Wilhelm Lübke
The Restoration Fever
(1861)

Translated Jonathan B. Blower

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Anyone who has turned their attention to the artistic monuments of the Middle Ages in recent years and sought them out on their travels from time to time will have been profoundly moved by the change of fate that these venerable witnesses to a great past have suffered in our own day. Who would not have been painfully struck, on visiting their favorites even ten years ago, by the neglect with which they seemed to be accelerating toward another demise as a result of human and heavenly hardships? And now: what a difference! Wherever one goes they are restoring, have restored, are going to restore. The trestles and human hands are in full swing at the age-old minsters; these days one hardly finds a single significant church that does not exhibit the traces of restorative activity.

This is the case in France more than anywhere else. […] But we have not remained idle in Germany either, even if we follow suit, as ever, with greater circumspection and at a gentler tempo. From Marienburg to Basel (we have the German-speaking countries in mind here), from the Minster at Aachen to the Stephansdom in Vienna—the principal churches of the western and eastern imperial German city—hardly a single significant monument has escaped the fervor of restoration. […]

At first glance this is certainly one of the finest features of that dazzlingly colorful picture of an age which, having languished for so long, now feels itself animated to the innermost core of all its ligaments, which is restlessly struggling to come to terms with a series of great tasks and which, by way of reward, so often has to accept the glib reproach of materialism. If anything, the universally awoken love for the monuments of a grand prehistory attests to the fact that the flame of historical consciousness has flared up vigorously in the present; that a long-extinguished interest in public affairs, a sound community spirit—the fundamental precondition of all healthy development—has been rekindled; that the breathless haste with which material interests are pursued has not silenced the sense for idealistic endeavors. A nation that no longer holds its historic monuments in contempt, but is able to read off its greatness and power from the lapidarian script of petrified history, one that again turns with a protective hand and loving care to things that have long been neglected—such a nation has taken a turn for the better and is on the way to full recovery.

Thus far one can perhaps be justifiably pleased. But this welcome change of fortunes had hardly been properly greeted before the good started to show its other side. Moderation is a difficult thing to maintain, especially when a popular movement sets itself high standards and then plunges blindly into the valley. As in a storm, the original goal is soon forgotten and the insatiable current breaks its banks and leaves the riverbed without direction or purpose. Its ripples then roll onward, carrying along
with them a corrupt, harmful and destructive element that gives a pernicious turn to something that is entirely good in itself.

It is regrettable but all the more necessary to have to say it: our desire to restore has now reached this dangerous point. It has become a furious fever that stands on the brink of bringing devastation to the wonderful monuments of our forebears. More than one sublime work of historic art has already fallen victim to it. A few more steps down this track and blind rivalry will have robbed our monuments of the characteristic expression that the centuries have impressed upon them, and all for the sake of this latest fanaticism.

The most obvious and justifiable purpose of any restoration is this: to repair that which has been damaged by the influence of time and the neglect or destructive impulses of man; to remedy any deficiencies that might arise due to construction; and to obviate further injuries wherever possible. But people soon went beyond these aims, setting themselves the task of completing monuments that had been left unfinished and extending them in the spirit of the epochs in which they were founded. We should not deny universal approval to even this sort of undertaking insofar as it does not curtail the important and reasonable interests of the present. But here the door has already been opened to caprice and vagary. We have seen completions that would have astonished and appalled no one more than the old masters who originally planned and began such buildings. It is unfortunately all too often the case that they would be compelled to bring charges against the disfiguration of their ideas, against the adulteration of their work. Their contemporaries, though, those for whom they built, would have felt ill at ease in these great halls, these choral chambers and whatever else they call the awful things now that they have been completed. And do we really feel at home in these old-new composites? Do we sense a warm atmosphere in them? Truly not! Neither the spirit of the present nor of the past speaks to us from within these rooms; it is at best their specters that inhabit them, floating around aimlessly and wringing their hands. [...] 

What did they make of the once so wonderfully picturesque Frauenkirche in Munich? They purified it, i.e., they removed those altars and monuments that were built in ‘periwig’ forms rather than the Gothic style. They got rid of the wide Renaissance arch that so happily interrupted the perspective and compensated for the lacking transept of the church. This vicious campaign against the ‘periwig’ style is nothing other than a periwig form of one-sided, fanatical art history. If only they had gone no further than liberating the noble forms of a fully developed architecture from all the enveloping additions! Instead though, they removed highly effective decorative elements that had mercifully concealed the bareness of what was, in itself, an ugly and unarticulated construction. The crude brick pillars now rise to the vault with shocking austerity—a monotony which must be perceived as an injury by any artistically trained eye, and indeed any impartial layman. The tedium of our popular ‘stone-colored’ paintwork is the icing on the cake. By contrast, the restorators’ polychrome wisdom blossoms with unusual splendor in the vaulting: the bosses are blue with gold stars (this in itself is nothing objectionable), but the ribs are painted so gaily that they seem to be made of wood. These, if not beautiful, are certainly thoroughly nonsensical. To harmonize with this, the splendid iron railings were ripped out of the numerous side chapels and, by all accounts, sold as ‘scrap metal’. It was all

1 Periwig. The German here is Zopf, meaning literally ‘plait’. In the nineteenth century it came to be a derogatory term for late baroque or rococo art, suggesting the elaborate hairstyles of the eighteenth century and outmodedness in general.
just ‘periwig’ after all. Away with it. It corrupts good taste and reeks of paganism to boot. It is just a shame that the mystery and festivity of the former arrangement has disappeared along with it, and that the utter flatness of the chapels has now been laid bare. […]

All this and more went through my head recently when I had occasion to learn that the Stephansdom in Vienna is facing a similar fate. They have already started ‘restoring’ the side chapels of the choirs, i.e. obliterating the character of age, scraping down the walls and returning the whole lot to the unpleasantly austere state of a newly finished building. The incomparable patina that centuries of incense and candles have given the interior is to be removed as though it were common dirt. Anyone with any understanding of art knows that the works of man always have something inharmonious and incomplete about them when they have just been finished, and that time alone provides that fine coating which eases them into the atmosphere of their surroundings and harmonizes them with the nature of the whole. To divest a monument of this historical patina is tantamount to tearing up its patent of nobility and consigning it to the ranks of yesterday’s parvenus. […]

When surveying the amount of devastation that the restoration fever has already wreaked, it is only right that one should also look for the deeper causes of the malady. As far as I can tell there are two elements which, when combined, become a danger to the monuments of the past. The one is the calculating fanaticism of a retrograde faction which uses every available field as a testing ground to see how far the religious life of the present can be wound back into the past. The other consists of those architects who, given their understandable desire for artistic commissions (and we shall presume that less honorable motivations are impossible), zealously take on any restoration work, and frequently, without being aware of it, put themselves in the service of a tendency that transgresses against the life of the present as well as the creations of the past. That they thereby commit a twofold ‘sin against the Holy Spirit’ weighs very little on their consciences.

It really is high time we took a serious and open stand against such threats. […] Or are we to look on placidly while negligible pretexts divest our monuments of their venerable character? I would have thought any stone which still has a breath of historical life in it ought to be inviolable to us. A number of monuments have already been altered beyond recognition thanks to the reconstructionists. It will not be long before we have every reason to wish back the days of indifference and neglect, which were less detrimental to the existence of monuments than our own vaunted epoch of restorations.