Leopoldo Torres Balbás
The Use of Ancient Monuments
(1920)

Translated by Lyn Lemaire

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“Do not talk of beauty as something that could be anywhere, that adapts to every environment, like a whore to her highest bidder. For us, art is like family, a genie of the home, a friend, a companion and that which is the best expression of our feelings; art is our god Lar. If you want to know it, you must know where it lives. The god is made for man and the work for the site that it occupies and defines. Beauty is that which is the most beautiful in its place.”

Romain Rolland, Colas Breugnon

Many of our ancient monuments continue to be used for the purpose for which they were constructed centuries ago. The atmosphere around them seems to have been immutably conserved, allowing us to appreciate them more fully than those that have been transformed by the actions of time or those whose use has changed. Among them are a large number of churches, many monasteries, for which time does not seem to have passed, numerous buildings that house sometimes secular institutions and needs.

Other ancient monuments, finding no use in our time, lay abandoned, in ruins, except in a few scarce villages that, so rich, intelligent and enamored are they with their ancient art or history, preserve them carefully. Such are the aqueducts, theatres and roman arenas, the fortified grounds, the castles, the bridges that are not currently being used. Innumerable churches and monasteries are also falling into total abandon, since there are many more today than would be required for the religious needs of our time. Finally, other monuments house people and needs that are quite different from their original intention: palaces, today home to humble people; monasteries seized, sold, and converted into workhouses; state houses used as schools; churches that are now bakeries or flour mills. The most well-known and most shameful case is that of the old cathedral of Lerida, a magnificent building of great artistic interest, converted into a military barrack some years ago, despite its being declared a national monument (Royal Order of June 12, 1918). The building of the convent of San Marcos, in Léon, is now divided between the Archeological Museum and the National Guard.

Yet it is not only time that changes the use of buildings to adapt to new needs and allows buildings to fall into ruin that, because they are not being used, seem to have lost their reason to exist. Such an act is fatal, and only man is able to mitigate the destructive action of passing years and of new generations. Also contributing are the State and the official elements that serve and represent it, and that are almost always divorced from all artistic sentiment. Most of the monuments that are restored, that is, that are remade, are not returned into their original use and are left bare, empty, and cold, the key thrown out and a guardian assigned to show and watch over them. This is what happens
to many of our buildings classified as national monuments: let us remember, among these, the
Visigothic basilica of San Juan de Baños; the Asturian churches of Naranco, Lino and Lena; the
Mozarabic monastery of Escalada; the Romanesque churches of San Martín de Frómista, and San
Juan de Duero, in Soria; the hermitage of Cristo de la Luz, in Toledo; the monasteries of El Parral, El
Paular, Poblet...

It is the hateful tendency to remove beautiful things from life and to lock them up in a
museum where they may be duly catalogued. Since ancient edifices cannot be moved into a
monumental museum, as many would like, they are isolated, by knocking down all of their
surrounding structures, enclosed behind padlocked iron gates, and deprived of their purpose. As
such, they are converted into dead works, losing all contact with daily life and disassociating
themselves from their environment. Their empty grounds, their big, bare walls, resemble those of a
prison. How can one not recall the impression of sadness and coldness produced by these restored
churches, absent of worship, that have remained apart, on the margins of the life of the city or of their
site! Think how much less beautiful the cloisters and galleries of Santo Tomás de Ávila and of the
Cartuja de Miraflores would be, for example, if they were deserted, like those of Poblet. The
adolescents that live in the palace of Infantado in Guadalajara, bring life to its rooms, give life to a
building that, empty, shown as a museum by a caretaker, would have much less appeal. Let us fully
enjoy the beautiful cloisters of Silos, which had been abandoned for a time, thanks to the black monks
that inhabit them and continue on in them a secular tradition of intelligence and culture.

A building is made to be inhabited by man or by divinity. It cannot speak to us in the same
way, when we visit it once in awhile, as when it is in an integral part of our life.

The importance of its preservation also lies within the building itself. “The new rule of work—
a French civil servant has remarked—imposes itself on everything; it is very difficult for
monuments to continue living as the nobles used to, without working, without producing, even if it is
no more than for their own sustenance.” Moreover, an inhabited building is not as easily destroyed as
an empty one. If in the monasteries of El Paular and El Parral congregations had continued to
worship, we would still be contemplating the works of art that have now been torn from them and
they would not be ruined today.

In general, we find in our towns ancient buildings closed and abandoned, on the road to
destruction, buildings of great capacity, that with a small adjustment could serve to house schools or
other needs of the public interest now occupying locations that are almost always in poor condition.

But even when they are destroyed, even when they continue to deteriorate through daily
drudgery, let us not remove from our life, in the name of a false artistic principle, these buildings that
count centuries of contact with Humanity. Even if the sun, the wind and the seasons are done with
them, let us allow them to stay with us, to live our life, because this is their purpose, and to perish, if
necessary, with our death.

If, for example, religious ceremonies cannot take place in San Antonio de la Florida without
the paintings of Goya continuing to fade, let us allow these to disappear after a few years, during
which time we can fully enjoy them; but let us not allow them to disappear before the worship in the
hermitage disappears, depriving them of the environment for which Goya made them.

Let us endeavor also for each building, as much as possible, to continue to ascribe to the same
purpose for which it was constructed. May worship services take place in churches, may religious
hymns continue in monasteries, may parties and receptions continue in palaces, may modern traffic
continue to cross ancient bridges. When such a thing is no longer possible, let us give them a purpose
of movement and activity such that their doors and windows may always be open to the sun and the
air of the street, and to all of the intensity of our present life.