

TOWARDS A PLURALISTIC PHILOSOPHY OF CONSERVATION

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The magic date 2000 which not only closes the old and opens the new centuries but also the millennia, places requires us - as conservators - to consider the position we have reached in our discipline, and with what baggage of mistakes and what assets of experience we enter the twenty-first century. This question must be - and is - asked above all by ICOMOS. This is witnessed by increasing discussion in recent years both at a regional and international level on the theoretical basis of conservation. Our first General Assembly this century should become a forum for the summarising of the changes which have taken place in conservation doctrine. Let the thoughts presented below serve as a step in this direction.

In earlier millennia and centuries, from barely perceptible - and undocumented - beginnings, the populations of individual and separate cultural milieux looked after their heritage for ideological, religious, or pragmatic reasons, creating in the process their own traditions and experience. These were passed down from generation to generation, though not as codified rules. Due to this type of conservation (though not yet known by this name), the treasures of many cultures have survived to our times. We may see this as a period of an "initial pluralist approach" to the conservation of the cultural heritage.

Philosophical approaches to the conservation of the cultural heritage were first codified in Europe. Already early in the nineteenth century the first conservation doctrine was beginning to take shape, that of purism - romantic in its philosophical conception - and quickly came to dominate in the whole of western Europe. This process was influenced by the publications and personal contacts of those involved in the restoration of monuments, but also the creation of national conservation services based on similar premises. This was the first important stage of international co-operation in conservation, the exchange of information and the consequent unification of concepts, though restricted within the bounds of one continent.

When at the turn of the century a new concept arose in central Europe, that placing emphasis on the conservation and not the restoration of monuments, the ground was prepared for its European reception. Its rapid and general acceptance by European conservators resulted from the fact that its Austrian and Prussian protagonists formulated their writings around ideas which were maturing in the whole area north of the Alps. The damage which was being done to the European cultural heritage by the purist doctrine was becoming increasingly recognised. The development of the historical sciences at this period demonstrated the need to

examine the written and material (architectural and archaeological) sources together, and the authenticity of these sources was the *conditio sine qua non* of the investigative results. At the same time there was also a reassessment of concepts in the historiography of art, which included the aesthetic acceptance of not only architecture and art of the Middle Ages but also that of later periods, up to neoclassicism. As a consequence, all of the chronological layers of monuments had to be taken into account by conservators. Against the background of such views, European exchange of views on conservation led to the formation of a philosophy of conservation, the leading concept of which could be summarised by the famous words of the German conservator Georg Dehio: «*konservieren nicht restaurieren*».

The destruction of monuments caused by the First World War created a fresh test for the new philosophy, though not to the degree that is often thought. The main canon, to pay equal attention to the conservation of the different developmental periods of the monument, was maintained, the main casualty was a rigorous attitude against the reconstruction of destroyed monuments.

The years after the First World War saw the rise of the first international organisations: the League of Nations, alongside which functioned the International Commission of Intellectual Co-operation, and in the field of cultural property, the International Office of Museums. It was this which organised in Athens in October 1931 a conference devoted to conservation. The final document of this conference, undeservedly seldom recalled today, is expertly-written and is one of the best of its type, after all these years retaining its actuality. It covers an impressive wide field of conservation, from architectural, urbanistic and landscape (referring to the need to preserve green spaces). It postulates the necessity for interdisciplinary investigations and work, and approaches the economic, educational and social issues (such as equal values in a multicultural heritage) and appeals for international co-operation in the field of conservation. The document is primarily addressed however not to conservators, but to the League of Nations. After gaining positive opinions from the International Commission of Intellectual Co-operation, in 1932 it was approved by the assembly of the League of Nations as a recommendation to the governments of member nations. Although there were not many years of peace left for the application of the recommendations of the Athens document, it played an important part in the creation of the awareness of conservators.

The post-War stage of the development of international intellectual co-operation in conservation - lasting until today - is also connected with international organisations. The League of Nations has been replaced by the United Nations, and the development of the Commission on Intellectual Co-operation gave rise to UNESCO, and the International Office of Museums changed into ICOM. The use by UNESCO of a representation of the facade of the Parthenon as its logo had an ideological significance, it showed the classical ideal of beauty from which western civilisation developed as an universal value. Just as before the War, in the early post-War years there was in these international organisations a decided domination of western culture, and in this eurocentrism. It was only with the passing of time and the passing of colonialism and the creation of the new developing countries that they gained a majority, and together with this a decisive influence on the choice of leaders and their policies.

When UNESCO decided to intensify its activities in the field of the protection of the heritage, it led to the creation of ICCROM, a specialised international centre in Rome. The formation of this first international conservation organisation, the members of which are states, had considerable significance for future developments. ICCROM became a scientific and didactic institution containing one hundred states scattered on all continents. At the beginning however, with a limited number of members (mainly European), it did not have the capacity for wider influence on the philosophy of conservation. The rise and animation of this organisation were in the hands of Italian conservators, who regarded its location in Rome as an opportunity to raise the international prestige of Italian conservation. It was from the Italian milieu that the idea arose of holding the «Second International Conference of Architects and Conservation Technicians» in Venice in May 1964. This meeting ended with the issuing of 13 final documents, which have mostly been forgotten - with one exception, later called the «Venice Charter».

Many legends and false conceptions have arisen about this document; a number of opinions current about its contents do not find support in the actual text. Although it is thought to have been written as a reaction against the mass rebuilding of monuments after the Second World War, the Charter itself does not however mention the word “rebuilding”, an *argumentum ex silentio* implying that the rebuilding of a destroyed monument does not constitute “conservation”. It is thought that the Charter established the meaning of the term “authenticity” to refer only to the material substance of a monument, while the document in fact refers only to the need to conserve a monument in the “full richness of its authenticity”, leaving open the question of the definition of that concept, and even suggesting that there may be several components of that authenticity. It is difficult to compare the Venice Charter with the Athens Declaration. The latter was a wide-ranging programmatic document addressed both to

conservators as well as to political leaders. The Venice document was a theoretical document addressed to a narrower audience, to conservators. It also addressed a narrower field, being restricted to individual monuments and archaeological ruins, which even at that time - in a period of revalorisation of historic complexes and towns - was already an archaic approach. Why then has the Charter had such a deep influence? It would seem that the secret of the Venice Charter lies in the way it has been written. The restraint of the authors, who were mostly Europeans, allowed the creation of an ‘open’ document, with universal characteristics. It rapidly came to lead a life of its own in the hands of its European adherents.

At the congress in Venice it was decided that there was a need for the creation of an international (and - in contrast to ICCROM - non-governmental) conservation organisation. This proposal was realised with the creation of ICOMOS in Cracow in Poland in May 1965. Its inception was European, and only with time did states from other cultural regions join. At the beginning they were submissive disciples of their senior western colleagues, a dozen or so years were necessary for them to find their own identity in the field of the protection of the cultural heritage.

The first years of ICOMOS were therefore Eurocentric in aspect, the main problems discussed were those of the old continent. Although it was difficult to understand from the perspective of non-Europeans, the problem of the rebuilding of monuments destroyed by the War returned again and again like a boomerang. The standard of ICOMOS became the Venice Charter, which it was attempted to adapt to European needs, to fit it to the philosophy of theoreticians of the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries such as Riegl and Dvorak. It was onto such a philosophical ground that representatives of non-European regions stepped when they entered ICOMOS, or came as scholars to international conservation courses of ICCROM. In this manner some thirty years ago began the export to overseas regions of European conservation philosophy from the beginning of our century, in which the Venice Charter was unwittingly involved.

The UNESCO World Heritage Convention of 1972 required a standardised regulation of the requirements for inclusion on the List which was applicable in cultural regions all over the world. Although multiculturalism had been included among the basic criteria for inclusion, the main problem lay in another criterion, that of authenticity formulated in its European understanding. In this manner, monuments or their complexes which had been partially reconstructed were ‘punished’ by being deemed by the international document deemed ineligible for inclusion on the World Heritage List. This state of affairs was tolerated in the first period of creation of this List as long as the majority of the objects included on it were from Europe (mostly its western regions). The first conflicts arose in the 1980s together with the entry of increasing

numbers of countries from the Far East into the Convention which began offering monuments on their territories for inclusion on the List. As a result, a deep divide became visible between two philosophical-methodological approaches:

- the European conception of authenticity of the monument, seen entirely in terms of authenticity of substance and derived directly from the Roman-Christian cult of Holy Relics, and
- the Far Eastern conception seen in terms of authenticity of form, function and tradition, derived from a belief in reincarnation.

The first concept was reflected in the work of western conservation theoreticians, the second reflected local building traditions sometimes even codified in modern building laws.

This controversy, having a concrete practical source in the creation of the World Heritage List, caused - after decades of sterility of conservation theorising - a great and lively intellectual discussion, for the first time of truly intercontinental dimensions. Gaining in power and significance in international organisations, non-European countries increasingly stressed their points of view, which stood in opposition to the European dictates and rejecting the exportation by the Europeans of their own philosophies, claiming them as universal. A key moment was the general assembly of ICOMOS in Colombo in 1993 where in the final document (for which all the European delegates meekly voted, so as not to be accused of racism), we read "the western philosophy does not have an universal value". The same document calls for the creation of regional charters of monuments protection. This haughty challenge came at a time when an international discussion on the concept of "authenticity" was in progress, culminating in the Nara Conference held in Japan in November 1994. The final document of that meeting, divergent however from the actual progress of the discussions, does not satisfy, while representing a step forward. Attempts are still being made by UNESCO to define the criteria of authenticity, and even the suggestion of replacing it by the somewhat uncommunicative concept of "integrity".

The ongoing discussions, though containing much formalism and exhibiting bureaucratic tendencies have great intellectual significance. They stimulate the thinking of a wide range of people involved in monument conservation in different cultural regions. One can only hope that from this melting-pot will emerge a new (this time really universal) philosophy of conservation, with which we will enter the twenty-first century. From which values contributed by individual cultural regions will it be formed? What contribution will be made by Old Europe? The key problem still remains the concept of "authenticity" in the understanding of "originalness". The word "authenticity" does not exist in the vocabularies of the languages of the Far East, nor indeed in Arabic, thus over half of the world's population does not understand the

concept. It will be difficult to unite the two apparently contradictory conceptions: Western and Far Eastern, is it possible at all while retaining mutual respect for the achievements of both of these great cultural regions and without a struggle and attempts to prove the superiority of one philosophy over another?

Let us admit that each of these «opposing» philosophies have universal elements and have contributed to the conservation of monuments, both have arisen not only on the basis of religious and cultural conditions but also in specific physical conditions.

- the Western tradition is related to the use of permanent building materials and a temperate climate. Only in such conditions can buildings survive (as long as properly cared-for) for several centuries and millennia in unchanged material and structural form,

- the Far Eastern concept is determined by the non-permanent building-materials used in the area (rammed earth, wood, wickerwork, bark) and a very aggressive climate. The survival of structures is only possible due to the systematic replacement of perished elements or entire parts of buildings. Only due to such techniques have the buildings of the Far East, sometimes over a thousand years old, have survived to our times in their original form. If these buildings had been subjected to the western approach of monument conservation, not a trace of them would remain today.

The western concept is fundamentalist in spirit (as opposed to the eastern one which is characterised by wise realism), it is in effect impossible to fully and consistently apply. Its application requires continuous compromise, hypocrisy if not schizophrenia. It has however an ABSOLUTE VALUE from the point of view of modern science: only a monument preserved in its original material substance may constitute a reliable historic source (document of history) for the investigator of the history of architecture and art, above all for the heuristics of those disciplines which are based on architectonic and archaeological investigations. At the same time, a rebuilt monument (however faithfully this has been done) remains only an iconographic source for the investigator! This scientific value of the Western philosophy, despite all the difficulties and even impossibilities of its practical application, has been increasingly discerned by Far Eastern conservators. They also draw attention to the fact that while in the past, the replacement of material elements was the only means of assuring the survival of the monuments, the availability of new materials and technologies has meant that to a greater degree it is possible to conserve the original material substance, and the development of investigative methods of the history of architecture and art create a powerful argument for this.

If in the discussion between East and West we stand in a position of mutual respect for each other's philosophy, acknowledging their great, though differing, contribution to the preservation of cultural property, and if we demonstrate

that the development of science and technology allows and encourages the preservation of the original substance of a monument wherever this is at all possible, we will have taken an important step towards an universal conception. Such a conception will have a pluralistic character. Local experience and approaches to conservation - resulting both from the cultural and natural conditions of particular cultural regions - should be respected and encouraged. Some of those experiences and approaches will be found to be common to all regions, and it is precisely these which will have a fully universal value. A future global conservation philosophy may be represented in the form of a flower, the petals of which will be the regional philosophies and approaches, while those aspects which they have in common will be represented by the shared centre. Common rules will be elastic, the permanent flow of information (the import-export of conservation experience) will not only be assured, but will also be improved by increasingly more efficient systems of intellectual communication. Already today the Internet is becoming an indispensable tool!

If we re-examine the Venice charter, one may see that it fits in the centre of the flower, with its reference to «the full richness of authenticity», and «full» includes all its components: material, form, function, tradition, mutually complementary and sometimes even - if need be - interchangeable. In the centre of our flower we will find not a little of the thoughts and experiences of the «Western philosophy». At the same time in the European petal, we will find a similar degree of imports from the Far East: an equal respect for all the components of the concept of «authenticity» (and thus it follows a reasonable attitude towards monuments reconstructed after a cataclysm), and the wisdom of the East, discouraging extremes of thought, and encouraging the seeking of compromise and realistic resolution of problems, individually-applied in every particular case, and applied to

all scales of activity, from the cultural landscape to individual monuments. In a word - less dogmatism, more understanding and application of intelligence. This will make our discipline healthier, more honest and more humanistic

The pluralism of methodological approaches must be the basic principle of our activities, based on understanding and not dogmatism. This concerns all aspects of the work of the conservator. This will allow the better definition of where the real division lies between what is regional (or applicable to a given aspect of conservation), and what is common and universal. If at the beginning of the next century, by means of exchange of methodological experiences between cultural regions and different branches of conservation, we create a pluralistic-universal conservation philosophy, it will not mean the rejection of previous local experience and traditions, but rather their integration with the experiences of other regions and respect for them. Only then after a period of “initial pluralism” of cultural regions isolated from each other and after decades of attempts to impose the domination of one of those regional philosophical traditions we will arrive at an “universal pluralism” of the cultural regions of the world, working together to protect the heritage of Mankind. A pluralism which takes the form of a flower. This is the great challenge for all of us united in ICOMOS in the twenty-first century.

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