to industrial products and restoration relevant to works of art. . . . As long as one is, in fact, dealing with industrial products, defined on the widest scale starting from the smallest craft item, the purpose of restoration will obviously be to reestablish the functional properties of the product. Consequently, the nature of the restoration will be exclusively tied to the accomplishment of this goal.

Yet for works of art, even if there are some that structurally possess a functional purpose (such as architecture, and, in general, objects of the so-called applied arts), the reestablishment of the functional properties will ultimately represent only a secondary or accompanying aspect of the restoration, never the primary or fundamental aspect that respects a work of art as a work of art.

. . . The human product that deserves this recognition is there, before our eyes. But it can be generically classified among the products of human activity only so long as the conscious appreciation of it as a work of art does not definitely exclude it from the community of other products.

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Thus we have come to recognize the inseparable link between restoration and the work of art, in that the work of art conditions the restoration and not vice versa.

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Now that we have reestablished the direct relationship between restoration and the appreciation of a work of art as such, we can define restoration: *Restoration is the methodological moment in which the work of art is appreciated in its material form and in its historical and aesthetic duality, with a view to transmitting it to the future.*

Naturally, the principles that guide the restoration during its operational phase will have to derive from this fundamental structure of the work of art in the reception the individual consciousness gives it.

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From CESARE BRANDI, *Teoria del restauro* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1963; reprint, Turin: G. Einaudi, 1977), chaps. 1—2, 4—5. Used by permission of Giulio Einaudi editore s.p.a. Translated by Gianni Ponti with Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro.

The material form of the work must necessarily take precedence because it represents the very realm of the image's manifestation; it ensures the transmission of the image to the future, and thus guarantees its perception within human consciousness. . . .

[E]ven though the imperatives of conservation are generally directed at the complex structure of a work of art, conservation pertains especially to the material form in which the image is manifested. Every effort and all research should be directed at ensuring that the material form lasts as long as possible.

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From this we clarify the first axiom: *Only the material form of the work of art is restored.*

But the physical medium to which the transmission of the image is entrusted does not accompany it; on the contrary, it is coextensive with it. It is not a question of the material form on the one hand, and the image on the other.

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Thus we can state the second principle of restoration: *Restoration must aim to reestablish the potential unity of the work of art, as long as this is possible without producing an artistic or historical forgery and without erasing every trace of the passage of time left on the work of art.*

§2. The Material of the Work of Art

The first axiom, by which the material form of the work of art is the only object of restoration, requires an in-depth examination of the relationship between matter and the work of art. . . . To begin with, and above all in relation to restoration, we must define matter, in that it represents contemporaneously both the “time” and the “place” of a restoration. To do so, we can only make use of a phenomenological approach by which matter becomes ostensibly the “vehicle for the epiphany of the image.” . . .

[This concept] provides the key to understanding the duality, already hinted at, of “structure” and “appearance.”

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Let us take the most obvious example of a painting on a wooden panel where the wood has become so porous that it no longer provides adequate support. In this case, the painting is the material appearance while the wood is the material structure. Such a distinction might not always be so clear-cut: the fact that the painting is on wood gives it special characteristics that could, in fact, be altered if the panel were removed. It is therefore important to keep in mind that the distinction between “structure” and “appearance” is more subtle than it may seem at first and, in practice, is not always possible to determine. Let us consider another example: a collapsed building, partially destroyed by an earthquake, that lends itself to reconstruction or anastylosis. In this case, appearance cannot be defined as being merely the outer surface of the building blocks; they have to remain blocks, not only on the surface. Nonetheless, the interior wall structure can be altered to guarantee the building against further earthquake damage. Even the interior structure of columns, if there are any, can be changed, assuming that this will not alter the appearance of the material. Here also a delicate approach will be necessary to ensure that the altered structure does not influence appearance.

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§4. Time in Relation to the Work of Art and Restoration

We should recall at this point that so-called archaeological restoration, however praiseworthy it may be for its respect of the work of art, does not achieve the fundamental aspiration of human consciousness in relation to the work of art by restoring its potential unity. It only represents the first phase of reconstruction, which will necessarily end only when the surviving relics of what used to be a work of art no longer allow plausible integrations. . . .

It will not be necessary to press the point any further, then, in order to state that the only legitimate moment for the act of restoration is the actual moment of the consciousness contemplating the work of art. At this time, the work of art exists in the moment and is historically present; yet it is also part of the past and, at the cost of not being part of human consciousness, is thus part of history. For restoration to be a legitimate operation it cannot presume that time is reversible or that history can be abolished. Furthermore, the act of restoration, in order to respect the complex historical nature of the work of art, cannot develop secretively or in a manner unrelated to time. It must allow itself to be emphasized as a true historical event—for it is a human action—and to be made a part of the process by which the work of art is transmitted to the future. From a practical point of view, this historical requirement should translate not only into a differentiation of the integrated areas, something already made explicit when the potential unity is reestablished, but also into a respect for the patina, which we can think of as the buildup of time on the work of art. Furthermore, it should allow for saving sample areas that show the state of the work of art before restoration and also of noncontemporaneous parts of the work that represent the same passage of time. Naturally, for this last requirement, we can only provide a general guideline, for each case has to be evaluated individually and never at the expense of the aesthetic requirement, which always takes precedence.

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§5. Restoration According to Historicism

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[I]f a work of art is the result of human activity and, as such, its appreciation does not depend on fluctuations in taste or fashion, its historical significance has priority over its aesthetic value. Since the work of art is a historical monument, we must consider it as such from the extreme point when the formal arrangement that shaped matter into a work of art has almost vanished, and the monument is reduced to little more than a residue of the material that made it up. We must then examine the ways we can conserve a ruin.

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A ruin is anything that is a witness to human history. Its appearance, however, is so different from the one it originally had that it becomes almost unrecognizable. . . . Consequently, the preservation of a work of art that is reduced to a state of ruin depends to a great extent on the historical significance that is assigned to it. . . . When dealing with ruins, restoration can only be a consolidation and preservation of the status quo. Otherwise, the ruin was not a ruin, but a work of art that still maintained an implicit vitality that would allow the reestablishment of the original potential unity. The identification of a ruin therefore goes hand in hand with that initial phase of restoration known as preventive restoration, meaning merely conservation and protection of the status quo. This recognizes that any direct intervention is explicitly excluded if it goes beyond conservation monitoring and consolidation of materials.

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Therefore, with the concept of ruin, the analysis of a work of art in terms of its restoration begins from the very first stage, beyond which the materials that constituted the work of art reverted back to raw materials. This is consequently the very first level of restoration. Having to present the work of art not in its transition from internal creation to extrinsic form but as already having a worldly existence, restoration must start from precisely where the work of art ends, that is, at that limiting moment (a limit in both time and space) when the work of art, reduced to a few traces of itself, is about to fall back into an amorphous state.

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If we continue the analysis in terms of the historical point of view, we are faced with a double problem regarding works of art: the conservation or removal of additions, and the conservation or removal of reconstructions. In going from a work of art that has been reduced to a ruin to a work of art that has undergone additions and reconstructions, it might seem impossible to approach the problem from a strictly historical point of view. Yet we want to emphasize that we do not wish to solve the same problem using two distinct approaches. We only want to examine if conservation or removal of additions and reconstructions is, in fact, legitimate from the historical point of view. We also want to determine the limitations of both historical and aesthetic requirements, and to try to find at least a way of reconciling any discrepancies.

By presenting the problem of the legitimacy of conservation or removal, we have already overcome the obstacle posed by those who believe that the legitimacy of conservation is based exclusively on the historical significance of the work of art. If this were so, we should have to respect unconditionally both the barbaric vandalisms and the integrations carried out on artistic, not restoration, grounds that a work of art may have been subjected to over the centuries. Nor should we exclude the possibility that both can be respected together. Yet, since a work of art is endowed with both historical and aesthetic requirements, conservation and removal cannot occur at the expense of the one and the disregard of the other.

. . . From a historical point of view, an addition to a work of art is nothing more than new testimony to human activity and, thus, is part of history. In this context, an addition is not different from the original stock and has the same right to conservation. On the other hand, removal, although also the result of human action and thus also part of history, in reality destroys a document and does not document itself. It would thus lead to the negation and destruction of a historical process and would falsify evidence. Therefore, from a historical point of view, only the conservation of an addition is unconditionally legitimate, while its removal always needs justification, or should at least be done in a manner that will leave a trace both of itself and on the work of art.

Consequently, the conservation of an addition is the norm, removal the exception. This is the exact opposite of what nineteenth-century empiricism recommended for restorations.

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One might think that the problem is not very different as far as reconstructions are concerned. Even reconstruction is evidence of human action and represents a historical moment, but it is not the same as an addition. An addition can *complete* a work or can function, particularly in architecture, differently than was originally intended. With an addition there is no imitation; there is, rather, a development or an insertion. A reconstruction, on the other hand, seeks to reshape the work, intervening in the creative process in a manner that is similar to how the original creative process developed. It merges the old and the new so that they cannot be distinguished, abolishing or reducing to a minimum the time interval between the two creative moments. The difference is therefore striking.

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If we thus come back to the alternatives of conservation or removal from a visual, historical perspective, we will consider it appropriate, whenever possible, to return a monument to that state of imperfection in which it had been left by the historical process, and which ill-considered restorations have instead completed. However, we should always respect the *new* unity that, independently of the foolishness of restorations, was established within the work of art through a new fusion; the more this fusion affects the work of art, the more it is also a real source of historical material and testimony.

Thus an addition will be worse, the closer it comes to being a reconstruction; while the reconstruction will be all the more acceptable, the more it differs from an addition and tries to form a new unity in place of the old one.

One can point out, nonetheless, that even the worst reconstruction does, in fact, document human activity, albeit an erroneous one, and that it is still part of human history. Thus it should not be removed—at the most it can be isolated. This position would seem to be historically unassailable if it did not, in fact, lead to a conviction of nonauthenticity or falsification for the entire work of art. Such a conviction would lead us to question the very veracity of the monument as a historical monument: this cannot be allowed at the level of philological critique. Furthermore, a similar requirement to completely conserve all phases through which the work of art has passed must not contradict the aesthetic requirement.