

Conservation-Restoration in Europe: Setting in Motion the Concepts and Principles developed in the Twentieth Century

MARIE BERDUCOU

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the challenges presented by new and diverse forms of cultural heritage, such as industrial heritage and contemporary art, to the classic conservation restoration principles developed within Europe since the nineteenth century. These principles, based on concepts of integrity and authenticity, lie at the root of modern conservation ethics and are centred on a consideration of the historical dimension of heritage as expressed through its material components. However, current conservation practice increasingly encompasses new forms of heritage, to which the application of principles originally developed for historic monuments and works of art becomes problematic. Consequently, some revision of these principles is needed to allow more flexible approaches as illustrated by two different case studies.

Since the purpose of cultural heritage preservation is to provide social benefit, the values held by heritage must be analyzed through a wider lens that includes social and cultural dimensions. In this regard, space must also be found for imagination, creativity and open-mindedness to play a role in finding innovative new uses for monuments that respect these values as much as possible.

Introduction

In past years, during each Sharing Conservation Decisions course, I offered an overview of the principles of conservation and restoration as they had developed in Europe, attempting to place them in an historical perspective. The presentation always concluded with a proposition for a methodological framework for conservation projects. We will not dwell on these items within this paper. However, here are just a few reminders:

- The discourses formulated in the nineteenth century were principally based on a consideration of historic buildings (Ruskin, Viollet-le-Duc, Boito, Riegl). During the twentieth century these principles primarily focused on the preservation of 'original material' and a respect for all historically significant additions (Athens conference, Venice Charter).
- They were further developed for works of art in the twentieth century (Brandi, Philippot), placing a respect for original materials at the heart of conservation-restoration and raising a difficult question: how do we take into consideration the material history of works undertaken to the object (additions, alterations, transformations, etc.) within a conservation intervention?

This brief summary highlights perhaps the extent to which European thought is dominated by the historical dimension of cultural heritage. This means that the material study of cultural heritage is focused both on everything that establishes with certainty the origin and original form of the object, as well as the indicators of its evolution over time. The paradoxical nature of this thought process becomes quickly apparent: can one logically integrate all traces that reflect the ageing and history of an object within a conservation project whose scope is to define and establish which interpretation of the object is to be presented? If so, should we accept that the present conservation project is itself a moment in the life of the object, as are any other previous interventions?