The questions concerning the restoration of monuments are not new in Italy. One could even say that no other country has gathered in this field so vast a set of experiences. What has been done, however, is still little compared to what will have to be done, since the most diverse and, unfortunately, the most desperate cases present themselves today to the mind of the experts. On the other hand, since it is impossible to see to the restoration of all the buildings of artistic interest, it will be necessary to make a choice, whose criteria will be determined through the close examination of many contrasts and polemics. In any case, it seems certain that the privileges accorded for the past twenty years to the Roman ruins will have to be much reduced in favor of the renewed democracy, since that kind of elective affinity which linked the new Caesars to the ancient ones has run its time. Besides, the contrasts and the polemics will be useful, in this and in other arguments, to reawaken the interest for the common historical and artistic patrimony which is among the first conditions for the recovery of our cultural life. We feel therefore persuaded to rethink the ancient and new theories of restoration, with a participation so more lively and attentive [aderente] as more vast and immediate will be the task to accomplish.

Restoration, understood as the conservation and defense of monuments and not only as their practical adaptation to new uses, is an absolutely modern thing—it’s history dates back to little more than a century ago. Antiquity ignored the problem of aesthetic restoration; the Renaissance era lovingly measured and drew the ancient monuments, but rather than conserving them, it exploited them as a source for marbles and stones; the Baroque era harbored a smiling indifference for the forms of the past and, in its boundless production, did never hesitate, not even before to the most grave dangers of contamination. We need to come to the first decades of the nineteenth century to find theories of restoration proper, such as those expressed by Quatremère de Quincy and Viollet-le-Duc, so famous, the latter, as vast and often deleterious was his work and influence. In both the cases of completion and restoration [ripristino], Viollet-le-Duc proclaimed the necessity that the restoring architect make as his own the language of the ancient artists and hence follow not only the example offered by the work to be restored but also the typical and hence generic forms of the so-called style of architecture—which is not the style of art for the simple reason that the latter is never generic but always individual. In his Dictionnaire raisonné the French theorist wrote: “The best course is to put oneself in the shoes of the original architect and suppose what he would do if he came back to the world and one were to put before him the programs that we have in front of us.” Such anti-historical supposition appeared so legitimate that it became the foundation of many restorations which, in the second half of the nineteenth century and even afterwards, were carried out in France and in other
European countries. This is not the place to show how, even today, such rationalistic [raziocinante]—and not aesthetic—outlook can be found, in different form, in that architectural historiography which continues to proceed according to schemes and types of evolution. But, to remain on the subject, I will not cite the French and German works in which the false document was inseparably mixed to the authentic; it will suffice to recall some of the most famous remakings [rifacimenti] which were executed in Italy following the same direction. Such were the facades of the Florence cathedral and of Santa Croce, the Castello Sforzesco in Milan, and—an example even more serious for the damage it did to an entire environment—the restorations carried out by [Alfonso] Rubbiani in many large and small buildings in Bologna [...]. About fifty years before Rubbiani, even Naples had had its own restorer, [Federico] Travaglini, well known to the scholars for the destruction he carried out in the church of S. Domenico Maggiore [...].

Fortunately, the errors of the past proved useful for the education of the modern restorers, and the critical and aesthetic culture, which in Italy is more advanced than elsewhere, has strongly contributed to the formation of a mature consciousness of the problems in question. Proof of such progress is, among other things, that set of rules on the criteria to follow for the management [tutela] of monuments, rules which have been formulated years ago thanks to the intervention of the authorities devoted to the protection itself, that is, the Monuments and Excavations Offices [soprintendenze ai monumenti e agli scavi]. Such a set of rules constitutes an extremely interesting document and, despite bearing the unhappy title of Carta del restauro (Charter of Restoration), it will certainly enjoy a better fortune than many other analogous charters, since all in all it appears guided by a healthy and enlightened sense of art and of history. At its core, the Charter is inspired by a conception diametrically opposed to that of Viollet-le-Duc. Indeed, in the Charter the restauro di ripristino, the one founded on stylistic analogies, is definitely banned and is admitted only in those cases in which it is founded on absolutely reliable bases. [...] Only anastylosis is admitted—that is, the mechanical recomposition of dismembered parts such as, for example, the scattered drums of a Doric column or the blocks of an isodomic masonry. [...] All this [is premised] on the just intention to distinguish the ancient part from the new—that is, in a sense precisely opposed to that championed by Viollet-le-Duc.

Another rule worth noticing is the one that affirms the necessity to conserve, of a monument, all the elements with a character of art or historical memory, “whatever the period they belong to” [...].

In other words, even while respecting the rule in question, it will always be a matter of judging whether certain elements have or have not an artistic character, since, in the negative case, it will be absolutely legitimate to abolish what masks or indeed offends true beauty, and indeed commit oneself [compromettersi] to a choice [predilezione] inspired by a critical evaluation proper. Surely even the ugly belongs to history, but not for this should we dedicate to it the same care which the beautiful demands. [...] Every monument, therefore, will have to be seen as a unique case, for such it is in so far as it is a work of art, and such will have to be even its restoration. [...] Given the unpredictable variety of particular cases, it appears evident that there will be occasion to carry out the most diverse experiences, from that of the pure structural consolidation and the recomposition of scattered fragments to that of the completely new work which will replace the destroyed part of a building and create a happy contrast instead of a false imitation. And here we should note that, whereas an interior or a façade are expressive by virtue of a fundamental stylistic unity, what we call an environment—what is included in the perspective of a piazza or a street—demands a variety of forms, since in this case it is not a matter of only one
work, even when, in the best examples, the harmonious rhythm of various formal tendencies gives the impression of a perfect and ideal fusion; and in similar cases no obstacle should be put to the creation [il manifestarsi] of a new architecture. [...]

Some examples of what I said above can be offered by the work that will have to be done in Naples, in the church of Santa Chiara, in the church of Sant’Egidio, and elsewhere.

The impossibility to recompose the baroque interior of Santa Chiara appears evident at first sight. In its present condition, given the disappearance of the vault and of almost all the eighteenth-century decorations, restoration, from the point of view of formal direction, offers only one possibility: the one that consists in repeating the fourteenth-century lines, continuing to reveal what the fire has already partially revealed. Significant remains of the eighteenth-century remodeling [rifacimento], however, should be conserved—remains such as the sepulchral sculptures in some of the chapels and the pavement which, however badly damaged, will be easy to recompose, given its predominantly geometric character. It will not be possible, however, to conserve the stucco pilasters [pilastratura] and the cornices of the windows, since such parts, as a consequence of the disappearance of the vault and the pilasters between the chapels, now lack any organic link of recurrence [legame organico di ricorrenza]. [...]

In fact—and to avoid the temptation to find at all costs, in the middle of so much ruin, some reason for consolation—it should be acknowledged that, notwithstanding the extent and boldness of the decorative program, the Neapolitan eighteenth century did not reach in Santa Chiara one of its happiest expressions. [...]

In any case, it seems clear that part of the fragments should be recomposed on site and that the rest should be gathered and conserved, together with the surviving parts of other works, in those rooms of the convent which, once restored, will become a museum of the church. Conceived in purely structural terms, the restoration should be limited to the remaking, where need may be, of some load-bearing elements in schematic form, so that they will appear recognizable from the rest of the structure for their different character and yet contribute to the reconstitution of an overall image [visione d’insieme] and help to protect from further ruin what remains. Now, it seems very likely that such overall image can be achieved, but such image will prove certain only when, after the scattered elements will be gathered and examined, there will be drawn the graphic ripristino which should precede the execution of the work. [...]

The greatest difficulty will not be the arrangement of the surviving parts of the monuments, which will require the many means which modern technology gives us. Rather, the difficulty will be to give an aesthetic form to the monument as a whole [...]. The constraints of the restoration will impose their just and rigorous limits to taste and fantasy, but the latter, and only they, will always be the basis for a satisfying solution to the problem. If this is true, then, what conclusion should we draw? That restoration is itself a work of art sui generis—conclusion already implicit in what we said earlier, but which is not at all implicit in the rules mentioned above. In fact, one would say that for those who drafted those rules what was paramount was to deny any creative role to the restorer’s intervention, and this for the plausible fear of the practical consequences that a different approach could have produced. [...]

The destruction of so many works of art makes us feel today the truth of Leonardo’s maxim—that beautiful things belong to those who love them. [...] To restore and protect our monuments shall be one of the peculiar tasks of our future, in spite of the judgment of the so-called practical men, those who believe that the purpose of a human society is already satisfied by the reaching of a practical welfare. In our difficult work of persuasion of these people, however, logical arguments will be much less useful than those inspired by the love for the most
precious fruits of our civilization—in the same way for which a sentiment, and not logic, is what gives impulse to our moral life.