

OTTO DEMUS
INTRODUCTORY LECTURE

My task is to speak about the contribution made to the history of art and civilization during the study or restoration of historical monuments. This is so immense a field that I cannot hope to deal with it adequately unless I confine myself to certain aspects of the problem. At the same time — odd as it sounds — I want to extend my theme to include the opposite aspect of the question, that is the contribution of art history to the restoration of historical monuments. I want to take the opportunity of this talk, to repeat to you what all know — talks like this are not really meant to produce anything new — namely, that restoring and art history are independent: art history which does not take cognizance of the results produced by the care and the restoring of monuments is apt to pass by the living work of art and content itself with abstractions, while the practical activity of restoring can go astray completely if it is not guided by historical knowledge.

I said that I am going to speak only about certain aspects of the contribution of restoring to art history. Before I deal with these aspects let me use the time honored figure of speech, the *praeterio*, so dear to classical writers, in mentioning those aspects about which I am not going to speak. I shall not say anything about our main activity, that of simply preserving the heritage of the past, of warding off those dangers which seem to multiply like the hydras heads: they grow so quickly that not even Hercules could hope to cut and burn them off in time. It is, of course, this activity which, in the last resort, procures to art history its material. If it were not for our lowly day-to-day work, the art historians would soon be left with nothing but photographs. May be, they would feel happier this way, but real research, real scholarship would soon be at an end. I shall not dwell either on the many discoveries of single works of art which are being made during our work, practically every day. These discoveries are important, all of them — even if they only affect the statistics of art history; and some are more important than others — namely those which furnish us with new and unique specimens. It is important, for example, and it is a genuine contribution to our art-historical knowledge, if frescoes of the 11th century are being brought to light in Austria (Lambach) because up to now we had hardly anything of the kind to show and because the newly found paintings fill a great gap in our knowledge, not only of alpine painting but also of the working of Italian and Italo-Byzantine influence in the North.

I am also passing over the results of “derestoring” activities, by which a good many first rate frescoes were reclaimed, frescoes which had already been given up as practically non-existent. Some of these victims of 19th century restoring present themselves now, after cleaning, as most interesting and, of

course, absolutely authentic works. Such works can be most revealing, especially in a country, which is not too rich in early monuments: every one of them may (and does) open up entirely new vistas for the art historian to explore.

However, what I really want to concentrate on, are not single works of art brought to light by restoring but new *aspects* of monuments, of single works and of groups of objects. This discovery of new aspects seems to me the greatest contribution which our restoring activity is making towards the development of the history of art and culture in general.

Even before he begins his work, the restorer (with this I don't mean the technician only but every person concerned with the safeguarding, preserving and restoring of monuments or works of art), even before actually beginning, he will have to deal with a number of problems which, at the first glance, don't seem to have much to do with what he is setting out to achieve. If the objects he is dealing with are buildings, he will have to go into the economic and sociological conditions which may — or may not — guarantee their existence. He will have to realize that monuments do not exist in a void, that they are part of a complicated set up which he must study in order to understand their living conditions. He will have to see them as parts of ever larger entities and finally, as parts of the life which surrounds them — and him. The first step towards this fuller understanding will be to see monuments as groups — either homogeneous or variegated. He will realize that it is not enough to deal with the safeguarding and restoring, say, of one or the other country house in the neighbourhood of Venice; this is only a tiny part of the problem, — which is really the problem of the "Ville Venete". So he must go into the historical, economic and sociological conditions of the origin and of the continued existence of these monuments: only after he has done this, he will be able to find a cure for the malady he is going to treat. For, this malady is not something which affects just one individual, it is a malady which threatens the survival of the entire species. After completing his studies he will find that he has done more than to establish the possibility of the cure: he will have learned to understand the entire species truly and thoroughly, and he can and should hand on his understanding to the art historian as a solid foundation of *his* work.

Quite a lot of very important research of this sort has been done since the war, research which had become necessary, among other things, by the changing material conditions. To quote only a few examples: our yugoslav colleagues have made an excellent study of medieval bridges, which were threatened as a species, thereby opening up a new field of interesting historical and architectural research; or, realizing that the very existence of towns like Traù-Trogir was threatened, they have minutely examined the material and sociological conditions, down to every detail. In this way they have furnished us with data which nobody possessed before and which, if properly used, can make us understand a historical town much better than it was understood before.

Art history will have to take cognizance of these things if it does not want to be left behind with its papers and photographs, staring at details instead of learning to see the great contexts.

However, the most detailed study will always be needed in dealing with the material aspects of important single objects. It is here that the restorer will

by necessity become the most useful instrument of art historical research. This is, of course, quite obvious in the field of architecture: most buildings are the results of complicated developments, before, during and after their actual erection, they consist of innumerable accretions, they contain many seams, traces of breaks — most of which were covered up by the latest addition, the skin which has been drawn over all this disorder. All of us know (and detest) the bewildering aspect of a building which in the course of restoring has been stripped of this protective and unifying covering. All of a sudden, the previously so homogeneous architecture reveals itself as a product of various periods, as a sum made up single parts were only loosely held together by the outer skin. If such buildings are still in use, the tendency of the restorer will (and must) be to simplify, to unify, to hide the multiplicity of parts behind a more or less homogeneous surface. This means quite often that he has got to suppress, even to falsify part of the evidence — it may not only be necessary but even right to do so. But before doing this, the restorer has the duty, to note and analyse every detail, to follow up every trace which might contribute towards a better and fuller understanding of the monument and its history. He must, even if only for the sake of the record, reconstruct this history, by uncovering and analysing every single trait. In this way he will discover a new dimension, the dimension of depth in space and time.

There are cases in which this work of stripping was done by other agencies — by decay, fire, war damage. Quite a lot has been uncovered and discovered by these acts of god and man. But the operation has been done crudely, the restorer has to do his probing very carefully so as not to harm to object. If necessary, he has to remove layer by layer, as if he were making an excavation — which is exactly what he is doing. He has to develop new methods for looking beneath the surface and for removing outer layers without destroying them.

To achieve this, the restorer will have to be assisted by the art historian. I know that architects do not like this idea. But every restoration campaign is, at least in its first analytic stages, a kind of excavation which differs from an archeological excavation mainly, by its taking place above ground.

Now just as you cannot exclude an archaeologist from an excavation below ground, you cannot do without an art historian in an excavation above ground: new facts, new indications may come to light any moment which can be interpreted only by the trained art historian in conjunction with a trained architect. Of course an art historian must be especially trained to do this job; at least, he must be able to learn as he goes along. Excellent results have been achieved in cases where an art historian was given the task of recording detail by detail: at the restoration of Speyer cathedral, for instance, a young architectural historian attended the work day and night, with the result that we have a really complete dossier about this great monuments and are not thrown back on guesses about what the successive phases of the building may have looked like.

Of course, the architect and the restorer must give to the art historian every opportunity for this study, for making soundings and even real excavations. This should be done even beyond the absolute necessities of the restoring campaign. The art historian should be able to take a look at the foundations of a

building even if these foundations, for once, have no need of strengthening. Such soundings should be combined with every restoration, as a matter of course. The necessary time and the money will have to be found. Naturally, in view of the difficulties which exist, especially in western countries, with objects which are still being used, the time and the cost will have to be reduced to an absolute minimum.

Only by this very careful study will a building be understood as a living organism, as the result of a complicated history, crystallized in various layers. One of these several layers is (or was) the "natural" skin of the building, its surface as it was planned by its creator. This surface consists or consisted of the roof with its original shape and roofing material, of the original mortar, stone treatment, facing, panelling or polychromy. Let me for a moment insist on the latter — one of the most neglected facettes of restoring and of architectural history. We have, of course, known for a long time that, with a very few exceptions, architecture has always made use of colour, and we are delighted to find a good many contemporary representations of polychrome architecture. The old style art historian will pounce on these and will be convinced that he knows what the colour of gothic architecture was like. In some of these representations you will, however, find brilliant reds, sweet pinks, tender greens. Here, even the old style art historian will begin the doubt; if he pursues his quest as he should, he will realize that he cannot take these representations at their face value, that there is no short cut to finding out what an architecture looked like, as regards colour: he has got to go and look himself for the actual traces. Pictorial representations of polychrome architecture are extremely important, not, in the first line, for reconstructing the real colours, but for something much more complicated: compared with the real colours, as revealed by the restorer, they give us a key for judging the *intentional* changes wrought by the painter.

As regards the 15th century, we shall, for instance, find that the coloristic style of painting was then much bolder than that of the architecture itself; as regards the 16th century, the opposite is true. In short: the style of colour representation of architecture in the 15th and 16th centuries seems to follow the same direction in either case, it overshoots the mark, in one way or another.

I have chosen simple examples, examples which can be verified quite easily. But what of the façades of Gothic cathedrals painted brilliantly in blue, red and gold? And what about the real colours of Romanesque architecture and its pictorial representation? You will agree that a lot of work has still to be done here, work which can only be done in the course of restoring.

Nobody will doubt that same applies to sculpture. Polychromy has always played an important part, even where one expected it least. We all remember the wonderful shock which we experienced when we first saw the Baptistery doors of Florence in the new (and old) golden sheen; or the ST. Louis of Donatello which was only known in his verdigris mimicry — and now he is golden. Similar unforgettable experiences are provided by the first sight of romanese, gothic or baroque polychromy, after it has been freed from dull overpainting, dirt or false colour. However, before it can be freed, the facts of the case have to be studied very carefully, because some of these sculptures contain up to a dozen superimposed layers of polychromy. We must carefully collect the material from which a new discipline of art history will be built up: the history

of colour in sculpture. It was, for instance, a widespread belief that lustre colours were used in the baroque only — one could hardly imagine that anything so baroque could be a late gothic invention or technique; now we know that it was used as early as 1500. Thus, the least an art historian can learn from this, is to be careful. There is no doubt that work of the restorer enables the art historian to see his material more correctly. He ought to realize that quite a lot is questionable as regards seemingly authentic surfaces. He will have to look at every work critically; and he will realize that a work of art is something extremely vulnerable, that there is very little we can take for granted: there is only a nucleus which remains unchanged, and a lot of surface which is changeable in the extreme. If he has realized this, the art historian will have lost something of his cock-sureness, and can begin to collect the material for the new field of research I have spoken about, that of the history of colour.

I have said something about architecture, something about sculpture, — now I want to add a few words about the contribution made by restoring activities and studies to the history and the understanding of painting. I think that it is in this field that we have seen the most revolutionary development: I refer, of course, to the discovery of the substrata of paintings. It is still too early to say how much of a revolution in art history has been brought about, for instance, by the discovery of a new form of artistic expression, the sinopia, and by making these sinopie visible, in many cases side by side with the finished painting. I am sure that Professor Procacci's book has been a revelation to many art historians; I am also sure that there are still a good many colleagues who do not even know the meaning of the term. So let me explain: Sinopie (the word is derived from cinnabar, the red paint) are sketches for wall paintings on the walls themselves. They can be more or less careful drawings, cartoons, at it were, drawn directly on the wall. They can be preliminary sketches, to be altered in the actual execution. In most cases these drawings are very vivacious, full of vitality, speed and instantaneous sensation: quite often they seem to have a greater artistic value than the completed frescoes.

New, sinopie have been completely unknown before a technique was developed which made the removal (undamaged of course) of the fresco layer possible, thereby freeing the underlying preparatory drawing. Thus, there can be no doubt that the discovery of the new medium of artistic expression is a gift by the restorer to the art historian. With this gift the art historian received an insight in the methods of work and study used by the artist in preparing his work, those methods which sometimes were based on trial and error, sometimes on what amounts to divination. These sinopie are more than studies, much more than drawings on paper or parchment. They are not coolly worked-out cartoons, this are the visible traces of what one might call the "splendeurs et misères" of the fresco painter's activity, they are his means of answering the challenge of the wall.

Of all this we had no idea a few years ago. It is a new world which has opened up before our eyes, something which should not only provide us with new material for the history of art but which, in addition, should affect profoundly our understanding of every single work concerned and of the creative process in general. Surely not a mean contribution to art history!

But the knowledge of sinopie is not the only gift which restorers of

paintings have bestowed on art history. Other insights were provided by those scientific methods which are now being used for the examination of panel and canvas paintings: infra-red light, x-ray etc., etc. The findings of these investigations have also contributed a great deal towards the problems of art history — not to speak of those of art criticism.

The main effect which these findings should have on our understanding of art and of its creation, is to my mind the realization that the work of art is not just something which came into being at one given moment and has remained firmly fixed ever since. On the contrary: we see now that it had a long and sometimes very complicated prenatal history; that it was a potentiality before it became a reality; that its history continued throughout the creative process and the actual making — resulting in numerous authentic changes which the restorer must point out to the art historian. And it goes further; the life of a work of art does not come to an end with its completion. It goes on, for better or for worse, ever changing, receiving accretions, losing authentic parts: in short — it is not a point in time but represents rather a longitudinal section, participating as it does in the life of the artist, the town, the country, the nation, in the life of humanity.

Thus we, who have gone through the school of our craft (monuments service or whatever you call it) see the work of not so much as a cross section through the artistic process but as the materialization of a long and complicated story which is still going on, and which will not even end with the complete ruin of the object, its disappearance: because some of its essence — that part of it which the art historians call “influences” — will go on living as long as art is being produced.

This view of the work of art as a living organism whose life goes parallel to our lives should, I think, be also the basis of the teaching of art history — permit me to end my talk with a few words about this problem. I think that one of the best ways to introduce the student to an understanding of a work of art is to let him go, before anything else, through an analysis of its material and technical qualities, and to give him an insight into the complicated process of conception, gestation, birth and survival of the work. He (or she) should learn to see the work of art as something that does not live between the pages of a handbook or, at the very best, within the walls of a museum; but something which was made by one man (or several) under very special spiritual, sociological, economic and material conditions; something which then became an object, a material thing, beginning to live a life of its own, a very mysterious life which has also its ups and downs and the history of which is still continuing. If this is realized by teachers and students alike, there will be no danger that art history will become a parlor game to be played with photographs, footnotes and bibliographies. To avoid this danger we need the help of the restorer, of the museum's conservator and of the architect, those men who have been trained to analyse and diagnose facts.

I have tried to show that we have learned a lot from these men and I think that we, as art historians, cannot do better than continue to do so.

OTTO DEMUS
CONFÉRENCE INTRODUCTIVE.
RÉSUMÉ.

Le Conservateur de Monuments et l'Historien de l'art doivent collaborer l'un avec l'autre s'ils veulent comprendre l'oeuvre d'art pour ce qu'elle est vraiment, c'est-à-dire pour un organisme vivant qui a des précédents historiques, un passé et un futur, lequel d'ailleurs, dans le cas d'oeuvres importantes, ne cesse même pas d'exister avec leur destruction complète: de telles oeuvres, en effet, continuent à vivre à travers l'influence de leur souvenir.

Le Conservateur (Architecte) a besoin de l'Historien de l'art et de l'Historiographe pour connaître les prémisses sociologiques, économiques et historiques qui ont déterminé l'oeuvre d'art et l'ont ensuite transformée: cette prise de connaissance doit présider à toute intervention matérielle. D'autre part, il est absolument nécessaire que l'historien de l'art se tourne vers le conservateur pour être instruit sur les différentes couches du monument. Et cela vaut, soit pour des architectures dont l'histoire complexe peut être étudiée par le conservateur à l'aide de soigneuses recherches, soit pour les couleurs présentées originellement par les sculptures dans lesquelles, souvent, on peut relever jusqu'à une douzaine de couches successives superposées, soit, enfin, pour les peintures dont les couches cachées (esquisses à la sanguine de « Sinopie », couches sous-existantes, corrections) sont mises à jour par le Restaurateur.

A notre avis, ces problèmes sont tellement importants que tout jeune historien de l'art devrait suivre un cours pratique de conservation des monuments durant ses études ou immédiatement après les avoir terminées.