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Artworks and Their Conservation. A (Tentative) Philosophical Introduction

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Introduction

Abstract

What is it like to restore the works of art of the past? What principles, constrains and rules underpin our conservative practice? In this essay we will take a philosophical look at the discipline of art conservation. Different philosophical positions that impact the aesthetic, ontological and conceptual arguments as to how restoration is to be conceived will be discussed, in the context of examples of artworks that have undergone restoration, de-restoration or re-restoration. This will lead us to address the following questions: Why do we feel compelled to conserve artworks? Which values should we abide by when it comes to restoring them? What role do the intentions of the original artist play? Finally, does current audience have a right to be involved in the matter?

1. *The Subject Field*

In some cases, if something is ruined and then replaced, no harm is done. If a crash ruins my mobile phone so that I am no longer able to use it, I can make up for it if I buy another mobile phone. If my umbrella is shattered by the wind, I can easily fix the damage by getting a brand-new umbrella.

Now imagine a famous cathedral, a piece of human artistry that has managed to survive for centuries in the old historic centre of an ancient European city. All of a sudden, a terrible fire happens, ruinously destroying a large part of the structure. The roof falls down, and the spire collapses consumed by the flames[1]. Once the emer-

[1] Readers will of course relate this example to the tragic fire that struck the church of Notre-Dame, in Paris, on April 15, 2019. While French President Emmanuel Macron has vowed to rebuild the symbol of Paris within five years, Prime Minister Édouard Philippe has already set up an international competition to replace the 19th-century spire made by Eugene Viollet-le-Duc which collapsed during the fire. Relevantly, discussions over the reconstruction of the cathedral have already begun. Jean-Michel Wilmotte, a famous French architect who is going to participate in the competition, claims that rebuilding a 'pastiche' of the destroyed spire would be "grotesque." (see: https://www.francetvinfo.fr/culture/patrimoine/incendie-de-notre-dame-de-paris/notre-dame-pour-l-architecte-jean-michel-wilmotte-un-pastiche-de-viollet-le-duc-serait-grotesque_3255699.html). But there are also those who wish for integral reconstruction of the church in its previous appearance: see, for example, C. Smith and J. Ralph, *Notre Dame: how a rebuilt cathedral could be just as wonderful*, in "The Conversation", April 16, 2019 https://theconversation.com/notre-dame-how-a-rebuilt-cathedral-could-be-just-as-wonderful-115551.

gence is over, a decision is taken to rebuild the destroyed church as exactly as it looked before the event, with its charming gothic pinnacles, gargoyle sculptures, and pointed arches. Is this decision problematic at all? Some might say it is not: what is valuable was the look of the church, and now it looks precisely as it looked before. Yet for many people things would be more complicated than that. What is valuable was the historical artefact, the authentic result of the old carpenters' agency. What we have now is just a Disney-like replica of the original building. Something has been lost in the process. But what has been lost? We are assuming that none can tell the difference between the before and the after. Now, if we can answer that, if we can say *what* has been lost in the reconstruction process, then we are on the right track of figuring out what it is that art conservation and restoration are meant to preserve.

At first glance, one might think that art conservation is a matter for professionals and expert practitioners. Decisions in conservation often come out of the expertise of specialists working with a multitude of materials (wood, ceramics, stone, paper, textiles and, recently, food products and other ephemeral materials), object types (paintings, sculpture, installations, artefacts, books, furniture) and environmental contexts (collections, buildings, cities, archaeological sites). Conservators must be acquainted with a vast number of techniques, mediums, and procedures in order to be able to replicate them – as well as be well versed in chemistry and physics. Science provides conservators with means for developing technologies, detecting significant facts, and matching them to theory, and thus constitutes an indispensable part of the conservator's training and perspective. However, science by itself is not enough to settle all issues, for while it can help us define reliable means for achieving certain ends, science cannot decide the suitability of those ends or justify them[2]. For example, how are we to adjudicate, by scientific virtue alone, which competing approach to an artwork's restoration should prevail and which should be sacrificed in the course of an intervention? And what can scientific evidence tell us about which condition of the object should be the most appropriate? Modifying an object in a certain way cannot be done for the sake of science.

[2] See for example Cesare Brandi on the relation between restoration and science: "It is an erroneous concept, an illusion associated with philosophical empiricism, that restoration can be rescued from the empiricism of false thaumaturges only with the aid of physics and chemistry, which are in fact servants and not masters of restoration. The use of ultraviolet and X-rays, macro-photography, etc. will not allow a non-empirical restoration to be carried out unless the restoration activity is guided by a critical and precise knowledge". (C. Brandi, *Il restauro e l'interpretazione dell'opera d'arte*, in "Annali della Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Lettere, Storia e Filosofia", Serie II, 23, p. 95, my trans.).

It is ultimately on the basis of cultural, historical, ethical and aesthetical considerations that we determine what is most desirable, appropriate and permissible to do.

As technical as they may seem, thus, issues in art conservation are to be settled mainly on a conceptual ground. This calls philosophy into question. Conservators make choices in the light of specific concepts and ideas concerning the identity of a work of art, its value and its meaning. These ideas constitute an infrastructure that, while pervading the whole activity, often goes unnoticed, in the sense that it is either unspoken or taken for granted. Philosophical work is thus needed to put this conceptual infrastructure under the spotlight, so as to unearth its theoretical foundations. This may result in a better appreciation of how these ideas developed, whether they still have value for contemporary society, and, possibly, whether they continue to contribute significantly to our cultural development.

Drawing on these considerations, in this essay we will take a philosophical look at the discipline of art conservation. This will lead us to issues of value, history, aesthetics and how we can relate to both the intentions of the original artists and current audiences' needs. Our goal will not be to adjudicate among various approaches to conservation, nor to offer a defence of any particular policy proposal. Rather, we will try to challenge the norms of conceptual import that underlie much discussion in contemporary debates in restoration. The questions that we will attempt to address are the following: Why do we feel compelled to conserve art? What values do we find in artworks? How does our hidden conception of what a work of art is impinge on our approach to conservation? What role do the intentions of the original artist play when it comes to restoring a work of art? Does current audience have a right to be involved in decisions as to how a work is to be conserved? How should we go about doing this?

2. *Some Terminological Clarification*

Before we begin, two important terminological notes are needed. In the course of this text, we will make reference to both notions of "conservation" and "restoration". Things are, however, quite complicated on this front. It should be noted that the words *restauro* in Italian, *restauración* in Spanish and *restauration* in French have broad denotations that encompass much of what is meant by the term *conservation* alone in English (although *conservazione*, *conservation* and *conservación* are increasingly used in Italian, French and Spanish). In English-speaking countries, the term "restoration", if

employed at all[3], is generally used in a restricted sense, denoting an intervention aimed at integrating the losses in a work of art or at re-creating a certain period style. After the 15th Triennial Conference held in September 2008 in Dehli**,** the International Council of Museums, Committee of Conservation (ICOM-CC) adopted a resolution on terminology "to facilitate communication among the international professional around the world and in the literature on the subject", which establishes the current English usage of the two terms at the international level. According to this resolution, "restoration" is to be regarded as a part of the broader field of "conservation". The term conservation thus defines:

all measures and actions aimed at safeguarding tangible cultural heritage while ensuring its accessibility to present and future generations. Conservation embraces preventive conservation, remedial conservation and restoration. All measures and actions should respect the significance and the physical properties of the cultural heritage item.

Restoration, in turn, refers to:

all actions directly applied to a single and stable item aimed at facilitating its appreciation, understanding and use. These actions are only carried out when the item has lost part of its significance or function through past alteration or deterioration. They are based on respect for the original material. Most often such actions modify the appearance of the item. Examples of restoration are retouching a painting, reassembling a broken sculpture, reshaping a basket, filling losses on a glass vessel[4].

The two words, however, still maintain similar meanings in most Neo-Latin languages. For example, in Italian it is very common to listen or read that an object is "in restauro", meaning that it is subject to protective measures aimed at its preservation, even though not necessarily directed at "modifying its appearance". To the same extent, in much Spanish literature, the term "restauración" refers indistinctively to all interventions of consolidation to an artwork physical state[5].

One simple, if not elegant, solution that has been adopted is to avoid the problem by juxtaposing the terms in the form "conservation-restoration". This, according to some authors, helps blur

[3] For example, in the revised *Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Practice of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works* (AIC), the word restoration is not used at all. Available here: https://www.nps.gov/training/tel/Guides/HPS1022_AIC_Code_of_Ethics.pdf.

[4] Available here in both the English, French and Spanish version: http://www.icom-cc.org/242/about/terminology-for-conservation.

[5] Spanish conservator Salvador Muñoz-Viñas' important book *Contemporary Theory of Conservation*, Elsevier, Oxford 2005, was originally published in Spanish with the title *Teoría contemporánea de la restauración*, Editorial Sintesis, Madrid 2004.

the distinction between the two domains of conservation and restoration, a boundary which, given the close interdependence of the procedures, is in fact less clear-cut than it appears in the ICOM's definition. This solution, as Alessandra Melucco Vaccaro argues, might be seen as an attempt to re-establish a continuum involving both conservation and restoration, and to recover "the sense of a historic tradition [...] gathering together the best from the two movements that were so ferociously opposed to one another in the nineteenth century" [6]. Nevertheless, although being quite established in certain areas, as for instance in many scholarly texts on the topic written in France[7], the expression "conservation-restoration" seems somewhat cumbersome for regular usage. This is why, in order to avoid further confusion, in this text we will comply with current use of the terms in the English language and refer to conservation (and its related terms like conservators, etc.) every time modern practice is being described in general, while retaining the word restoration (and its related terms restorers etc.) when used referring to earlier practice or whenever the context requires it.

The second terminological issue arises from alternative use in this text of the words *work* and *object* to describe the items to which conservation interventions apply. Rather than a proper metaphysical problem[8], the question at stake here is that it is important to distinguish between the realm of "fine arts conservation" and that of "objects conservation". Although, as we shall soon see, the notion of art is certainly in the historical origin of current conservation practice, the "fine arts" category does not cover the full variety of things that are presently conserved and restored. In fact, much of what goes nowadays under the label of conservation exceeds what is commonly referred to as "the world of art" or of aesthetic objects *stricto sensu*, to encompass many other types of objects that are displayed and conserved in museums: fossils, written documents, pieces of furniture, ancient potteries, archaeological items and antiquities in general[9], jewels, ritual tools, and

[6] A. Melucco-Vaccaro, *Reintegration of Losses*, in A. Melucco Vaccaro, N. Stanley-Price and M.Kirby Talley (eds.), *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage,* The Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles 1996, p. 327.

[7] See, for example, use of this expression in the title of Jean-Pierre Cometti's book: *Conserver/Restaurer. L'œuvre d'art à l'ère de sa préservation technique*, Gallimard, Paris 2017.

[8] For discussion of the relationship between the notion of artworks as physical objects and as ideal entities, see Section 3 "Ontology".

[9] The common-sense notion that conservation only deals with antiquities is debatable, because there are many examples of things that are conserved which cannot be considered "archaeological". Family heirlooms, tribal objects, personal things, historical documents, might all be the object of a conservation operation, but they can hardly be considered "antiquities" in any meaningful sense of the word.

so on. It is indeed difficult to find a common ground shared by all objects of conservation as it is currently practiced. Conservation is performed upon artworks and non-artworks, antiques and contemporary objects, archaeological pieces and cultural items[10]. These objects are cared for as evidence of what we construe as our cultural heritage[11] and are thus preserved in a manner that try not to hide or deform the information that each one of these objects conveys. Bearing these considerations in mind, our investigation in this text will however be restricted to the single field of specialization within the domain of conservation that is concerned with artwork conservation. Therefore, unless differently specified, in the following we will refer to the term "object" only as a (broad) synonym or of the term artwork.

[10] See J.P. Cometti, *Conserver/Restaurer*, cit. p. 10.

[11] Although a commonly invoked concept, heritage is also one that is very difficult to pin down. Broadly speaking, heritage describes everything that is "an evidence of the past that is used for present and future purposes" (R. Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches*, Routledge, New York 2013, p. 14). However, since every object has been transmitted to us from the past and can be thus considered an "evidence of the past", this idea does not help us discriminate conservation objects from all other objects. For a critical discussion of the complexity of the notion of heritage see also D. Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996.

I – *Values*

1. *A Modern Discipline…*

Art conservation as we know it today has a relatively short history behind it. Of course, physical objects and material tools have always been mended and repaired. While the earliest attempts at object reparation date back to prehistoric times[1], recent historical evidence[2] has confirmed that the Etruscan had already developed highly refined techniques to restore potteries they considered of particular value, such as those attributed to important masters of the past[3]. Similarly, during the Roman Empire, paintings by famous Greek artists were cleaned and fixed as needed[4]; and later, in the Middle Ages, altarpieces were often reworked and repainted to brighten their colours and bring them into line with the prevailing taste of the day. Similarly, up until the Baroque age, it was common practice to complete ancient sculpture through interventions that sought to restitute their original design or to rearrange them in a modern composition. As complex as they could be from a technical point of view, these activities were however more "cleaning", "maintenance" or "repairing" procedures than "conservation" in the current sense. Indeed, conservation only began when it became

[1] See O. Nieuwenhuyse, *The Prehistory of Pottery Restoration*, in "Newsletter ICOM-CC Working Group Glass and ceramics", 17 January 2009, pp. 1-4. Available at: http://www.icom-cc.org/54/document/the-prehistory-of-pottery-restoration/?id=535#.XfEfwOhKg2w

[2] This is confirmed by recent studies conducted by archaeologist-restorers such as R. Dooijes and O. P. Nieuwenhuyse, *Ancient Repairs: Techniques and Social Meaning*, in M. Bentz and U. Kästner U. (eds.) *Konservieren oder Restaurieren. Die Restaurierung griechischer Vasen von der Antike bis heute*, Verlag C.H. Beck, München 2007, pp. 15-20; G. Nadalini, *"Considerazioni e confronti sui restauri antichi presenti nelle ceramiche scoperte a Gela",* in R. Panini, F. Giudice (eds.) *Ta Attika – attic figured vases from Gela*, L'Erma di Bretschneider, Roma 2004, pp. 197-205; A. Pergoli Campanelli; L. Vlad Borrelli, *Conservazione e restauro delle antichità: profilo storico*, Viella, Roma 2010.

[3] A. Pergoli Campanelli, *La nascita del restauro. Dall'antichità all'Alto Medioevo*, Jaka Book, Milano 2015.

[4] See especially, Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia*, Book XXXV, trans. by J. F. Healey, *Natural History: A Selection,* Penguin Classics, London 1991.

clear that the attitudes, tools and skills required to preserve "art" were different from those required to treat other kinds of ordinary objects.

In this regard, it has become somehow conventional to trace conservation's origins from a start somewhere during the Italian Renaissance[5], even though the first organized attempts to regulate the practice only date back to a period between the 18th and 19th centuries. In the second half of the 18th century, Winckelmann wrote his seminal text on art history; fine-arts academies became common around Europe; and Baumgarten officially initiated the autonomous discipline of aesthetics.[6] Art and its objects gained special status within society – a status still valid today – as features of aesthetic contemplation and collective concern. They were "eternalised": put out of their historical use and offered to contemplation as pure forms, turned into museum items.[7] This process was made possible by the development of a new technology of material conservation and preservation.

With the advent of the 19th century, the ideas of the enlightenment gained larger recognition: public access to culture became a wide-spreading idea; Romanticism celebrated the cult of genius and exalted the beauty of ruins; and patriotism enhanced the value of monuments as symbols of national identity[8]. This trend was especially intense in England, where the *Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings* (SPAB), founded by William Morris and Philip Webb in 1877 had a major impact among artists and the cultivated audience in general. Across the English Channel, where many ancient artworks and buildings remained, their conservation started to be felt as a duty of modern nation states. Relevantly, this cultural climate also saw the emergence of the first attempts to develop a systematic theory of conservation, mostly thanks to the work of the two authors who are generally regarded as the

[5] For a classical text on the history of conservation see: A. Conti, *A History of the Restoration and Conservation of Works of Art* (trans. H. Glanville), Elsevier, Kidlington, UK 2007. See especially chap. 1 "Towards Restoration", pp.1-31.

[6] Cf. the classic essays by J. J. Winckelmann, *History of the art of antiquity* (1764), (trans. H. F. Mallgrave), The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles 2006; and A.G. Baumgarten, *Metaphysics* (1739), (trans. C. D. Fugate, J. Hymers), Oxford Academic, Oxford 2013.

[7] On the process of art musealization, see: L. Shiner, *The Invention of Art: a Cultural History*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2001.

[8] See for instance Camillo Boito on this: "The art of restoration [...] is recent [...] and could not achieve its methods except in a society which, lacking its own style in the fine arts, was able to understand all styles and appreciate them. This condition occurred after the first Napoleonic empire, at the beginning of modern Romanticism". (C. Boito, *Questioni pratiche di Belle Arti: restauri, concorsi, legislazione, professione, insegnamento* (1893), Hoepli, Milano 1982, pp. 211 and ff., my trans.)

fathers of the discipline, the English draughtsman and author John Ruskin (1819-1900) and the French architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc (1814-1879). Then, with the beginning of the twentieth century, with new advances in science and technology permeating society, conservation broadened its scope, strengthened its importance and gained public recognition as an activity requiring special, well-trained skills, which were perceived as different from those of the artist, the craftsman or the carpenter. The current discipline of conservation, with its plethora of complex technical, ethical, juridical and aesthetic aspects, was finally able to establish itself as a distinctive profession.

2. *…For an Old Concern*

As its relatively short history testifies, art conservation is thus a modern activity. This, however, should not lead us to think that the fundamental concerns or interests on which conservation is based are modern too. Broadly speaking, the concept of conservation has been embedded in human consciousness as long as human beings have been populating this planet. The desire to keep the objects we care about in the state in which they are without undue alteration of their form or substance seems to be a fundamental pattern of our social concern. But why do we feel the need to preserve things at all?

The general answer is that we are committed to a never-ending fight against death. Seeing the decomposition of what we consider valuable horrifies us, so we try to preserve it, driven by an ancestral discomfort in admitting the natural decomposition of things that matter to us. To this extent, we conserve and restore artworks primarily because we care about them and we want to keep them for future appreciation. This appeals to a range of interdependent cultural considerations: that human beings organize themselves into societies to transmit what they consider valuable to those who will come after; that artworks are something that we think deserves to be transmitted; that part of what this transmission is about is preserving the integrity of these objects, both physical and figurative; and that preserving integrity means very often repairing or even modifying the objects.

Eternal as it may be, our concern for conservation is stronger today than it ever was before. Ironically, whilst recklessly multiplying the number of throwaway items it produces, our society keeps protecting an ever-expanding number of objects every year. As an evidence, in less than a century the notion of cultural heritage has extended so much that the number of UNESCO's recognized

"World Heritage sites" reached a total of 1.092 in 2018 from the original 12 registered in 1978, with a constant increase rate in time[9].

This paradox tells us an important lesson, the fact that we only keep, conserve, and restore what we *value*. This explains why: "When we speak of recognizing the value of some object, such as the Grand Canyon, or Picasso's *Guernica,* or the great whales, what we seem to have in mind is that there is reason to preserve and protect these things […] the value of these objects provides me with a reason to preserve them […]"[10]. Recent studies in axiology have confirmed the intuition that there is a tight conceptual connection between the notion of value and what we can call, following philosopher Gerald A. Cohen, our "conservative disposition"[11]. "The conservative impulse", Cohen writes,

> is to conserve what is valuable, that is, the particular things that are valuable. I claim that we devalue the valuable things we have if we keep them only so long as nothing even slightly more valuable comes along. Valuable things command a certain loyalty. If an existing thing has intrinsic value, then we have reason to regret its destruction *as such* […][12]

Notice that what we distinctively want to conserve are the particular *bearers* of value not value *per se*. In this sense, as Cohen specifies, conservation of "what has value" is not conservation of "value". Value itself might be conserved when something valuable is destroyed and then replaced by a thing of the same value (think again at the case of the destroyed church mentioned in the Introduction), but our conservative disposition "is not to keep the value rating high but to keep *the things* that now contribute to that rating"[13]. Valuing something is in some respects like loving it, whether either is a species or a genus of the other in Aristotelian terms. Why doesn't the love we bear for one person transfers to a substitute with identical qualities or features? Part of this is because it is the individual, not the series of valuable characteristics

[9] This leads sometime to paradoxical consequences. For example, the Banking company *American Express* has recently donated a cage made of a special type of glass that is supposed to survive nuclear explosions to protect Van Eyck's *The Mystic Lamb*, located in the Church of Saint-Bavon (Belgium). In this way, though there may be no more Church of Saint-Bavon, no more Belgium, and no more *American Express*, we may still have Van Eyck's *Mystic Lamb* safe and sound in its glass cage. See M. Favre-Félix, *Un débat au Louvre (12/2002) Présentation et commentaires*, in "Nuances", no. 31, 2003, p. 4.

[10] T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Harvard University Press, Harvard 1998, p. 169.

[11] G.A. Cohen, *Rescuing Conservatism: A Defense of Existing Value*, in R.J. Wallace, R. Kumar, and S. Freeman (eds.), *Reasons and Recognition: Essays on the Philosophy of T. M. Scanlon*, Oxford University Press, New York 2011, pp. 203-230.

[12] G.A. Cohen, *Rescuing Conservatism,* cit. p. 210.

[13] *Ibid*. (emphasis added).

he or she may possess, that is the object of our love. To the same extent, it is this particular artwork that we want to protect, not the "quantity" of value it embodies, as it were.

The connection between value and conservation helps explain why it is so hard for us to refrain from trying to protect and restore valuable objects such as artworks, while we are happy to throw away things like umbrella, pens, pots, mobile phones and so on. When these things no longer fulfil their function, we simply replace them, and although sometimes the replacement might not be exactly *the same*, it is in most cases just as good for us, or "good in the same way"[14] as the old item. Obviously, this does not apply to objects that, besides their practical function, also possess different values for us of an emotional, relational or even merely economic nature. For example, if my old pendulum clock is broken, I might be reluctant to throw it away for the affective value that I attach to it, because this clock was, say, passed on to me by my mother who was given it by her grandmother and so on. Instead, I will have it restored. Alternatively, if someone strikes my car, I will try to have it repaired rather than replaced, mostly because of its monetary value. The general rule, however, is confirmed: we only conserve and restore things that have value to us. These last considerations lead us to a further distinction between the *amount* of value something has and the *types* of value that reside in it. We have argued that works of art are preserved because they have value. But what types of value do works of art possess? What is their nature? Answering to these questions is crucial if want to figure out what principles should guide us when conserving them.

3. *The Multiple Values of Artworks*

Alois Riegl's essay *Der moderne Denkmalkultus* (*The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origin)*, originally published in 1903, is unanimously considered the first and most classic formulation of a value-based approach to art conservation. Riegl's proposal of viewing works of art as possessors of various sorts of "values" continues to be valid or, at least, significant today. His analysis constitutes therefore a necessary starting point for our investigation in this section.

Why are artworks cherished and preserved? Riegl asks in this tiny masterpiece. The reason he proposes is that works of art have values – in fact, several values concurrently – that coexist with each other and ultimately influence our construal of artworks. According

[14] E.H. Matthes, *History, Value, and Irreplaceability*, in "Ethics", Vol. 124, no. 1, 2013, pp. 35-64.

to Riegl, regardless of their quality or importance, all works of art – paintings and buildings, statues and symphonies – are always at the same time visually or audially enjoyable objects that demands aesthetic appreciation as well as material instances of human history. To use Riegl's terms, artworks are "historical monuments" and "monuments of art."[15] This is reflected in the ways in which we evaluate them.

On the one hand, we appraise artworks for how they look and appear, namely for their directly sensuous qualities and for their so-called "surface features." In doing so, we attribute an *aesthetic value* to them, something which Riegl considers a "present-day" type of value, because it pertains to the satisfaction of *current* (aesthetic) needs. This value is based on the features of a work that are specifically linked to its "artistic properties, such as concept, form, and colour"[16]. Related to aesthetic value are also what Riegl calls "newness value" and "use value". The first refers to the pleasure that is generated in us by seeing brand-new artworks, artworks that look as if they have just been completed. As for "use value," it refers to the fact that many monuments, artworks and buildings, continue to be used or to a have some kind of social function.

On the other hand, we can appraise artworks for their history and for the information they provide us with on human development, that is, for their being documents of previous ages and generations. In doing so, we attribute a *historical value* to them, something which Riegl calls a "memory value", because it relates to the satisfaction of the cognitive and intellectual interest we have for our past. Historical value is the result of the study and explicit learning of the original condition in which a work was created, and is dependent for the degree of its significance upon the information about the past and the knowledge about history that a work can provide us with. Closely connected to historical value, and ultimately dependent upon its recognition, is also what Riegl calls "age value". Age value depends on our appreciation of the accumulated effects of time on the surface features of an object. It corresponds to what Ruskin famously referred to as the "voicefulness" of ancient buildings. "The greatest glory of a building" Ruskin famously wrote in his "The Lamp of Memory", from 1848 "[…] is in its Age, and in that deep sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, of mysterious sympathy, nay, even of approval or condemnation, which we feel in walls that have long been washed by

[15] A. Riegl, *The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin*, (1903), (trans. K.W. Forster, D. Ghirardo), in "Oppositions", Vol. 25, 1982, p. 21.
[16] Ivi, p. 22.

the passing waves of humanity"[17]. Unlike historical value (and similarly to aesthetic and newness values), the sense of accumulated voicefulness that gives rise to "age value" doesn't require study to be grasped, since its strong emotional appeal makes it is easy to recognize by everyone. As Carolyn Korsmeyer glosses, age value is responsible for yielding a distinctive kind of experience since it is "always inseparable from the sensible and affective impact that an object has on the viewer"[18].

According to Riegl, despite their difference in nature, most of the time these values – the aesthetic, the age and the documentary – are so intermingled with each other that it is even difficult to tell them apart. Consider a painting like Caravaggio's *The Calling of St Matthew*, located in San Luigi dei Francesi, the church of the French congregation in Rome. Clearly, we appreciate this work for its dramatic beauty and its capacity of capturing natural light – features that make it a masterpiece of the Baroque period – but we concurrently admire it both as a document that testifies to a particular age of the history of art and culture and as an evidence able to reveal us something about the particular style or taste of his author, the way in which he painted in the early seventeenth-century, what techniques he used, what role he played in Roman society of the time, etc. The aesthetic value of the *The Calling of St Matthew* – its being an astonishingly beautiful artefact – is thus enhanced by its age and documentary value – its being a source of historical information. Indeed, as Riegl claims, historical knowledge can become a source of aesthetic pleasure in addition to and aside from the work's purely sensuous qualities[19], adding to our aesthetic experience and prompting specific emotional responses.

Where's the problem with all this? The problem is that, although the different values possessed by artworks generally co-exist in a constant mutual interaction with each other, there are, however, cases in which these values *do* clash, leading to what can be called, in modern terms, a "value conflict". This occurs as either the result of artworks' natural aging process or as the effect of a destructive event leading to a sudden alteration in the work's structure. In both situations, intervention is required on our part to preserve the damaged object, something which necessarily requires us to make some choices.

[17] J. Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture,* Smith, Elder and Co., London 1849. Ch. 6 "The Lamp of Memory", pp. 176-198.

[18] C. Korsmeyer, *Aesthetic Deception: On Encounters with the Past*, in "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", Vol. 66, no. 2, 2008, p. 122.

[19] A. Riegl, *The Modern Cult of Monuments,* cit., pp. 27-28.

The first scenario stems from the fact that artworks – like all other physical objects – inevitably change over time, due to their inherent material degradation and to their interactions with external or environmental agencies. This modification results in perceptible changes that modify the object's aesthetic appearance. Lichen and fine moss cover the surfaces of fountains and outdoor monuments that once shone brightly; various parts of ancient sculptures fall off, thus changing the once balanced design; erosion ruins the stones of a building; paint dries, cracks, and flakes creating losses in the painted surface (*lacunae*); certain colours lose their original intensity and fade to translucence, while other darken because of oxidation (*patina*). At the ultimate stage of the aging process, the artwork's initial aesthetic appearance may no longer be appreciable: the work has become a ruin – a thing whose primary significance is being a testimony of past human history[20]. Of course, we appreciate ruins in several ways, part of which purely aesthetic, part of which more intellectual. In particular, we enjoy the picturesque look ruins often create with their complicated surface and irregular design. Roughness, irregularity, and asymmetry represent indeed strong sources of aesthetic appeal to us.[21] Additionally, as studies confirm[22], we also enjoy the way in which ruins remind us of the passage of time. Ruins provide us with a direct contact with the past, something that has been described as a powerful feeling of awe and sublime[23].

But before time has finally completed its work turning an object into a ruin – thus altering forever the object's original character – the gradual aging process presents us with a challenge: should we intervene to curb or slow down the artwork's natural phenomenon

[20] Cf. with C. Brandi's definition of a ruin: "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 […] Otherwise, the ruin was not a ruin, but a work of art that still maintained unity." C. Brandi, *Theory of Restoration* (1963), (trans. C. Rockwell), Nardini, Firenze 2005.

[21] This corresponds to the literary theme of "Time the Painter", who intervenes to create harmony in paintings by adding the dark patina that unifies the tints, making them sweeter and softer (for references on this notion, see: A. Conti, *A History of the Restoration and Conservation of Works of Art,* cit., pp. 107-113).

[22] For a classic study on the value of ruins see: G. Simmel, *Die Ruine*, in *Philosophische Kultur* (1911), in *Two Essays*, in "The Hudson Review", Vol. 11, no. 3, 1958, pp. 371-385. For more recent studies on the aesthetic appeal of ruins, see: R. Ginsberg, *The Aesthetics of Ruins,* Rodopi, Amsterdam-New York 2004; M. Ryynänen, Z. Somhegyi, *Learning from Decay: Essays on the Aesthetics of Architectural Dereliction and Its Consumption,* Peter Lang Verlag, Bern 2018; J. Bicknell, J. Judkins, C. Korsmeyer (eds.), *Philosophical Perspectives on Ruins, Monuments, and Memorials*, Routledge, New York 2019.

[23] We are particularly fond of ruins as "witnesses" of the purely natural cycle of growth and decay. Ruins represent an aesthetic symbol of the passing of time, and thus evoke a pleasant feeling of melancholy, longing and nostalgia. See P. Lamarque, *The Value of Ruins and Deptiction of Ruins*, in J. Bicknell, J. Judkins, C. Korsmeyer (eds.), *Philosophical Perspectives on Ruins, Monuments, and Memorials,* cit., pp. 87-90.

of alteration in order to preserve its aesthetic appeal or should we rather let time run its course on the object, adding on to its age value? And how are we to tell apart cases in which age alteration counts as "mere damage" to a work – to be resisted and fought over – from cases in which it somehow contributes to the work a positive sense, and thus deserved to be kept or maintained?

The second scenario comes out of the fact that artworks – like all products of human activity – may be subject to sudden injury under both natural and intentional human agencies. In those unfortunate circumstances – when the survival of the object is in jeopardy and intervention is required to save it from complete devastation – we are faced again with a conflict of values. For example, consider the case of a historic building collapsed after an earthquake. In the aftermath of such tragic situation, we have to decide whether to reconstruct the building in its previous appearance – thus favouring its "present-day values" (aesthetic and functional) over its "memory-value" – or simply consolidate what is left of the original, albeit ruined, structure – thus privileging its documentary significance. The recent case of the XIII century Basilica di San Benedetto in Norcia (Perugia), largely collapsed after the earthquake of 30 October 2016 – with only the facade, the apse and part of the naves being preserved – is exemplary of this type of dilemmas. While an international design competition for the church restoration is expected by the end of 2019, sponsored by the Ministry of Cultural Heritage – in which professionals from around the world will be invited to offer their own contribution to the church restoration – the general public is split into two factions. Some people urge that Norcia "must not be turned into a perfect replica, but show the wounds of the earthquake […] out of respect for history."[24] Others, including the majority of Norcia inhabitants, argue in favour of a complete reconstruction of the church to exactly as it was before collapse.[25] Each of these options comes with its own risks. Focusing on what Riegl calls "memory-values" alone may eventually reduce the collapsed church to a memorial, a purveyor of information about the past. Alternatively, fostering "present-day values" may result into creating a forgery or a fake from the old basilica. Perfect reconstructions often come with an artificial character – a sort of Disney-like effect, so to say

[24] A quotation by Antonio Paolucci, former Minister of Cultural Heritage and current Director of Norcia's Restoration Committee, in an interview available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QhFRISQlBPQ.

[25] See: *Terremoto, polemiche sulla ricostruzione della basilica di Norcia,* in "La Nazione Umbra", 20 January 2018. Available here: https://www.lanazione.it/umbria/cronaca/terremoto-basilica-norcia-1.3673508.

– that wipes out the memory of the catastrophic event, pretending somehow that it never happened. On the other hand, it is also true that not everything that happens in the history of an object needs always to be preserved. If some night-vandals hacked into the Colosseum and sprayed graffiti on some of its walls, the fact that this has happened would give us no reason *per se* not to restore the wall to how it was before. Neither it seems that we would be denying history if we decided to do that. What shall we do, then? Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is no easy answer to this question. In fact, the tension caused by trying to preserve the different conflicting values of a damaged work of art is one of the greatest conundrums conservators have to deal with.

4. *The Aesthetic and the Historical Instance*

In the history of conservation theory, probably the most significant contribution to the analysis of this value-conflict – as well as one fruitful attempt to solve it – comes from the work of Cesare Brandi, the famous Italian art critic and philosopher. In his 1963 *Theory of Restoration,* which summarizes Brandi's thoughts and reflections on the subject collected in his long experience as director of the *Istituto Centrale del Restauro* in Rome, Brandi established the foundations for a new theory of art conservation[26]. What is particularly interesting is that the *Theory* did not simply present Brandi's ideas on how to approach conservation treatments – as many had done before him – but tried instead to build up a solid philosophical background from which practical guidelines for conservation decision-making could be derived. It was a unique and unprecedented project at that time, and in many regards it still is today, as testified by the notoriety that Brandi's conception of conservation has gained internationally[27].

At the outset of his *Theory*, Brandi argues that the tension between different values of an artwork can be seen as the "dialectics" between two main "aspects", "features" or "elements" that co-habit in every artwork – what he calls, in Italian, the *istanza estetica* and the *istanza storica*[28]. According to Brandi, the co-presence of the historical and the aesthetic instance in the same artwork is of fundamental importance for conservation theory, yet it is also the source of all its problems. Brandi condensed this idea

[26] C. Brandi, *Theory of Restoration*, cit.

[27] Brandi's *Theory of Restoration* has recently experienced a new surge of interest thanks to its translation into French (2001) and English (2005) and to the organization of several events in 2006 celebrating the centennial of Brandi's birth.

[28] Ivi, p. 74

in a fundamental principle: "Restoration", he writes, "consists of the methodological moment of the recognition of the work of art, in its physical consistency and in *its twofold aesthetic and historical polarity*, in view of its transmission to the future."[29]. Both the aesthetic and the historical aspects need indeed to be taken into account in the context of conservation, for if the "two-fold" identity of artworks is neglected, mistakes are inevitably made throughout interventions.

The first mistake arises when conservators privilege the historical over the aesthetic factor. When works of art are primarily considered with regard to their *istanza storica*, their value is taken to reside primarily in their age: the greater the age, the greater the value. This gives rise to what Brandi calls "archaeological restoration"[30] – a type of conservation which implies the simple maintenance of the current *status quo* of the work. Yet, according to Brandi, archaeological restoration is only viable in the case of ruins – objects that, in Brandi's definition, cannot be restored, because it is impossible to recover their lost aesthetic unity – but does not apply to other works of art. Indeed, artworks are primarily objects of our aesthetic appreciation, and it is the main aim of conservation to preserve their aesthetic character.

The second mistake arises when conservators overestimate the aesthetic factor to the detriment of the historical factor. This leads to what Brandi calls "the most serious heresy"[31] in conservation, i.e., stylistic restoration, or restoration "in the style of the original"[32]. This form of restoration implies an attempt to reconstruct or restore all the damaged elements of the original object, integrating gaps or *lacunae* either by "induction" or by "approximation" with respect to principles of stylistic consistency. For the sake of the work's aesthetic value, proponents of this form of restoration, according to Brandi, take on the role of "the original artist or creator". Nevertheless, in rebuilding parts or entire works, they merge the old and the new, the authentic and the inauthentic, and end up producing an overall sensation of deceitfulness.[33]

In contemporary philosophical literature, these two opposite approaches to art conservation have been famously christened *pur-*

[29] Ivi, p. 50 (emphasis added).
[30] Ivi, p. 63
[31] Ivi, p. 64.
[32] Brandi also calls it "restoration by fantasy" "[…] There will be (and certainly have been) people who would insert restoration into precisely this most intimate and unrepeatable phase of the artistic process. This is the most serious heresy of restoration: it is restoration by fantasy." *Ibid.*
[33] Ivi p. 91.

ism and *integralism* by the British philosopher Mark Sagoff[34]. Supporters of purism (among which Sagoff recognizes himself) reject the idea that artworks should be restored and only allow for the "cleaning"[35] and "reattachment" of components that might have fallen off from it, giving priority to consolidation of the work's material and prevention of further decay. Any modification to an object that goes beyond pure maintenance, purists claim, will indeed create a forgery. On the purist account, to restore a work of art is worse than to let damage to it stand, for no matter how aesthetically convincing the restorer's intervention may turn out to be, restoration does violence to the historical value of the object as related to the original artist's handiwork and creates in this sense a form of deception[36].

From an opposite perspective, supporters of integralism allow additions and rebuilding to an artwork in order to restore its aesthetic appearance, which might be altered or obscured through aging, dirt, accidental damage, or disruptive events occurred in the course of time. According to integralists, restoration's aim is to restitute an artwork its pristine aesthetic value, even if this involves attaching or substituting newly fabricated components to the object. The *aesthetic integrity* of the artwork – which may be defined as the ability of the object to produce aesthetic sensations upon the observer[37] – represents indeed a work of art's *raison-d'être*. Of course, integralists claim, intervention is conditional upon the fact that the aged state of the object is actually considered less aesthetically appealing than the previous state: when the aged look and ruined appearance of the object contribute positively to its overall aesthetic value, then restoration should not take place[38].

Despite their popularity among art philosophers, both these approaches are, from Brandi's perspective, ultimately unsatisfactory.

[34] See, in particular, M. Sagoff, *On Restoring and Reproducing Art*, in "The Journal of Philosophy", Vol. 75, no. 9, 1978, pp. 453-470.

[35] This principle, while apparently straightforward, is more complicated than it seems. As a matter of fact, as we shall see in the next section, cleaning procedures are among the most controversial procedures in conservation. Cleaning the surface of a painting often results in altering the painting's original relationship of colours, thus changing the work's original look. Hence, even when "simply" cleaning the paint surface, restorers can in fact be making drastic changes to the work. For discussion on this issue, see: E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1972, pp. 54-57.

[36] M. Sagoff, *On Restoring and Reproducing Art*, cit., p. 463.

[37] For further discussion on the notion of "aesthetic integrity", see M. Clavir, *Preserving What Is Valued: Museums, Conservation, and First Nations*, UBC Press, Toronto 2002, pp. 53-55. Interestingly, aesthetic integrity is a common reason why we fix up many objects outside the realm of fine art: houses, pieces of old furniture, worn-out tapestry, etc.; a similar concern leads today an increasing number of people to undergo plastic surgery.

[38] For details of this argument, see: Y. Saito, *Why Restore Works of Art?*, in "*The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*", Vol. 44, no. 2, 1985, pp. 142.

They are, as we have seen, "mistakes". But why it is so? What is wrong with them? The issue, according to Brandi, is not so much that these positions are incorrect or wrong *per se* as it is that they are *incomplete*. Neither is able to take into account the fundamental duality of works of art: the fact that, as we have seen, these objects are always to be considered historical documents *and* aesthetic images at the same time. This means that documentary relevance and aesthetic significance are to be valued to similar degrees, so that we cannot do without any of them (which also explains why only few people in the conservation profession are today wholly purist or integralist, while most of them position themselves along a spectrum between these two polar extremes[39]).

But if, as we have seen, it is not possible to sacrifice *a priori* either of the two instances of the artwork's "twofold polarity" what should conservators do, then, when it comes to restoring an artwork? Brandi's proposal is that they get to a compromise solution by finding a *balance* between these opposite stances, something which involves critical judgment on the part of the practitioners based on attentive considerations of the individual artwork under examination[40]. To achieve this goal, it is important that conservators try to justify and rationalize as much as possible the process of evaluation that leads them, in each single case, toward making a decision. This, as we shall later see[41], leads Brandi to defend the idea that restoration has primarily a *critical* rather than technical nature. Critical evaluation on the part of the conservator is thus essential in the attempt to reconcile, in each individual case, the aesthetic and the historical instance. This task represents, according to Brandi, the main goal of a philosophical approach to art conservation.

[39] The two approaches, however, are not deprived of contemporary supporters: see, for a defence of the integralist point of view, P. Marconi, *Il recupero della bellezza,* Skira, Milano 2005.

[40] C. Brandi, *Theory of Restoration*, cit., p.

[41] See Section 5: "The Viewer's Rights".

II – *Ontology*

1. *Controversies*

How difficult this goal is, however, is testified by the number of *querelles* that continuously arise in the field. Complaints of damage to works of art resulting from conservation interventions have indeed been commonplace throughout the entire history of the discipline. In fact, as conservator Helen Glanville puts it, there never seems to have been a time in which conservation "has not been the stuff of controversy."[1] One paramount case of controversy is the so-called "cleaning controversy", occurred in the post-war period over the restoration of oil paintings in the National Gallery in London. The conflict regarded particularly the different methodologies, both practical and theoretical, on how to approach the cleaning of oil paintings, and featured characters of the highest calibre like the *National Gallery*, the *Istituto Centrale per il Restauro* in Rome and Ernst Gombrich, newly-appointed Director of the *Warburg Institute* in London. As a result of the intellectual status of its participants, the controversy is especially worth considering because of the quality and novelty of the discussions that ensued and the relevance of the arguments proposed.

Between the Forties and the Fifties, a large number of National Gallery works – in fact over seventy paintings including Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*, Rubens' *Le Chapeau de Paille* (*The Straw Hat*) and Rembrandt's *Woman Bathing in a River* together with many others – were cleaned by a team of different restorers guided by the well-known conservator Helmut Ruhemann. The first exhibition of the newly-restored paintings, organized by the Gallery in 1947, was simply titled *Cleaned Pictures*, but the accompanying exhibition catalogue presented on its cover a suggestive engraving by William Hogarth "Time smoking a picture", from 1761. The image shows Saturn, depicted as "Winged death", darkening a painting with

[1] H. Glanville, *Introductory essay: Relativity and restoration*, in A. Conti, *A History of the Restoration and Conservation of Works of Art,* cit., pp. ix.

the thick smoke of his pipe, while distractingly cutting it with his scythe. Fragments of a classical sculpture lie at his feet, symbolizing the destruction time causes to artworks, as well as a jar labelled "varnish". The engraving – a satire directed at art connoisseurs' belief that age adds value to artworks – was clearly not a random choice on the part of the National Gallery conservators. It testified to the principles that had been followed during the cleaning procedures, principles that aroused inflamed reactions and public criticism.

Among the critics[2], Brandi, in particular, claimed that the removal of varnish during the intensive treatments had ruined the paintings, leaving them tonally out of balance. In 1949, he publicly stood up against the National Gallery's restoration penning a heated article in the pages of *The Burlington Magazine*, where he referred to concepts such as *patina*, *varnish* and *glazes* and how they needed different methods of conservation and preservation[3]. Brandi's ideas were further reinforced in the early 1960s by Gombrich, in a series of articles also published in *The Burlington Magazine*[4]. Writing about the National Gallery cleaning procedures, Gombrich claimed that paintings change in time, and in a way that is not reversible; they cannot be returned to the state in which they presumably appeared in the hands of their makers. Additionally, in the past artists applied all sort of glazes or tinted varnishes to mitigate the vivid colours of their works. This resulted in the darker effect we call patina. When the patina is removed, Gombrich argued, the aesthetic integrity of the artwork is dramatically affected. Indeed, as he had already noticed in his 1960 *Art and Illusion*[5], the need for brighter colours on old master paintings is mainly a product of our modern aesthetics, especially after the success and dissemination of Impressionist painting. Corrupted by such recent bright works, we now like to see overcleaned and seemingly freshly-made paintings. But, Gombrich insisted, this gives us no good reason to conceal their original faded colours, their characteristic patina, and

[2] See, among the many, E.H. Gombrich**,** *Controversial methods and methods of controversy*, in "The Burlington Magazine", Vol. 105, no. 720, 1963, pp. 90-93. S. Walden*, The Ravished Image, or How to Ruin Masterpieces by Restoration,* St. Martin's Press, New York 1985; A. Conti (ed.), *Sul restauro*, Einaudi, Milan 1988; M. Daley, *Oil, tempera and the National Gallery*, in J.H. Beck (ed.), *Art Restoration: The Culture, the Business and the Scandal*, J. Murray, London pp. 123–151.

[3] C. Brandi, *The Cleaning of Pictures in Relation to Patina, Varnish, and Glazes*. In "The Burlington Magazine", Vol. 91, No. 556, 1949, pp.183-188.

[4] E. Gombrich, *Dark Varnishes: Variations on a Theme from Pliny*, in "The Burlington Magazine", Vol. 104, No. 707 1962, pp. 51-55; *Controversial methods and methods of controversy*, cit.

[5] E. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion*, cit. pp. 60-72.

all the other signs of time. In response to the critics' allegations, Ruhemann and the others conservators of the National Gallery defended the accuracy of the operation, referred to technical evidence and scientific analysis done during the treatments to argue that the cleaning of darkened protective varnishes had been carefully monitored to avoid the removal of paint layers, and accused critics of fascination with "dirty" pictures[6].

Without delving further into the specifics of the quarrel – surely one of the longest and most heated in the whole history of conservation – what is interesting to notice is that, looking in retrospect, all parties to the debate seemed in fact to agree on some basic principle concerning conservation, for example that the conservator's aim was to respect "what the original artist made"[7]. Everyone, in other words, was convinced that conservators should strive to show as best as possible the artist's "original achievement", or, in Ruhemann words, "to preserve and show to its best advantage every original particle remaining of a painting"[8]. Difficulties aroused, however, when it came to identify *what* exactly such an achievement was, for at the end of the day this seems more a matter of a philosophical persuasion than of a technical decision.

2. *Artworks' Identity in Conservation*

These last considerations lead us to investigate the dependency that insists between our approach to conservation and the conceptual framework we use to classify and describe art objects. The way we conceive of artworks' identity determines our notion of conservation: if our ontology changes, then our conception of conservation will also change[9].

For example, do painters create *physical objects* which, just like every other material object, will fade and age since the very moment of their completion due to natural forces causing damage and decay, such that decay is an essential part of them?

[6] S. Walden, *The Ravished Image*, cit., p. 118.

[7] D. Carrier, *Art and Its Preservation*, in "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", Vol. 43, no. 3, 1985, p. 291.

[8] H. Ruhemann, *The training of restorers*, in G. Thomson (ed.) *Recent advances in conservation*, Butterworths, London 1963, p. 202.

[9] Cf. S.J. Wilsmore, *What Justifies Restoration?*, in "The Philosophical Quarterly" , Vol.38, no. 150, 1988, pp. 56-67. "As restorer", Wilsmore writes, "the way in which I decide what to do with damaged works of art such as sculptures and paintings should be guided by what I believe constitutes their identity […]. That is to say, I must ask myself: "What determines the identity of this statue or painting which I intend to restore?". At least implicitly, it is only in reference to the answer I would give to this question that I could justify what I go on to do. It is therefore important to establish for such works of art a correct account of their identity, and for me, as restorer, to use it as my basis in any such justification" (*ibid.* p. 56).

Or do they rather create ideal *aesthetic objects,* timeless "visual-types" only contingently related to the perishable material token in which they are embodied, whose degradation – the yellowing of varnish, the flaking of paint – is something we should ignore or (provided we have the required means) attempt to prevent and correct? Our answer to this question impinges directly on the actions we decide to implement with regard to artworks. If we take a work to coincide with the material object directly touched by the artist, even the smallest restoration intervention will inevitably change the meaning and significance of the object, thus altering "what the artist made". Alternatively, if we take the work to coincide with an a-temporal visual-type, something like a Platonic form, to restore it is to make it appear ideally closer to "the way it is"[10] in a metaphysical sense of "being" – namely, to what "the artist made"[11].

Relevantly, each of these options is consistent with a part of our ontological intuitions concerning visual works of art[12]. On the one hand, we are inclined to consider visual artworks like paintings, statues, sculptures etc. as "particular objects" characterized by a certain material constitution and identified by their specific location in time and space. This is implied, for example, in claims like "The painting *Mona Lisa* is a 500-year old object located in the *Salle Des États* of the *Louvre* museum". At the same time, though, we also tend to treat paintings as "visual-types", ideal aesthetic structure that can migrate from one physical support to another and thus be infinitely reproduceable. A similar idea is concealed in claims like "My tea cup has the *Mona Lisa* on it" or "I have a *Mona Lisa* t-shirt". Of course, we don't usually believe that we have seen a painting if we have just seen a reproduction of it in a newspaper or on the internet, without having seen the original object. Nevertheless, the fact remains that in many circumstances we refer to visual artworks as if they owed their identity more to a specific configuration of lines and colours, as types with multiple instances, than to a unique physical object[13].

[10] R. De Clercq, *The Metaphysics of Art Restoration*, in "The British Journal of Aesthetics", Vol. 53, No. 3, 2013, p. 263.

[11] Readers will relate these two stances with either purism or integralism, respectively.

[12] For this conflict of intuitions, see particularly P. Lamarque, *Work and Object. Explorations in the Metaphysics of Art,* Oxford University Press, Oxford 2010, p. 60).

[13] E. M. Zemach, for instance, supports an ontology in which all works of art are considered types. He writes: "The type which is that piece of music is a concrete object (a sequence of sounds) that may be present at many times and places. The type which is that painting is, likewise, a type: a concrete object that can recur at more than one location. In the past that did not often happen; rarely was a painting reproduced in a way which kept its essential properties intact. But many musical works were produced only once, then, for the cheap and reliable mechanical means which we often use for reproducing music were not yet invented" (E.M. Zemach, *How Paintings Are,* in "The British Journal of Aesthetics" Vol. 29, no 1, 1989, p. 69).

Although backed up with a part of our intuitions, neither of these options – the particular object and the type model – is able to match with all pieces of evidence coming from current artistic practices. For example, if artworks were actually reducible to the physical objects they are constituted of – the painting to the constitutive canvas, the statues to the marble – then we would consider any change in the constituting object as a change in the work. The argument would be the following: say A (a painting) and B (the painted canvas) were the same object (premise 1); then any change in B would result in a change in A (premise 2); but since change in B is inevitable (premise 3); then A could no longer be considered the *same work* A right after the very first moments of its existence (conclusion).

However, our attitudes and behaviours toward artworks testify loudly against this idea, for we commonly accept that works can have their parts replaced and still remain the same thing, as long as this process proceeds slowly. In fact, our whole notion of conservation is based on this fundamental idea. A painting is the same object even if some of its varnish is gradually removed during cleaning. Rembrandt's *Woman Bathing in a River* was the *same work* before and after undergoing heavily cleaning procedures in 1947 (although, if critics were right, it was perhaps left "tonally out of balance" afterwards). What we believe, in other words, is that artworks *do* survive the gradual replacement of their original parts, and while their material properties may change, they remain the same enduring entity – for otherwise speaking of "change" would be impossible. In metaphysical terms, this suggests that we take physical objects and artworks to have different persistence conditions according to Leibniz's law[14].

What about the other option, the claim that works of visual art are, as it were, image or visual types? Although there may be something intriguing about this idea[15], a decisive counterargument exists against the claim that paintings and statues can be assimi-

[14] A formal version of this argument can be found in a recent paper on the ontology of restoration by R. Stopford, *Preserving the Restoration of* the Pietà, in "The British Journal of Aesthetics", Vol. 56, no.3, 2016, pp. 301-315. A similar argument also appears in J. Jarvis Thompson, *The Statue and the Clay*, "Nous" Vol. 32, no. 2, 1998, p. 152.

[15] Especially with regard to some visual works in contemporary art, such as for instance Sol LeWitt *Wall Drawings* or some other works of installation art, which can be re-executed time and again, in the same way as theatre plays and symphonies are being re-performed. For discussion on this idea, see: R. van de Vall, *The Devil and the Details: The Ontology of Contemporary Art in Conservation Theory and Practice, in* "The British Journal of Aesthetics", Vol. 55, no. 3, 2015, pp. 285–302 and P. Laurenson, *Authenticity, Change and Loss in the Conservation of Time-Based Media Installations,* in "Tate Papers" 6, 2006. Available at: http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/06autumn/laurenson.htm.

lated to the type-token category together with, say, musical works. Indeed, works that are types always presuppose the existence of *a system of notation* of some kind, which provides the means for distinguishing which properties of the work are constitutive of the type and which are only contingent – that is, for fixing the essential features every token of the type must comply with to count as such, and the limits of admissible variation in each single case[16]. But how could we build a notational system in the case of artforms such as painting? What would be the distinctive qualities of a work such as, say, Rembrandt's *Woman Bathing in a River*, the loss of which determined the loss of the work *per se*? Which of its features could be considered constitutive and which only contingent? Answering these questions proves difficult if not impossible altogether, for it seems that when it comes to visual arts, even the most subtle features of the work (the thickness of the brushstrokes, a particular colour pigmentation, etc.) are at least *potentially* constitutive. As Goodman puts it: "In painting […] none of the pictorial properties – none of the properties the picture has as such – is distinguished as constitutive; no such feature can be dismissed as contingent, and no deviation as insignificant"[17]. In fact, if such notation *were* possible, conservation would be a much simpler activity than it actually is, for it would be sufficient for conservators to preserve what were prescribed by the notated instructions to restore a work of art. In practice, however, no shortcut of this sort, no straightforward algorithm, no uncontroversial rule is there to disposal for the practitioner.

This brings us to a further important point, for the concept of "essential properties", vague and elusive at it is, is nevertheless central to conservation practice. Indeed, essential properties are so that they determine the distinctive aesthetic character of any particular work as such. To this extent, provided the *essential* qualities of a work are retained, a few changes to a work during conservation treatments would not by themselves threaten its identity. But what are the distinctive qualities of a work of art, the loss of which determines the loss of the work *per se*? What are its distinctives features? This impinges on what we count as "fundamental" in the identity of a work of art. With no notational system available helping us make the decision, however, answering this question necessarily involves, for any particular work of visual art, some sort

16 See for some arguments on this point: P. Taylor, *Paintings and Identity*, in "The British Journal of Aesthetics", Vol. 29, No 4, pp. 353-362.

17 N. Goodman, *Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols,* Hackett, Indianapolis, 1976, p. 116.

of evaluative stipulation on the part of the conservators. It is therefore necessary to leave the generality of ontological classifications altogether behind us and consider instead the particular status of each visual artwork individually. Of course, depending on the particular artwork involved, some cases will be easier to determine than others. As Susan J. Wilsmore puts it:

> It is easy enough to judge that the smile "in" the *Mona Lisa* is essential to the existence of that painting, and that it would be ruined were it erased by a restorer, even if he were to repaint it himself. Nor would we accept any justification for his doing so, such as his replacing damaged pigment. On the other hand, the same painting could remain reasonably intact, though slightly damaged, if a similar extent of pigment, but composing only its background, were repainted and so restored[18].

But most cases conservators have to deal with are not as clear-cut as this one, and leave much if not all to discussion – which, again, explains why conservation interventions are often so controversial. So how can the conservator determine, in every single case, which features of the work of art are to be considered constitutive and which are not in order to plan its action accordingly?

[18] S.J. Wilsmore, *What Justifies Restoration*?, cit., p. 61.

III – *Intentions*

1. *For and Against the Artist's Intentions*

A common answer to this problem involves making appeal to the original artist's intentions. It is the artist's will, on this account, that determines which features are essential to an artwork and which are not, and therefore helps distinguish between changes that have an impact on the artwork's identity as *that* particular artwork, and changes that only affect the work as a material *object*, leaving its specific artistic character unchanged. Alteration to the surface features of a work like flaking paint usually belongs to the latter type of changes; we deliberately ignore them or try to look through such alterations in our appreciation of a work. The case of the patina, however, is more controversial. Should the yellowish layer and colour fading be considered an integral part of the work? As we know, there are often conflicting answers on this issue. One solution is to claim that it is the artist's governing intentions that are decisive to draw the difference: through her intentions, the artist implicitly or explicitly stipulates what elements and features must be counted as the work-constituting properties, and provides an indication as to what elements needs to be preserved and what can be sacrificed in her work[1].

In the philosophical debate, this position concerning the role of the artist's intention in art interpretation is generally known as "intentionalism"[2]. Historically speaking, intentionalism arose in the context of twentieth-century discussion in literary criticism, where it was formulated with regard to the interpretation of literary texts in relation to the existence and character of the author's intentions

[1] In this sense, to use Goodman's terminology, reference to the artist's intentions may help us establish "the criteria of identity" for one work.

[2] Philosophers have engaged with this topic extensively, especially since the 1960s. See, among the many publications, P. Livingston *Art and Intention: A Philosophical Study*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2005; N. Carroll, *Interpretation and Intention: The Debate between Hypothetical and Actual Intentionalism*, "Metaphilosophy", Vol. 31, pp. 75-95; G. Iseminger (ed.), *Intention and Interpretation*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 1992.

in writing such texts[3]. As a philosophical position, intentionalism extends however beyond the scope of literature to include all works of art in general. Broadly understood, intentionalism is thus the doctrine according to which the actual intentions of the artists are central to the understanding of the artworks they create. For intentionalists, interpretation is a matter of explaining why artworks have the features, characters and meanings they possess, and since artworks possess these features as a result of the actions of artists, it is necessary to explain them with an eye to the intentions of the pertinent agents, the artists[4]. The general assumption underpinning intentionalism is that unlike functional objects such as mobile phones or umbrellas, understanding artworks requires reference to the goals of the makers, to the conception of their own making of the work. Artists' personalities, intellectual approaches, psychological stances, and creative attitudes are all thought to affect the disposition of the artworks they create. Indeed, if art is the intentional results of a person's creative expression in this broad sense, it must be explained by means of its creator's intentions. Awareness of these factors shapes our perspective when we wish to make critical interpretations. This is not the case for functional objects, which merely possess use value and are created to meet practical needs. Of course, some old works of art, like for instance altarpieces and votive paintings, were also initially functional artefacts as items of devotion, so it was only when their status changed and they started to be considered artworks in the modern sense that people began to focus attention on the artist's intentions in creating these items.

Relevantly, reference to the artist's intentions gains particular importance when it comes to figure out how to conserve works of art. In an interesting paper from 1996, Stephen W. Dykstra, for instance, studies the role that the artist's intentions may play the field of conservation[5]. According to Dykstra, applying intentionalism to conservation means in the first place thinking that the extent to which an object of the past like a painting or a statue is damaged is the extent to which the "intentional" activity of the artist is deleted or made unrecognisable. As a consequence, regardless of the fact that a work may become more or less aesthetically valuable as a result of conservation, if our goal is to preserve "what the artist

[3] E.D. Hirsch, with his *The aims of interpretation,* University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1967, is generally seen as the major defendant of the intentionalist stance in philosophy.

[4] See N. Carroll, *Art, Intention, and Conversation*, in G. Iseminger (ed.), *Intention and Interpretation*, cit., pp. 97-131.

[5] S.W. Dykstra, *The Artist's Intentions and the Intentional Fallacy in Fine Arts Conservation*, in "the Journal of the American Institute for Conservation", Vol. 35, no. 3, pp. 197-218.

made" what we should do in the first place is investigating what the artist really wanted her artwork to look like in the future. Reasons for one or another type of intervention are to be found thereby[6]. Interestingly, as Dykstra notes, this principle was formulated for the first time in the context of the National Gallery controversy. Discussing the cleaning procedures adopted by the Gallery in a 1950 paper, Neil McLaren and Anthony Werner, an art historian and a scientist, explicitly stated that it was "presumed to be beyond dispute that the aim of those entrusted with the care of paintings is to present them as nearly as possible in the state in which *the artist intended them to be seen*"[7]. McLaren and Werner's idea – as well as that of many others before and after them[8] – was in other words that the degree of respect for the author's intentions should constitute the standard for judging the success of a conservation treatment. How did the artist originally conceive her work? This question is fundamental if we want to understand correctly how to go about restoring it.

Perhaps the artist wanted her work to change with time, showing its age. For example, a painter might have anticipated that a patina develops on the canvas; a sculptor that her statue gets more complex with age due to cracks and dust, and an architect that her building be covered with mosses and lichens. Appreciation of the aging effect on a work of art might be so great for some artists that they can sometime try to reproduce the aged look on their brand-new works of art. Constable, for example, is renowned for having claimed that "Time will finish my painting" [9]. Relevantly, desire for works' degradation is an intention often expressed by many contemporary artists, who deliberately design their works to be altered

[6] Notice, however, that while standard intentionalism is concerned with how to interpret the content and meaning of a work, intentionalism in conservation is concerned with how to infer the constitutive work's features, which are the object of any intervention. But we can imagine a version of intentionalism that suggests that the artist's actual intentions determine the work's features, rather than only the correct interpretation of those features.

[7] N. McLaren and A. Werner, *Some Factual Observations about Varnishes and Glazes*, in "The Burlington Magazine" Vol. 92, No. 568, 1950, p. 189.

[8] In the field of art philosophy, this position has been recently defended by Raphael De Clerq. According to De Clerq, a work's artistic value is determined by the *artist's intention. "*The purpose of restoration" he writes, "is to return or leave intact those perceptual properties that the artist intended the work to have and which, at some point after completion, it actually had" (R. De Clerq, *The Metaphysics of Restoration*, in "The British Journal of Aesthetics", vol. 53, no. 3, 2013, p. 274. For example, the artist might have the intention that the work develops a certain degree of patina after completion. "What counts", De Clerq writes, "is the artist's intention and whether it is based on reasonable expectation" (Ivi, p. 265).

[9] Quoted in Y. Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, Oxford University Press, New York 2008, p. 190.

in time[10]. Some artists consciously disregard the quick mortality of the media they select, suggesting that permanence is irrelevant to their work. They operate with materials that gradually degrade or decay, natural stuff like wax, leaves, woods, cotton, paper, food etc. Consider for instance a work's like Ladislav Čarný's *Putrefactio est omnium rerum mater* (1996): the artist sprinkled paper copies of the famous "character heads" by Messerschmidt with decomposing bacteria, so as to portray, as it were, the work's inherent process of degradation. The "heads" deteriorated so readily that debris was reported to accumulate on an exhibition hall floor between regular sweepings. Clearly, in cases like this one, the artist intends degradation as a crucial part of the work's itself and of its meaning.

Other artists, however, might desire the original appearance of their work to be maintained in its brand-new look. In this regard, they might want that the freshness and brightness of their painting's colours, the sharpness of their sculpture's shapes or the cleanliness of their building's spaces be preserved in their pristine appearance to the enjoyment of future generations. In this sense, the early perishability of the materials used, prematurely subject to an unstoppable process of decay, might just be, both nowadays and in the past, an unintentional side effect of the artists' technical experimentation. The most famous example of this in the history of art is certainly Leonardo's *Last Supper*. Due to the experimental methods used by Leonardo and to a variety of other environmental factors, the fresco was immediately exposed to serious deterioration processes, which Leonardo himself noticed as soon as he completed the work. A more recent example is Mark Rothko's well-known series of works known as the "Harvard paintings", which underwent a dramatic process of degradation in just a few years due to the unstable pigments used by Rothko[11]. In both the Leonardo and the Rothko case, the work's decay appears deplorable, and it is up to conservators to try to control it. Interestingly, from the perspective of someone like McLaren and Werner, however, (let's call them "intentionalist conservators"), whether the deterioration of the work is envisioned by the artist or whether it is a purely accidental factor, the result does not change. In either case, the

[10] For a comprehensive account over the role of the artists' intentions in contemporary art, see: G. Warthon, *Artist intention and the conservation of contemporary art,* in E. Hamilton and K. Dodson (eds)*, Objects Specialty Group Postprints, Volume Twenty-Two 2015,* The American Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works, Washington, 2016, pp.1-12.; S. Irvin, *The Artist's Sanction in Contemporary Art*, in "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", Vol. 63, no. 4 2005, pp. 315-326.

[11] See K. Esielonis, "The History of Rothko's Harvard Murals", in M. Cohn (ed.) *Mark Rothko's Harvard Murals*, Cambridge, Ma., Harvard College, 1988.

purpose of conservation is the same: to present the artwork as the artist originally intended it to be seen and appreciated, by returning or leaving intact those perceptual properties the artist wanted the work to display.

This idea seems very plausible *prima facie*. Indeed, we are used to give great importance to the intentions of the artist in our artistic practice broadly construed. For example, when we cannot tell the exact nature of the notes in one musical passage or determine what the missing words of a literary text are[12], we don't settle the case simply by opting for whatever solution pleases us the most. Instead, we do all that we can to collect data in order to get to the most reasonable hypothesis about what the author might have wanted. More generally, when it comes to view, perform or interpret an artwork, most of the times we feel obligated to the creator's preferences and intentions. This respect for the original intentions of the artist gives substance to the popular intuition that artworks are of interest because they are the products of intentional human activity, a vehicle by which various meanings and intents – feelings, world-views, insights, ideology, etc. – are conveyed. We understand a great deal of artistic solutions in terms of choices and intents of the author rather than solely in terms of manipulations of artistic conventions. The way in which an author modulates the dynamics of a musical phrase, for example, is commonly explained in terms of what she is trying to do, for there are no fixed conventions that we can fall back on. And indeed, it seems hard to see artistic doings without reference to the intentional activity of authors.

Recourse to the artist's intentions, however, while apparently straightforward in principle, is in fact more complicated than it seems when it comes to moving from theory to practice. As natural as interpreting words and actions in terms of authorial intentions may seem, arguments of many sorts can be and have in fact been advanced to deny the relevance of authorial intentions to the interpretation of works of literature and art in general. In the philosophical debate, the critical position against the role of the artist's intentions in interpretation is commonly known as anti-intentionalism. Whereas in ordinary life we often interpret the meaning of an utterance or an action by looking at the agent's intentions, anti-intentionalists maintain that interpretation of works of art and literature either cannot or should not be treated in this way. The realm of art, according to anti-intentionalists, is sufficiently different from other domains of human intercourse to call for a

[12] As the reader might notice, these are cases in which the notation is not helping us in discerning the constitutive properties of the work.

different form of understanding, one in which the authorial intent is irrelevant. This argument was famously developed in a scholarly article dedicated to the issue of literary interpretation by literary critic William K. Wimsatt and philosopher Monroe C. Beardsley, appeared in *The Sewanee Review* in 1946[13]. In this seminal paper, Wimsatt and Beardsley questioned the value of appealing to authorial intentions in interpreting literary works, and claimed that the author's intentions are neither available nor desirable as standards for assessing these works. Mistaken explanations occur whenever critics or readers attribute scientific, critical, or historical interpretations to the mentality of the author or artist. To describe this phenomenon, Wimsatt and Beardsley coined the term "intentional fallacy", now a popular expression in philosophical circles. Wimsatt and Beardsley's treatment of the problem of intentions in art was able to frame the topic in a way that provoked debates and invited critiques. In the following years, an outstanding number of articles and essays were published drawing examples to support or contradict their argument to specific literary and artistic cases. Within a decade, the proliferation of commentators on this issue led to the establishment of one of the first and most intense debates to have emerged in the tradition of analytic aesthetics. What about literature in conservation? As Dykstra notices[14], there has been little if any crossover on this subject between art conservation professionals and philosophers of art; however, most of the concerns that have been advanced against intentionalism in the philosophical debate do apply to the conservation fields.[15] In the next section, we will consider these criticisms from the point of view of art conservation, and see in what way they can be addressed.

2. *Problems with Intentions in Conservation*

Most of the ambiguity and scepticism surrounding the topic of the artist's intentions can be attributed to the use of the word "intention" when applied to artists and their works. The first prob-

[13] W.K. Wimsatt, M. C. Beardsley, *The Intentional Fallacy*, in "The Sewanee Review", Vol. 54, no. 3, 1946 pp. 468-488. This seminal paper marked the starting point of the anti-intentionalist position. Wimsatt and Beardsely also argued for an "Affective Fallacy", which proposes that the subjective or emotional reactions to a work of art are irrelevant to the authentic nature of the work itself, since its objective structure itself should contain the meaning of the work. See: W.K. Wimsatt W.K & M.C. Beardsley, *The affective fallacy*, in "The Sewanee Review", vol. 57, no. 1, 1949, pp. 31-55.

[14] S.W. Dykstra, *The Artist's Intentions and the Intentional Fallacy in Fine Arts Conservation*, cit. p. 203.

[15] For discussion, see D. Carrier, *Art and Its Preservation*, cit. For more recent discussion see: D. A. Scott, *Art Restoration and Its Contextualization*, in "The Journal of Aesthetic Education", Vol. 51, No. 2, 2017, pp. 82-104.

lem is thus terminological clarity: what are we talking about when we talk about 'intentions'? Careful and extensive explanation is necessary to clarify exactly *what* meaning of the notion is under discussion. As Richard Kuhns noted in a famous paper entitled *Criticism and the Problem of intentions*[16], from 1960, there are at least eleven different definitions associated with the expression the "artist's intention". For example, the artist's intention may refer to biographical factors like the artist's desire to achieve fame and glory, the will to earn money or to defeat a rival. But the notion of intention may also be adopted to describe the creative act in itself: for example, the decisions that led an artist to depict a particular subject according to a certain style. Alternatively, appeal to intentions can be used as a way to describe the moral or ideological content of the work[17]. Interestingly, Kuhns also points out that reference to the artist's intent is often confused with the "effects" produced by the work. In fact, it sometime happens to read that a work communicates some tension, or that it requires a certain ending, or that it suggests one meaning. Such impulses, which an educated viewer can perceive in the work, are sometimes interpreted as the author's intention.

Whatever meaning we might want to give to the term, however, "intentions" are always, by definition, a product of someone's mind, of her or his purpose to fulfil a certain desire. But if intentions are mental acts, then the question arises as to how we may access them, since the inner workings of the artist's psyche will remain forever undisclosed to us. How can we be certain of what the artist intended us to achieve? One option is to take the physical object, in a comparison with other works by the same author, as our primary guide to the artist's intentions[18]. To this extent, the aims, impressions, insights, feelings of an author about his or her work can be apprenticed through observation and investigation of the work material in which these mental acts are, as it were, *embodied*. Only "embodied intentions" in this sense can be relevant for conservation, because they have direct influence on the way the work is presented to us. Indeed, embodied intentions are not "simple" intentions but intentions that have been put into action in a specific

[16] R. Kuhns, *Criticism and the Problem of Intention*, in "The Journal of Philosophy", 1960, vol. 57, no. 1, pp. 5-23.

[17] According to Dykstra, Kuhns' taxonomy of intentions can be applied to discussions in art conservation, with all the different meanings identified by Kuhns being present in the approaches of different conservation theorists, which explains the variety of opinions and methods at stake. See S.W. Dykstra, *The Artist's Intentions and the Intentional Fallacy in Fine Arts Conservation*, cit.

[18] Ivi, p. 198.

way, leading to the realization of the work as it actually is. These include for instance a painter's intent to achieve a particular shade of colour, to apply paint with wide or thin, fast or slow, accurate or inaccurate brushstrokes, to add a finishing layer of varnish or glaze at the end and so on, as well as her will to consider the work completed at a certain point. If the artist's achievement is carried out successfully, the material object itself – the *work* – tells us what the artist *intended* to do.

But what if the artist did not accomplish what he intended? As it sometime the case, the artist's intent and her work do not necessarily coincide. A number of obstacles can arise between an artist's determinacy to realize a certain work and the work's actual realization, including technical limitations of various sorts, problems with material availability, as well as a series of economic or personal circumstances. For example, the final aspect of a work can be at least partially determined by the artist's requirement to meet a deadline, the need to satisfy the purchaser's tastes etc. In most cases, it is the combination of intentions and contingency that makes the artwork what it is. Intentions which have never been acted upon, however, have no effect on the work's features; nor do intentions which have been acted on unsuccessfully. These unrealized intentions are insignificant from the point of view of conservation. Of course, we may have very good evidence, both from inside the work or outside, that the artist intended to depict a certain feature in her work. This knowledge will nevertheless be relevant to us only if the artist successfully executed this intention in the work. Indeed, our ability to infer what the artist meant to do does not make it the case that the work in fact has the feature she meant to give it, just as our ability to infer that a gymnast intended to stand on the balance beam does not make it the case that her exercise is successful if she falls[19]. The relevance of the artist's intent, again, is found only in the artwork, not in the inner workings of the artist's psyche. To attempt to find intentions elsewhere is to undertake the pursuit of psychological speculations that have nothing to do with the real object at hand – the work of art – which is the focus of our interest during conservation processes.

But how reliable can the material of an object be, as a source of information? Although scientific observation, study, experimentation and the consistent application of these technologies to con-

[19] S. Irvin in *The Artist's Sanction in Contemporary Art*, cit., develops a somewhat similar argument to claim that, in the conservation of contemporary art, only the intentions that have been concretely realized by an artist in her work (what she calls "sanctions") are significant.

servation allow us to gain knowledge on the physical procedures originally laid down by the artist, from the very first instants of the object's life, materials start to decay because of natural and environmental agents, which alter the attributes of the object directly shaped by the artist's hands. Even an artwork that has been carefully preserved from dirt, environmental conditions, mechanical stress and natural calamity is subject to inevitable chemical decomposition (what is sometime called "inherent vice"). This creates the problem, for as a result of this changing process, the material eventually loses fidelity in its allegiance to the artist's intentions. Regardless of the artist's clarity of purpose, all her "embodied" determinations are therefore subject to fade over time. Artistic achievements are not and cannot be fixed forever in the final physical result of artists' creative work. But if this is true, then alongside with the material in which they are embodied, our chances to access the artist's purposes, aims, goals, and intentions will also "deteriorate" or "decline". What is more, it is often very difficult to predict *how* various materials will deteriorate under a range of different circumstances. When the exact nature of those materials is uncertain, the difficulty increases, and if the materials are also combined somehow unusually, the difficulty is near to impossible. In fact, very often the artists themselves ignore the chemical or technical aspects of their work, the components of the colours they use, the aging processes of some materials[20].

This leads us to a further worry, for in what way can an artist be able to anticipate questions regarding how her works will age in the centuries to come? Even if some artists might have an adequate scientific knowledge in this sense and be concerned about the degradation of the materials they use, deterioration is often unpredictable. Of course, one may object that artists can at least expect that some progressive aging and damaging will occur to their works. But what about the harm caused by sudden catastrophic events? Many unexpected damages can threaten the survival of a work: bombing, flooding, earthquakes, vandalism, etc. whose damages cannot be anticipated by the artist. The same goes for the environment in which the work is going to be displayed in the future. For example, for a long time it was considered acceptable to remove altarpieces from the original church for which they were designed and move them to secular museums, where they could be beholden by observers deprived of any religious interest, and where they were surrounded

[20] S. Muñoz-Viñas discusses this case in *Qualche ragione per ignorare l'intenzione dell'artista*, in P. Martore (ed.), *Tra memoria e oblio. Percorsi nella conservazione dell'arte contemporanea,* Castelvecchi, Roma 2014.

by completely different kinds of works (paintings coming from other churches, battle scenes, landscapes, still-lives, portraits) as well as by fire extinguishers, thermohydrometers, emergency exits, etc. But how could a medieval artist anticipate that his altarpiece, commissioned by some noble client to decorate the family chapel, would end up in some public museum on the other side of the world? Nor could an artist predict the development of future conservation techniques, unknown at her time. Up until fifty years ago, few people could imagine the development of new digital technologies. We are now able to digitally scan artefacts and buildings and replicate them through 3D printing technology, so digitally-fabricated copies are increasingly starting to be adopted in the conservation field. How could we know how artists of the past would react to the opportunity of making digital replicas of their works – provided this is a meaningful question at all?

In a nutshell, artists are simply unaware of the fate of their work in the future, so that any expression of intent on their part is necessarily based on precarious assumptions and thus liable to be contradicted by reality. So why should they have a say in how we conserve their work? In fact, they might simply not care. Most artists, and justifiably so, are mainly concerned with how their work appears to contemporaries and do not worry about future viewers. A question like: "what would Titian like his work to look four centuries after his death?" only has conjectural answers. As David Carrier puts it:

> […] since the artworld practices of Titian's time differ from ours, the belief that Titian would or would not like to see his painted cloak darkened seems wildly over-optimistic. We can infer, from his responses to Hobbes, what Descartes would say to some materialists. Imagining his reply to the Philosophical Investigations is to engage in speculations which cannot be entirely guided by his texts; too broad a stretch of philosophical history intervenes between Descartes and Wittgenstein.[21]

Precisely because of its speculative nature, the author's intentions may serve as a justification for theorists, critics or conservators of different backgrounds and beliefs to defend their *own* approach, associating their *own* analyses and interpretations with the artist's intent and equating their *own* conclusions with that of the artist. This happened clearly during the National Gallery cleaning controversy[22], when both camps invoked fidelity to the artist's intentions in their arguments to impose their taste and preference on the aesthetic appearance of the works, so as to support opposite conclu-

[21] D. Carrier, *Art and its Preservation*, cit., p. 293.
[22] Ivi, pp. 291-292.

sions. So, for instance, Gombrich could quote Jakob Rosenberg to claim that "I have not the slightest doubt that Rembrandt himself would have preferred the effect of the uncleaned picture [...] And I doubt whether it was any different with Titian, with Rubens, with Velasquez - in short, with all the great pain Rembrandt *himself* would have preferred the effect of the uncleaned picture" [23], while art historian Denis Mahon argued that good restorers see "each picture as an individual case which usually provides a considerable amount of evidence of its own – to those who have the eyes and experience to read it – of what the artist's intentions may have been".[24] Therefore, although recourse to the intentionalist agenda is often invoked as an objective, impartial way to handle problems in conservation, the role that intentions play in conservation debates seems to be somewhat fictitious.

[23] E. Gombrich, *Controversial methods and methods of controversy*, cit. 90-93.

[24] D. Mahon, *Miscellanea for the Cleaning Controversy*, in "The Burlington Magazine", Vol. 104, no. 716, 1962, p. 468.

IV – *The Viewer's Rights*

1. *Killing the Author?*

There is, however, a further, stronger concern against intentionalism that we have to consider. Indeed, even if an artist let us know by letters, documents or other explicit statements of intents how she intends her work to appear in the future, while carefully exemplifying her intention in the material of the work, this doesn't necessarily imply that we should be compelled to accept her viewpoint when we have to restore her work. As it is often said, artists are not necessarily the best interpreters of their work: so why should they be the final authority on how it needs to be conserved? Why should they be more entitled than their current audience to decide how their artworks should appear in the present moment? Even provided that the artist might have some special insights in her own work just because it is her *own*, there is no need for us to think that these insights create an inescapable obligation when we make decisions on how to conserve the work. Authorship, in other words, may not necessarily be a proof of authority in the field of conservation. When speaking of ancient buildings, Ruskin famously stated that "we have no right whatever to touch them. They are not ours. They belong partly to those who built them, and partly to all the generations of mankind who are to follow us"[1]. However, ancient buildings, as well as artworks from the past in general, not only belong to our ancestors and descendants, but also to us to a similar extent, as we are both ancestors and descendants of other people, so why not giving priority to our desires and expectations when it comes to conserving them?

This idea may recall somehow the famous poststructuralist doctrine of "the death of the Author" heralded by Roland Barthes[2] and the related conception of the "birth of the reader". Though

[1] J. Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture,* cit., p. 165.

[2] R. Barthes, *The death of the author*, in *Image, music, text* (trans. S. Heath), Fontana, London 1977.

Barthes did not explicitly consider the issue of intention, let alone the problem of art conservation, he believed that, with a literary text, the interpreter's activity must be freed from the burden of respect for what "the author is confiding in us"[3]. A cult for the "Author", Barthes claims, characterizes traditional approaches to literary interpretation where the writer is considered as a "god"[4], who deliberately imbues his work with an ultimate meaning, which is the duty of the viewer to discover. These approaches, according to Barthes, are fundamentally misguided, because the author has in fact no special rights on the meaning of her work. For any work of art, there is not, nor could there be, any privileged interpretation: "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single "theological" meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash"[5]. The conclusion calls for the emergence of an autonomous reader, who creatively participates in generating the meaning of the work by embracing all the multiple interpretative trajectories that appreciation divorced from a concern with authorial intentions can allow[6].

Whilst explicitly designed for the case of literature, Barthes' ideas can be used as a tool to advocate for the viewers' rights across the interpretation of all arts, as well as – which is more important for our purposes here – to defend a certain notion of art conservation. Indeed, as Spanish conservation theorist Salvador Muñoz-Viñas notices[7], conservators themselves are somehow special types of viewers; *special* because they are forced to concretize their critical interpretation on the work itself, suggesting a certain reading to other viewers. In this sense, just as literary works are read and re-read, and each new reading succeeds as long as it reveals something new – and refrains from placing a claim on absolute objectivity – the same goes for visual artworks in conservation, which can be conceived of as palimpsests where texts are written in succession, each one hiding or modifying the previous ones. It is the conservator's job to judge which meaning should prevail, often at the expense of the others. By encouraging the viewer's autonomy to interpret the work as freely as possible, Barthes' "death-of-au-

[3] Ivi, p. 143.
[4] Ivi, p. 146.
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] This plea for a great deal of free play on the part of the reader has been aptly termed a "ludic model of interpretation" by Jerrold Levinson. See J. Levinson, *Intention and Interpretation: A Last Look,* in G. Iseminger, *Intention and Interpretation,* cit., pp. 221-256.
[7] S. Muñoz-Viñas, *Étude en rouge: trois manières de tuer l'auteur* (trans. J. Morizot), in "Nouvelle revue d'esthétique", 2018, Vol. 1 no. 21, pp. 85-97.

thor-*ism*" can thus be adopted in conservation to ensure additional freedom for the conservator-viewer, to challenge the thought that there is always only one single way to proceed or that there are stock, objective answers to the problem of conservation.

2. *The Communicative Turn*

The idea that there may be a plurality of intents, opinions, and interests at stake other than the author's when it comes to preserving a work of art lies indeed at the heart of what can be called the "contemporary approach to art conservation"[8]. Since the last two decades of the twentieth century, the field of art conservation has evolved from deontological constraints based on the artist's authority towards an attitude of negotiation between the various interests and concerns of different subjects involved with the preservation of an artwork[9]. This shift from a concern for the original artist's intentions to current audience's needs has been described by Muñoz-Viñas as a major "communicative turn" in contemporary conservation theory[10]. This is based on the wide recognition on the part of many scholars of an essential "symbolic mechanism" grounding artworks' value[11]. The central idea of this approach is that the value of artworks – the reason why we conserve them[12]– does not simply rely, as in traditional approaches, on the historical value they could have for experts, nor merely on their aesthetic appeal, but rather on the complex *symbolic values* associated with such works. This means that when it comes to conserve artworks of the past, we should look not so much at what these objects are as documents or aesthetic items, but rather at what they represent in terms of meaning and significance for people. Artworks are indeed neither primarily objects of devotion, like relics to be preserved

[8] See S. Muñoz-Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Restoration*, cit. Muñoz-Viñas affirms the "the boldest thesis" in his book is the idea that "a contemporary theory of conservation actually exists" since the 1980s and that, as a consequence, "one or more non-contemporary theories exist as well". (S. Muñoz-Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Restoration*, cit., pp. xi-xii.

[9] In conservation policies, appealing to "meaning" as a feature of art objects can be traced back to the "Burra Charter", adopted in 1979 by the Australian branch of the International Council on Monuments and Sites. However, it was not until the end of the century that the basic relevance of communication for artworks to be deemed subject of restoration was completely acknowledged in the debate.

[10] S. Muñoz-Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Restoration*, cit. p. 147.

[11] See, among the many, D.E. Cosgrove, *Should we take it all so seriously? Culture, conservation, and meaning in the contemporary world*, in W.E. Krumbein, P. Brimblecombe, D.E. Cosgrove, and S. Staniforth (eds.), *Durability and Change. The Science, Responsibility, and Cost of Sustaining Cultural Heritage,* Wiley and Sons, New York 1994, pp. 259–266.; C. Caple, *Conservation Skills. Judgement, Method and Decision Making*, London, Routledge, 2000; M. Clavir, *Preserving What is Valued. Museums, Conservation, and First Nations*, cit.

[12] See Section 2 "Value".

untouched for the benefits of devotees, nor are they timeless aesthetic surfaces to be restored for the pleasure of the eye. Rather, to borrow a formulation Sagoff used in a different context, they are in the first-place *symbols* of a web of collective meanings for a certain society:

> When objects are suitably rare, and no more can be produced, it is possible to collect them for their meaning or for their significance as symbols […] It should be plain than an important boundary, a social boundary, exists between objects we view as symbols and as parts of our heritage, to be preserved from the past and transferred to the future, and articles we merely use, and which therefore, wear out or have a natural life[13].

But in what ways are artworks to be conceived of as symbols? On this account, artworks are symbols in the sense that they all *communicate* something, that they express a collectively recognized message that we find individually, culturally or socially meaningful[14]. This message constitutes the fundamental reason why we conserve and preserve them: we do not conserve them (merely) because of how they look, or for the documentary value they may have, but because they convey meanings that we consider relevant to our society. Of course, many objects convey messages, and it could even be argued that every object is symbolic in some sense, but, so the argument goes, it would be a mistake to assume that all objects are *equally* symbolic. Generally speaking, works of arts tend to be powerful vehicles of symbols. And the more powerful an artwork is as a symbol, the more strongly its conservation will be expected by the interested population.

The notion of "symbol", in this approach, must be taken in the broader possible sense as any device through which we can perceive, understand and construct, in Goodman's sense, "the worlds of our experience"[15]. By using symbols, we discover (in fact, we make up) the worlds we live in, and the interest we have in symbols – artworks amongst them – is distinctively related to the way we self-represent our identity as part of a culture. Art is also, in this sense, as a strong purveyor of cultural and social identity.

Take Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, arguably the most well-known painting in the whole world. It conveys a series of ideas, of which

[13] M. Sagoff, *The Aesthetic and the Economic Value of Artworks*, in "The British Journal of Aesthetics" 21 (4), 1981 pp. pp. 325-326.

[14] For versions of this idea, see also E. Pye, *Caring for the Past. Issues in Conservation for Archaeology and Museums*, James and James, London 2001; S. Muñoz-Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Restoration,* cit.

[15] See, for example, N. Goodman, *Ways of World Making*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis IN 1978.

the most immediate is perhaps the idea of Leonardo himself, which is a very multi-faceted concept revolving around the notion of individual genius and human creativity. This meaning is based on a non-arbitrary, causal relationship: the painting was created by Leonardo, and he is the major cause of its existence. However, the *Mona Lisa* also brings other notions with it, many of which are far more abstract. It conveys for instance the notion of painting as a major art, of the Renaissance, of Italy, and embodies in itself romantic ideals of beauty, mystery, grace and perhaps the notion of art *tout-court*.

Notice that, from the viewpoint of contemporary conservation theory, this "web of symbolic meaning" is not wholly inherent to the object itself, but is rather generated collectively. It is the viewers who assign meanings to artworks, whether it is a few people or a much larger group (as is the case of the Mona Lisa). If people no longer agreed that the work has any meaning for them, the work simply loses its status. Collective recognition is thus what gives an artwork its value and what makes it worth of conservation. Of course, part of Mona Lisa's symbolic significance depends on its possessing unique "historical" and "aesthetic" value, but its relevance nowadays no longer resides in its documentary or purely formal features, but in its being a symbol for art lovers around the world. To this extent, the great communicative significance of many iconic works of art is based upon the fact that they are meaningful to an extremely large number of subjects, and thanks to a number of features including their aesthetic aspect, their frequent appearance in the media, the circumstances related to their creation, their historical function and so on. Artworks' symbolic value indeed includes yet cannot be reduced to all the other values we have previously considered. Of course, not all subjects contribute in the same degree to create this value, for influence and power, as institutional theorists argue, play a decisive role when it comes to assigning value to an object[16]; even in this case, according to contemporary conservation theorists, the result needs nonetheless to lead to a form of collective agreement[17].

As Muñoz-Viñas notices, similar considerations also apply to the notion of "damage", which is obviously crucial to conservation and a prerequisite for it to exist. We decide that some changes of an object are to be regarded as a "damage" or a "deterioration" on the basis of certain idea of the work we prefer. Damage is thus not a

[16] Cf. for instance G. Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1974.

[17] S. Muñoz-Viñas, *Contemporary Theory of Restoration, cit.* p. 160.

quantifiable feature of an object, an objectively determinable property, but the result of an interpretative judgement[18]. To the same extent, it is social context and collective discourse which decide if the alterations that have afflicted artworks over time should be interpreted as either disturbing or rather crucial factors for the identity of the work. For example, the graffiti scratched by the imperial army of Charles V into the frescos' plaster of Villa Farnesina in Rome during the 1527 sack of the city are currently regarded as a crucial factor, as the damage is retained as symbolically significant; not only are they not restored, but are rather preserved behind Plexiglas shields as a precious record. On the other hand, we consider the scarring of the *Barcaccia Fountain*, in Piazza di Spagna, Rome – which were made in 2015 by Dutch football hooligans after a match – as disturbing factor that needs to be removed as accurately as possible: it has no value for the work's meaning. Of course, future generations may have different opinions on the matter. To this extent, up to a century ago the fact that altarpieces were often removed from the site they were created for, ancient friezes were detached from the temples in which they were originally placed and national treasure were transferred to museums across the world, were not perceived as dangerous decisions, precisely because of a social discourse that interpreted these facts as legitimate. This, according to Muñoz-Viñas, only confirms the intuition that whether or not something is harmful to the identity of a work depends on collective agreement.

Again, what is important on this account is that we conserve art objects not because of their intrinsic qualities, but because of the intangible, symbolic effects that their alteration, both natural and intentional, might have upon the subjects that make up one society. The widespread protection of heritage sites is based upon and is a proof of the meanings those sites have within society: conservation policies have been developed precisely to prevent the meanings to be drastically altered or lost[19]. This is crucial for this approach to conservation, for it follows from this assumption that what conservators must do in the first place is to ensure that the communicative value of works – their ability to convey social, cultural, historical meanings – is safeguarded and enhanced, and not just the material they are composed of, if they want to preserve the work itself.

[18] "Damage heavily depends on *subjective* value judgements" writes S. Muñoz-Viñas (*Contemporary Theory of Restoration,* cit., p. 104). Consider for instance the debate engendered by the Sistine Chapel restoration in the 90s. Much of the controversy revolved around whether or not the darkened aspect of Michelangelo's frescos should be considered as 'damage' or as a deliberate 'patina-effect'.

[19] Ivi, p. 160.

Conservation treatment can be seen in this sense as a "meaning-enhancement" intervention, focused more on the subjects that interpret the meanings than on the objects themselves: "It is the subjects who are served through conservation: the realization of this simple idea is one of the underlying principles behind […] contemporary theory of conservation"[20]. Indeed, artworks are conserved, maintained and cared for because they are important to us; they have no rights per se, "subjects do"[21]. Clearly, some people will have a greater degree of involvement with the work and will therefore be more affected by the work conservation than those for whom the work has little significance. In the literature, these subjects – people who have an interest and attribute value to a work – are generally called "stakeholders". It is thus for the various *stakeholders* that conservation is performed in the first place, and their interests (their needs, their preferences and their priorities) should be considered among the central factors when it comes to decision-making[22].

3. *Challenges to Authenticity*

Recognition of these conceptual principles in contemporary theories of conservation has significant effects on the way in which conservation measures are designed and implemented. For example, conservators may decide that some artworks shall not be restored to a state closer to the one intended by the artist, despite knowledge of what the appearance of the work would have originally been. A perfect example of this, reported in a recent paper by David Scott[23], amounts to the restoration of Raphael's painting *Portrait of Young Woman with Unicorn* (1505 or 1506), located in the Galleria Borghese in Rome. In the 18th century inventory of the Gallery, the subject of the painting was identified as a Saint Catherine of Alexandria by Pietro Perugino. A restoration of the work made in the years 1934-36, however, established attribution to Raphael, while the removal of heavy repainting in the course of the intervention revealed a unicorn behind Saint Catherine's wheel. A few decades later, however, radiographies showed that in place of the unicorn (or "liocorno", in Italian), symbol of virginal purity, the woman initially held a small dog in her arms, symbol of conjugal fidelity. Eventually, though, not even this dog was by the hand of Raphael, but by a second unknown artist! Despite this

[20] Ivi, p. 158.
[21] *Ibid.*
[22] Ivi, p. 170.
[23] D.A. Scott, *Art Restoration and Its Contextualization*, cit., pp. 94-95.

discovery, Scott comments, "contemporary restorers have chosen to go against the intentions of the original artist: "because of the popularity and exoticism associated with small unicorns: restoration of this painting has, therefore, valorised a specific instantiation, much damaged with parts overpainted and parts obscured"[24]. In other words, they have prioritized the specific meaning the painting had acquired over time, although it contradicted the original appearance of "what Raphael made". As a result of this decision, visitors to the Galleria Borghese can still see today the little unicorn in the lady's arms. What is particularly striking in this example is that it exemplifies the idea, typical of contemporary conservation theory, that the on-going life of the artwork and its various changes in time may be considered more crucial to the identity of the work than the meanings themselves intended by the artist. Accordingly, conservators are somehow justified to change the perceptual properties of the work not to bring it to a supposedly "authentic" state, but to one that present-day observers may find the most convenient.

From a strictly philosophical perspective, the most relevant consequence of this is that the notion of "being true" to the artist's original work – something which can be defined using the German term *Werktreue*[25] – is substituted with a notion of fidelity "to the audience" – what could be called "*Publikumstreue*". While traditional twentieth-century approaches regarded conservation as an operation driven by an aim to reveal and preserve an object's *authenticity* or *original nature*, the profession is now regarded as "*a social process* designed to understand cultural heritage, know its history and meaning, ensure its material safeguard and, as required, its presentation, restoration and enhancement."[26] Indeed, recent decades have seen the *Werktreue* ideal increasingly probed by a multitude of different standpoints. Although the majority of Western conservation policies, beginning with the Venice Charter (1964), are still based on respect for the objects' authenticity understood "in terms of the very material present at the object's creation and the unchanged microscopic and macroscopic structure

[24] Ivi, p. 95.

[25] The romantic notion of *Werktreue* is generally used in the musical fields to talk about the ideal of an authentic performance: a performance that respects what one thinks the original intents of the composer are (see: L. Goehr, "Being True to the Work", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 47, no.1, 1989, pp. 55-67).

[26] K. Weiler, N. Gutschow, *Introduction*, in K. Weiler, N. Gutschow (eds.), *Authenticity in Architectural. Heritage Conservation. Discourses, Opinions, Experiences in Europe, South and East Asia*, Springer, Switzerland 2017, p. xxi.

of that material"[27], attempts have been made to overcome what are perceived as the shortcomings of nineteenth and early twentieth-century Europe. In this regard, many authors have suggested that it is time to move the focus of conservation away from the original interest in the material condition of an object to more social, spiritual and non-materialistic concerns. At the same time, transcultural considerations on how we should deal with art objects from different proveniences and backgrounds have started to be included in the codes of practice. The Nara Document on Authenticity (1994) was explicitly drafted to broaden the definition of authenticity in conservation and free it from the hegemony of Western ideology, in order to make it more sensitive to cultural differences and "bring greater respect for cultural and heritage diversity to conservation practice."[28] For example, we have to consider that many Asian countries use different values scales and cultural frameworks and, consequently, may also endorse an interpretation of authenticity that is not reconcilable with ours. "The Chinese", claims the famous historian David Lowenthal "endorse tradition in language and ideas, but discard material remains or let them decay. Revering ancestral memory, the Chinese disdain the past's purely physical traces; old works must perish for new ones to take their place"[29]. This explains why, from conservation's point of view, many sanctuaries in the Far East are cyclically rebuilt, reconstructed, replicated, and relocated: in the context of local religiosity it is the *aspect* of the temple not its material configuration that hosts the divine force[30].

This shift from respect for the authentic material object to non-material, cultural, social and religious considerations is so strong nowadays that it creates sometime weird situations in which some monuments are considered "authentic" as a result of their

[27] J. Ashley-Smith, *The Basis of Conservation Ethics*, in A. Richmond, A. Bracker (eds.), *Conservation: Principles, Dilemmas and Uncomfortable Truths*, New York: Routledge, p. 20.

[28] The Nara Document, Article 10. Available at: https://www.icomos.org/charters/nara-e.pdf

[29] D. Lowenthal, 'Criteria of Authenticity', in K. Einar Larsen, N. Marstein(eds.) *Conference on Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention. Preparatory Workshop*, Bergen, Norway, 31 January- 2 February 1994, Tapir Publishers, Trondeheim 1994, p. 63.

[30] The most famous example is the sanctuary of Ise, in Japan, whose two main shrines, *Naikū and Gekū*, mostly wooden, are completely rebuilt every twenty years on an adjoining site, in a long-standing renewal process called the *Sengu.* Referring to the Ise case, the Korean-born philosopher Byung-Chul Han points out "a total inversion of the relationship between original and copy […] The copy is more original than the original, because the older a building is, the more it distances itself from the original state" B.C. Han, *Shanzai. Deconstruction in Chinese* (trans. P. Hurd), MIT Press, Cambridge 2017, p. 64.

reconstruction[31]. One paradigmatic example of this is the historic Old Town of Warsaw in Poland, which was completely rebuilt after its total destruction in World War II to the way it looked in the 17th century, and thus included into the World Heritage list[32]. This testifies to the fact that the ideal of "authenticity", which was "constantly used as the mantra"[33] or the "buzzword"[34] in twentieth-century art conservation, has lost today its strongly objective character and appears, in many cases, reduced to a fiction – the result of arbitrary decisions and consideration.

[31] M. Petzet, *In the full richness of their authenticity – The Test of Authenticity and the New Cult of Monuments,* in K. Einar Larsen (ed.), *Nara Conference on Authenticity*, Unesco ICOMOS 1994, p. 91.

[32] It is worth noting that the inclusion of Warsaw on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1980 was due to its universal value in the "restoration" of national identity of the Polish people. See J. Jokilehto, *A History of Architectural Conservation*, Routledge, London-New York 2017, pp. 255-256.

[33] D. Lowenthal, S. Jenkins, *Prizing the past for the present and the future*, in "British Academy Review", Vol. 18, p. 36),

[34] M. Crichton, *Timeline*, Knopf, New York 1999, p. 436.

V – *Interpretation*

1. *Relativism?*

Although there is no principled reason to oppose it, the contemporary re-definition of conservation's purposes and agendas legitimately allows for an entire panorama of new concerns to open. If conservation no longer aims to bring artworks closer to "the state in which the artist intended them to be seen"[1], but rather tries to adapt them to present-day expectations and needs – if it gives up with any concept of the authentic, the original, the true – then what principles should constrain the activity?

The thought that conservation should be ultimately conceived as a meaning-enhancement intervention does not help us much in this sense[2]. Indeed, even if we grant that conservation work is performed for those people for whom an artwork is symbolically meaningful, the same work can have different meanings for different stakeholders, and these meanings are neither fixed, nor are they universal. Obviously enough, tastes, values and ideas evolve over time: to the same extent, the meanings of artworks evolve too. This argument can be also formulated by using Goodman's formal theory of symbols. According to Goodman, something is a symbol, and is a symbol of a given kind, only within a *symbol system* of some kind – a system governed by certain distinctive rules of reference. The capacity of a symbol to mean something, in other words, is relative to the system in which it is inserted: "Nothing is intrinsically a representation; status as representation is relative to symbol system"[3]. If works of art are symbols, then they can have sense and meaning

[1] N. McLaren, A. Werner, *Some Factual Observations about Varnishes and Glazes*, in "The Burlington Magazine", Vol. 92, No. 568, 1950, p. 189.

[2] For fierce criticism against the so-called contemporary conservation theory, see: G. Carbonara, *È proprio necessaria una "nuova teoria" del restauro? Considerazioni sul volume di Salvador Muñoz Viñas. Is a new conservation theory really necessary? Some observations on Salvador Muñoz Viñas' book*, in "Opus. Storia, architettura, restuaro, disegno", no. 2, 2018, pp. 163-180.

[3] N. Goodman, *Languages of Art*., cit. p. 226.

– they can *represent* something, in Goodman's terms – only within a certain culture, which dictates the rules of reference and meaning for the work as that particular symbol. However, when these cultural rules change or when we shift from one system to another one, the value of the symbols changes too. So how can we rely on the symbolic meaning of an object to decide what is acceptable or even permissible to do in a conservation treatment?

A related problem with using meanings as a leading principle in conservation is that it is also impossible to know precisely the exact number of people for whom an artwork is symbolically significant, measure how much significant the work is for these people or the extent to which they would be affected by any given alteration on such work. For example, for how many people is Notre-Dame Cathedral actually relevant? How meaningful is it as a symbol for Parisians compared to the people of Barcelona, Rome or New York? Are all Parisians affected by the church's recent fire to the same extent? Or is the Christian population more involved than the Muslim one? Clearly, there are no obvious answers to these questions. As we know, meanings exist because subjects interpret them in some ways: as such, they are not based upon objective criteria, nor are they objectively measurable.

Based on these considerations, one might be persuaded to renounce to any objectivist temptation and conclude that there simply is *no* valid way to approach art conservation and that, as a result, every intervention is equally allowed. This position, however, which can be described as a form of *radical relativism* in conservation[4], is not only problematic for strictly philosophical or theoretical reasons, but because it threatens the very existence of the discipline in itself. If no decision to deploy specific technical skills to conserve an object is intrinsically valuable, desirable or preferable to another, why considering the natural alteration of a work of art problematic at all? Why not simply altering it in whatever state we see fit? We could, for example, replace the lacking parts of the Venus of Milo with two white, shiny marble arms, or restore the Parthenon frieze with their original colours, or even – why not? – decorate the Mona Lisa with a moustache. At the end of the day, if there are no universal or common reasons to do so, why should we be concerned with conserving works of art altogether?

[4] This view has been defended for instance by authors such as D.E. Cosgrove, D.E., *Should we take it all so seriously? Culture, conservation,and meaning in the contemporary world*. In W.E. Krumbein, P. Brimblecombe, D.E. Cosgrove, and S. Staniforth (eds.) *Durability and Change. The Science, Responsibility, and Cost of Sustaining Cultural Heritage*, cit. or B. Zevi, *Architettura e storiografia. Le matrici antiche del linguaggio moderno*, Einaudi, Turin 1994.

The significance of conservation, both as a technical profession and as a scientific discipline, lies indeed on the idea that certain kinds of interventions on a work of art, motivated by a certain understanding of the work based in turn on some kinds of technical, historical, cultural and artistic considerations, are preferable to others. If no preferable interventions exist, then the discipline itself becomes somehow superfluous[5]. We must therefore attempt to attain a form of generality in the judgments that motivate our actions in conservation. But if neither resorting to metaphysical classification nor referring to the original author's intentions help us in this respect – since, as we have seen, they both lead to an impasse – how can we determine what would be preferable to do?

2. *A Critical Act of Intepretation*

A tentative solution to retrieve some form of generality in the subjectivity of judgments that characterizes art conservation might be to go back to Brandi's aforementioned notion of conservation as a "critical act". This notion originates directly from Brandi's definition of conservation as "the methodological moment of the recognition of the work of art"[6]. Adopting Husserl's phenomenological terminology – which he probably acquired through mediation of Sartre's *L'imaginaire* [7]– Brandi writes, at the very outset of the *Theory*:

> the special product of human activity called a work of art is such because of a particular and conscious recognition. […] The human product that deserves this recognition is there, before our eyes, but only as long as the conscious appreciation of it as a work of art does not definitely exclude it from the community of other products can it be generically classified as a product of human activity[8].

The basic idea here is that restoration depends for its existence

[5] As Brandi claims, if "each restoration is only good for the period which defends it and bad for the subsequent period in which things may be seen differently", then the result is the "*theoretical impossibility* of restoration" at least *qua* systematic discipline. See C. Brandi, *Il fondamento teorico del restauro*, in "Bollettino dell'Istituto Centrale del Restauro", Vol. 1, 1950, p.8, my trans.

[6] C. Brandi, *Theory of Restoration*, cit. p. 50.

[7] It is a matter of debate among scholars whether Brandi can correctly be considered an idealist. Given the relevance he assigns to the material of the work in the *Theory* as the only possible object of restoration, Brandi cannot be considered an idealist – at least, not an idealist *tout court*. Yet, when it comes to artistic creation, he adopts the idealistic standpoint that the material has a secondary function with respect to the importance of the *image* that is generated. For discussion see: P. D'Angelo, *Cesare Brandi. Critica d'arte e filosofia,* Quodlibet, Macerata 2006; M. Carboni, *Cesare Brandi. Teoria e esperienza dell'arte,* Jaca Book, Milano 2004; P. Philippot, *La réstauration de la perspective des sciences humaines*. in C. Périer-D'Iterien (ed.), *Pénentrer l'art, Restaurer l'oeuvre*: *une vision Humaniste. Hommage en forme de florilège*, Kotrijk, Groeninghen 1989, pp. 491-500.

8 C. Brandi, *Theory of Restoration*, cit., p. 46.

on an act of recognition: something must be individuated as art in the first place in order for its restoration to take place. But how does a work of art become a *work of art*? A work of art is what it is, according to Brandi, because it has been "recognized" as such by someone. Although Brandi is not explicit about the modalities of this recognition, he describes this as an "acknowledgement" that takes place in the conscience of single individuals. Artworks need a special form of regard to exist as art: "Do not think that one must begin with an ideal in mind, for […] what is essential for the work of art is its recognition as a work of art."[9] To put it bluntly, art is to be found, for Brandi, somehow in the eye of the beholder. Those familiar with contemporary philosophy of art might be skeptical about the immediacy of this recognition. Many contemporary works of art, it can be argued, are not so easily distinguishable from everyday objects. If one considers the case of ready-made and conceptual art in general the difference between artworks and "mere real things"[10] becomes even fuzzier. What is interesting, however, is that Brandi's ideas in fact *confirm* this intuition. The objects we call artworks have no intrinsic value by themselves; again, it is the recipient's gaze that transforms these objects into something valuable – into *art*. A person may carve a piece of marble with the intention that it be art; if no one recognizes it as such, it is simply not art. Conversely, a person may paint graffiti on a wall for some reason; if someone else recognizes them as a form of art, then they *are* art. The gaze of the beholders is what matters the most: the "particular individual" who recognizes an object as a work of art takes priority. Restoration, in turn, appears to Brandi as the logical by-product of this process – a technique devised to allow that a damaged work of art continues to function effectively as such.

Interestingly, like Barthes and most contemporary conservation theories, Brandi's ideas in the *Theory* leads us toward the conclusion that the author's intentions need to be, so to speak, overshadowed in conservation. Affirming the fundamentally individual character of every work of art, Brandi's approach emphasizes the conservator's critical freedom to get rid of the constraints laid out by the artist's intentions and thereby avoids the failures of traditional intentionalist approaches[11]. This freedom, however, is not dictat-

[9] Ivi, p. 47.

[10] See A.C. Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*, Harvard University Press, Harvard 1981.

[11] As Chiara Occelli puts it in a recent essay: "This means that neither the artist's will nor the vicissitudes which might have modified or partialized the work are under discussion here. What counts is the way in which recognition comes about, or how the work is received, and for Brandi this reception is unitary." (Occelli C., *The tradition of*

ed by a substantial indifference to the role of the author and her alleged creative "intentions", but originates from a deeper ideal of *Werktreue,* respect for the unique creative act of the artist. This is why, *unlike* Barthes and contemporary restoration theorists, Brandi does not draw from the anti-intentionalist premise the "relativist" conclusion that all interventions in conservation are possible and equally justified.

The restorer is, for Brandi, somewhat in-between the current audience and the original artist. She cannot replace the artist as if she were, as Paolo D'Angelo puts it, an "artifex additus artifici"[12] – an artist who adds her own work to the original work – for this, as we know, leads to "the most serious heresy" of stylistic restoration – but she is not even a proper part of the audience. Rather, the restorer is in the same position as an art critic, and is therefore expected to operate like an art critic in her activity. "Art criticism", Brandi states in one of his philosophical dialogues, "embraces not only the attribution and promotion of a certain artwork, but also the procedures enacted to safeguard and preserve it, in order to transmit it to the future society. Restoration is thus a form of criticism."[13]

But what is an art critic? An art critic is, for Brandi, a connoisseur who works in the service of the artist, someone whose job is to understand, by means of her critical or aesthetic expertise, how the relevant artistic object she is confronted with in each single case functions as an artwork, what makes it especially valuable, peculiar and so on[14]. *Qua* art critics, conservators are supposed to apply their own aesthetic understanding to the work itself, so as to decide how to best preserve its peculiar artistic character. Of course, fundamental differences between the two disciplines can be noticed. Whereas "simple" critics can revise their analyses and evaluations at any moment, the articulations of which remain entirely discursive, conservators, on the contrary, have to carry out their decisions *on the object* itself. Out of this particular situation comes their particular responsibility, for the conservators' evaluations are to be "actualized" in a way that is not always reversible. In this sense, conservation is, for Brandi, a form of "criticism in action."[15]

Brandi (trans. A.M. Macintosh) in "Conversaciones", Vol. 5, no.7, 2019, p. 313). Cf. also S. Muñoz-Viñas, *Étude en rouge: trois manières de tuer l'auteur,* cit., pp. 92-93.

[12] P. D'Angelo, *Il restauro dell'arte contemporanea e la teoria del restauro di Cesare Brandi,* in V. Cuomo (ed.) *Arti e tecniche del Novecento*, Kajak edizioni, 2017, pp. 125-140.

[13] C. Brandi, *Carmine o della pittura,* Einaudi, Torino: 1962, p. 164, my transl. from Italian.

[14] On Brandi's conception of criticism, see P. D'Angelo, *Cesare Brandi. Critica d'arte e filosofia*, cit.

[15] Promotional quotation on the back cover of C. Brandi, *Theory of Restoration*, cit.

Interestingly, like the discipline of art criticism, conservation opens up to a bunch of hermeneutic problems. Deciding about an artwork's fundamental properties – those features which make a work the specific work it is – is at least partially a question of interpretation. This does not imply that every intervention conservators might implement is a priori allowed or justified, as if everything that happened to an object in its lifespan could be regarded as equally significant. Rather, it means that critical judgment is essential in determining the nature of the intervention, because it defines in advance the object to be treated by *interpreting*, in each single case, which considerations should better guide our actions. By acts of critical interpretations, we should refer here to the stipulated definition of the object that constitutes the departure for all conservation treatments, from the moment we ask the question of *what* it is advisable to restore.[16] All actions that are taken and performed in each conservation treatment depend on this fundamental definition. Whenever conservators decide to remove modern additions from an ancient marble statue to bring it into a state supposedly closer to the one it had in at some moment, they are deciding that its status as an antique is greater than its role as purveyor of history. Whenever they choose to clean a painting to make its colours look fresher, they are deciding that the painting should function more as an aesthetic item than as a material document. Whenever they opt to artificially light a Gothic cathedral, they are deciding that its meaning as an architectural building should subjugate its being a material proof of how churches were experienced by medieval churchgoers. All these decisions are based on certain considerations that are regarded as a priority by those in charge of the artwork preservation; *none* of them is objectively better, but *some* of them are surely preferable to others. Choosing one or the other, however, always follows an act of critical interpretation. But what principles should guide the conservators' critical interpretation in the context of a conservation treatment?

First, they must attend directly to the details of the particular artwork under care, in order to determine with exactitude "the substance of the object to be safeguarded", as Paul Philippot puts

[16] According to Philippot, the problem can be summarized in the following question: What is to be considered the whole of the object, to which all operations must be referred? All monuments of the past, be it architecture, sculpture, painting or any combination of these forms, have indeed come to us through time and history. This history, Philippot argues, must be taken into consideration when establishing what is the *whole* to be safeguarded. See P. Philippot *Historic Preservation: Philosophy Criteria, Guidelines*, in *Preservation and Conservation: Principles and Practices*, National Trust for Historic Preservation/ Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, DC 1982, pp. 367-382.

it[17] in order to make a decision on how to intervene. This task can benefit greatly from the "the help of the widest range of scientific techniques"[18], for although science plays a subordinate role with regard to critical and aesthetic considerations, its contribution to conservation practices is, according to Brandi, nevertheless fundamental. For example, scientific methods and techniques can help conservators in the attempt to make all additions and integrations to a work immediately detectable[19]. Indeed, Brandi's idea is that, as a form of critical interpretation, restoration is only justifiable as long as it aims at making it easier to see the potential formal unity of the work; but operations should stop "where hypothesis begins". Integrations must therefore be visible, for any retouching pushed until it is almost invisible or illusionist would constitute a fake. In this way, the conservator is supposed to restore the object's aesthetic integrity while avoiding the creation of a historical forgery. 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 part of the process by which the work of art is transmitted to the future"[20]

Of course, since each artwork is different and "works" somehow differently, there will always be room for a plurality of different solutions, reflecting the multitude of considerations and evaluations that are at stake in every single case. What makes an intervention appropriate for a certain artwork depends indeed on the particular nature that is attributed to this work in a particular context, and may not be appropriate in another situation. This, however, does not simply reduce conservation to a matter of personal tastes or subjective preferences. As art historian Umberto Baldini puts it, the fact that conservation is based on acts of critical interpretation leading to a plurality of different solutions means rather that in each case: "a rule has to be drawn from the reality of the individual object under consideration"[21]. In other words, saying that a *plurality* of different solutions is possible is not the same as saying that *every* solution is plausible and legitimate. To the same extent, although interpretations cannot perhaps be ultimately true or false[22], they

[17] Ivi, pp. 367-382.

[18] See C. Brandi, *Theory of Restoration*, cit., p. 64.

[19] As C. Occelli claims, Brandi's idea that "only the material of a work of art is restored" – one of the main axioms of his *Theory* (C. Brandi, *Theory of Restoration*, cit., p. 49), attributes a crucial role for chemical and physical sciences in the context of conservation and restoration. See C. Occelli, *The tradition of Brandi*, cit., p.316.

[20] Ivi, p.

[21] U. Baldini, *Teoria del restauro e unità di metodologia*, Nardini, Firenze 1978.

[22] See J. Margolis, *Robust Relativism*, in "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism",

can surely be more or less plausible, justified, accurate, preferable with regard to the object at hand. This position can remind us of what Joseph Margolis, in a philosophical context, has called "robust relativism"[23]. According to Margolis, considerations of plausibility are central to the practice of art criticism, where we cannot actually determine objective truth or falseness: "critical interpretations […] are logically weak in principle. It is this weakness, probably, that gives the appearance of lack of rigor to critical pronouncements."[24] The reason for this "weakness", in Margolis' terms, is that works of art seem to have an indeterminate kind of nature, one oscillating – as we have seen before – between different ontological alternatives[25]. This is why interpretive remarks about artworks do not need to be either true or false: "the important point is that interpretive judgments applied where, in principle, we cannot say with certainty what is or is not 'in' a given work cannot be confirmed in the strong sense in which, normally, causal claims can be"[26]. In these situations, a "tolerance of alternative and seemingly contrary hypotheses" is possible, a tolerance that, however, "does not entail that any artwork can convincingly support plural, nonconverging interpretations"[27]. His conclusion is that although restricted to the realm of mere reasonableness or plausibility, the rationality of critical interpretations in art can nevertheless be preserved without determinateness with respect to truth and falsity. This idea is crucial for conservation. Although we must renounce to total objectivity in the judgments that drive the discipline, this does not force us to relativism. A form of generality in interpretation exists, granting methodological rigor in the procedures associated with the practice.

Vol. 35, no. 1 1976, pp. 37-46 and *Robust Relativism*, in G. Iseminger (ed.), *Intention and Interpretation*, cit., pp. 41-51.

[23] J. Margolis, *Robust Relativism*, in G. Iseminger (ed.), *Intention and Interpretation*, cit., p. 44.

[24] Ivi, p. 45

[25] See Section 3 "Ontology".

[26] J. Margolis, *Robust Relativism*, in G. Iseminger (ed.), *Intention and Interpretation*, cit., p.43

[27] Ivi, p. 45.

Conclusions

This essay set out to review the practices of art conservation and restoration by considering a number of essential questions connected to the activity: Why do we conserve artworks? What values do we want to valorise? How does our notion of conservation impinge on the way we conceive of the artwork's identity? How much do we owe to the original artist's intentions when it comes to restore a work of art? And how much to current viewers? Finally, how should we avoid relativism when conservation and restoration are involved?

Cultural shifts in how conservation has been perceived in the recent past have changed the way in which the discipline is seen nowadays. Recourse to the original artist's intentions is starting to appear less and less appropriate for justifying decisions in conservation. This has consequences for how art – contemporary art especially – is to be conserved. Although it is still common to hear that when contemporary artworks are involved, the artist should be the one entrusted with decisions as to how to exhibit and conserve her work – provided of course that she is still alive and available – this idea appears flawed under several respects. First because, as we have seen, the artist may simply lack the required technical knowledge to figure out how the materials she used in her work will age over time, while the conservator's expertise makes him more qualified to handle this kind of decisions. Secondly, and more importantly, because the aesthetic effect that the artwork produces on the recipient is ultimately independent of the artist's intentions. Of course, the artist can expect the recipients to have a certain relation to her work, i.e. that they undergo some sort of experience when appreciating it. The American artist Christo, for example, intended viewers to walk barefoot along his *Floating Piers*, a site-specific work consisting of three km of high-density polyethylene platforms installed in 2016 at Lake Iseo, Italy, in order to fully appreciate the experience. However, recipients are clearly not obliged to comply

with the artist's instructions in their appreciation of the artwork, and can choose their own autonomous way of discovering and responding to it. They may enjoy Christo's *Piers* with their shoes on, or behold a medieval painting under electric lightings. From this viewpoint, conservators are on the side of current recipients, not the author, when they intervene on the work. For example, when it comes to conserve a work that features short-lived or ephemeral materials, they may choose to prevent the natural decay process of the object if this will allow a greater number of viewers to enjoy the work for a longer time, even though this may somehow go against the intentions of the artist.

On the other hand, however, too much insistence on the conservators' freedom in interpreting the work's meanings exposes conservation to the risk of relativism, and can thus be counterproductive for the existence of the discipline itself. Defining the task of conservation as a critical act of interpretation, in turn, can help us define the boundaries of the activity but does not necessarily resolve the conflict between the subjectivity of individual responses or modes of appreciation of a work of art and the demands for a stronger objectivity in our judgments. There is much more to be said about the hermeneutics underpinning conservation decision-making and how philosophical arguments can be advanced to justify their application and the resulting appearance of works of art.

Of course, this does not imply that all ideas about what should and shouldn't be done in the treatment of art objects are or can be rationally or conceptually justifiable. Much of what a society approves of or disapproves of in art conservation is determined by the various cultural conceptions that have predominated in that society at a certain period. Conservation practices, in this sense, cannot be effective if the cultural significance of art objects is not taken into consideration, since it is precisely because of this cultural significance that these objects are preserved (and not the other way around)[1]. However, claiming that answers to questions of restoration are merely cultural or conventional seems ultimately false: the way conservation proceeds as a profession is determined by the need to pursue a form of universality in the relevant analysis and decisions, especially when highly complex philosophical issues like the meaning of value, art, history, interpretation and authenticity are involved.

In conclusion, although we probably have to accept the impossibility of a singular, objective theory within the field of art con-

[1] See: Weiler, K. and Niels Gutschow, N., *Authenticity in Architectural*, cit., p. xxi.

servation, this should excite rather than discourage philosophical discussion. Striking a balance between the demands of our memory and the expectations of the present is indeed one of the most difficult challenges, but it is also the most urgent to undertake if we really want to secure a future to our past.

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