

# INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

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## AESTHETICS OF CONSERVATION AND RESTORATION

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It. *Estetica della conservazione-restauro*; Fr. *Esthétique de la conservation-restauration*; Germ. *Ästhetik der Konservierung-Restaurierung*; Sp. *Estética de la Conservación-Restauración*. The label refers to the philosophical and aesthetic debates surrounding the conservation and restoration of artworks, buildings, and other artefacts of cultural interest. Conservation-restoration practices include interventions aimed at safeguarding objects against physical alteration, ruination, and decay as well as measures facilitating their continued accessibility, appreciation, and understanding. While artefacts and artistic items have always been mended and repaired, conservation-restoration is a relatively modern discipline, dating back to the period between the 18th and 19th centuries. Today, conservation-restoration is recognized as a distinct profession, requiring technical skills and familiarity with several scientific procedures. In itself, however, the activity of restoring and conserving artworks also raises concerns that are primarily conceptual in nature (Cometti 2016; Scott 2017).

Many pertinent philosophical questions can be asked concerning conservation-restoration: To what extent should artworks be restored? What is it about the original state of an object that makes it worth preserving? What aesthetic and historical considerations underpin our conservation interventions? These questions impact discussions on the ontological identity of artworks, their value, meaning, and interpretation, and intertwine with the issue of how we can relate to the intentions of the original artists and the present audience's expectations. Clarifying the aesthetic and philosophical underpinnings of conservation-restoration is crucial to providing a firm foundation for future interventions.

### THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

There has been growing interest in art conservation-restoration among philosophers over the past two decades, lagging fairly behind earlier works by Anthony Savile (1993), Mark Sagoff (1978), and David Carrier (1985). The conversation between conservators and philosophers promises to be especially fruitful

in the years to come, as more and more aestheticians engage with works by seasoned or contemporary conservation theorists such as Alois Riegl (1903/1982), Cesare Brandi (1963/1977), Paul Philippot (1990), and Salvador Muñoz-Viñas (2005), among others.

The first philosophical question one can ask about conservation-restoration is simply: Why are artworks preserved (Pouivet 2018: 110)? A classic answer is offered in Riegl's tiny masterpiece *Der moderne Denkmalkultus*, from 1903, which provides the first formulation of a value-based approach to conservation-restoration. According to Riegl (1903/1982), we preserve art because we place value on it – in fact, several values concurrently. We appraise artworks for how they look, for how they serve our social needs, or for the information they convey on our past (Riegl 1903/1982: 21-22). A special kind of value possessed by artworks is what Riegl calls "age value" (Riegl 1903/1982: 33). Age value depends on our appreciation of the accumulated effects of time on an object and has a strong emotional appeal. It is what makes the sight of ruins or dilapidated monuments aesthetically pleasing and is responsible for our willingness to preserve them in their decaying state.

Riegl's notion of age value has been recently resumed by Carolyn Korsmeyer (2008, 2019). According to Korsmeyer (2019), age value is intrinsically connected to the feeling of "genuineness" of old objects and is responsible for yielding a distinctive kind of aesthetic experience. This experience, Korsmeyer believes (2019: 46), is mediated and made salient by the so-so that called "transitivity of touch", i.e., the (often purely imaginary) possibility of touching the "thing" that was touched by the original artist. Since genuineness depends on the sense of touch, Korsmeyer argues, it cannot be reproduced nor replicated in restoration. This position echoes John Ruskin's (1849) famous tirade against the renovation of historic architecture. For Ruskin (1849: 176-198), the imprints of time represented the most valuable features of a building, therefore any restoration intervention had to be considered a calamity, a damage to the work's authenticity.

In the contemporary debate, a popular conviction of conservation-restoration was advanced by Sagoff (1978), in a paper that has been extensively referred to ever since (Wreen 1985; Savile 1993; De Clercq 2013; Lamarque 2016; Stopford 2016; Scott 2016; Sagoff 2017; Giombini 2019; Korsmeyer 2019). Contesting the 1972 restoration of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, Sagoff (1978: 457) argues against the incorporation of extraneous material into a damaged artwork during restoration, only allowing for the "cleaning" and "reattachment" of components that might have fallen off from it. He calls this position "purism" (Sagoff 1978: 457). On the purist account, to restore a work is worse than to let damage to it stand. No matter how aesthetically convincing the result may be, interventions compromise the identity of the object as the original product of the artist's handiwork, thereby creating a form of deception (Sagoff 1978: 459; Korsmeyer 2019).

An opposite attitude characterises supporters of so-called "integral restoration" (Sagoff 1978: 457), a view reminiscent of Eugène Viollet-le-duc's (1866) famed definition of restoration as the process of re-establishing an object to an ideal state of aesthetic completeness. In decades past, integral restoration has boasted several more or less strenuous defenders, including Michael Wreen (1985), Yuriko Saito (1985), and, lately, Rafael De Clercq (2013) and Peter Lamarque (2016). According to De Clercq (2013: 4), though

decay can alter the aesthetic features of a work, the work's artistic value is always per se unchangeable, as it is determined once and forever by the original creator. Restoration's aim is thus to return the perceptual properties the artist wanted the work to have – which, however, does not always imply returning the work to its original state (De Clercq 2013: 268). Insisting on the value of the viewer's experience, Lamarque (2016) also disputes the plausibility of the purist argument. If no integral restoration is allowed, Lamarque (2016: 291) argues, chances of preserving the original aesthetic experience inevitably decrease with each new generation.

While from a practical standpoint there seems to be a whole series of gradations between doing nothing at all through to performing completely indiscernible reconstructions, the dispute between purists and integrationists proves to have complex ontological roots. Can artworks survive the gradual replacement of their parts during restoration? The issue leads directly to questions about artworks' persistence and identity conditions in time (Pouivet 2018: 111). Drawing on debates over the material constitution of objects, Richard Stopford (2016), for example, accuses purists of being metaphysically incoherent. According to Stopford, albeit philosophers generally agree that a statue such as Michelangelo's *Pietà* is not identical to the lump of marble of which it is made, advocates of purism reduce the artwork to the constituting material object (Stopford 2016: 303). In this sense, they take such object, even if reduced to a mound of rubble, to be the original artwork (Stopford 2017: 304). In his reply to Stopford, Sagoff (2017: 321) retorts that while a restored statue may persist as one and the same object, what matters in this context is not "numerical" but rather historical identity. A work of art accepts no substitutes nor replacements because it contains a record of the artist's original intentions when shaping the material, and intentions cannot be recreated (Sagoff 2017: 328).

Recourse to the artist's intentions represents indeed a standard, if controversial, strategy in the aesthetic debate on conservation-restoration (Carrier 1985; Dykstra 1996). According to Stephen W. Dykstra (1996), adopting an intentionalist approach in conservation implies thinking that the extent to which a work is damaged is the extent to which the "intentional" activity of the artist is deleted or made unrecognisable. On this account, it is the artist's will that determines whether and how we might intervene on an artwork. Some artists might want their work to change with time, showing its age. For example, many contemporary artists consciously operate with materials that wear out fast, as they consider degradation a crucial part of their work and its meaning (Irvin 2005). Other artists, however, might desire the original appearance of their work to be preserved in its brand-new look to the enjoyment of future generations. In either case, according to intentionalism, the conservator has a pro tanto obligation to respect the author's intent.

Although intentionalist arguments seem particularly robust in the field of contemporary art conservation (Irvin 2005), there are reasons to be cautious about extending their usage to conservation-restoration as a whole (Carrier 1985; Dykstra 1996; Muñoz-Viñas 2005, 2014; Scott 2017). One main problem relates to how we can ascertain what the original artist actually intended to achieve. How reliable is the material of a work, as a source of information on the artist's aims and desires? From the very first moments of their existence, physical substances start to decay because of natural and environmental agents, thus

progressively losing fidelity in their allegiance to the artist's intentions (Muñoz-Viñas 2014). Moreover, as it is often very difficult to predict how various materials will deteriorate under different circumstances, one can doubt that an artist might be able to anticipate issues regarding how their work will look in the future. A question such as: "what would Michelangelo want his work to look like four centuries after his death?" only has conjectural answers (Carrier 1985; Muñoz-Viñas 2014). Finally, the life-long vicissitudes of most artworks, including discolouration, surface alteration, erosion, fragmentation, and other changes, often make it impossible to return the work to the state the artist had intended it to have, even granting that we could know it. This has a direct bearing on attitudes toward conservation-restoration. If there is no simple correspondence between the properties the work had after completion and those it possesses today, the dichotomy between purism and integral restoration might ultimately be misplaced (Giombini 2019: 24).

An appeal to overcome intentionalism in conservation can be traced back to Cesare Brandi's *Theory of Restoration* (1963/2005), which represents a still unrivalled attempt at building up a solid philosophical background for the conservation profession. Affirming the individual character of every work of art as an object of appreciation, Brandi's *Theory* emphasizes the conservator's freedom to get rid of the constraints laid out by the original artist. In each different situation, according to Brandi, practitioners are required to seek tailored solutions based on an in-depth analysis of how a particular work is "recognized" and received (Brandi 1963/2005: 50). Critical evaluation on the part of the conservators is thus essential in determining the type of intervention because it defines the nature that is attributed to the item under care as well as its functioning and meaning as both an aesthetic and historical object (Brandi 1963/2005: 74; Philippot 1990; Cometti 2016: 38).

Treating conservation-restoration as a fundamentally critical rather than technical activity (D'Angelo 2017) helps us appreciate the hermeneutical underpinnings of the profession. Even contemporary decisions, as in the recent case of Notre-Dame contested restoration, pose philosophical questions regarding the extent to which different interventions can be seen as legitimate. We shall look forward to further debate on the aesthetics of conservation-restoration, how philosophical arguments can be advanced to support decision-making processes, and how this might influence artworks' display and appreciation in the future.

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