The problem of the treatment of lacunae in a damaged work of art has so far had contrasting solutions. Basically, the approach has been empirical, whereas the solution is primarily theoretical. Certainly, an objection could be made that the variety of solutions devised also depends on differences in the structure of works of art, whether architectural, sculptural, pictorial or of some other sort, and therefore a single approach to treatment would be precluded by the very nature of the works in question.

In fact, such an objection validates my initial remark rather than rebuts it, for, if a solution depends on the specific nature of the work of art as an object, it highlights the empiricism with which the attempt is being made—case by case—to resolve the problem, which is linked to the very essence of the work of art. The adjustment, as it were, that the theoretical premise must undergo in meeting each individual case, does not imply that one can do without a theoretical premise.

Therefore, it is necessary to explain what is involved in this theoretical premise, which, in my view, is indispensable to assuring a rational approach to the treatment of lacunae.

To do this, we must define the object of our research; that is, the work of art. At this point, all may deem the question obvious, but it is an obviousness that must be investigated. A work of art, as we see it in a museum, is the same work of art that was created by an artist. Once it is finished, or the creative rapport between the work and the artist is ended, the work enters into the world as a possible object of universal experience. Has it become something else? And how could this something else be defined?

By putting the issue in this way, it is clear that I intend to apply a phenomenological treatment to the work of art; that is, to subject it to a special *epoché*. I will limit myself to considering ‘a work of art only as an object of experience in the world of life,’ as Husserl would say. Doing this will not cause the work of art to decline into generic “objectness,” but rather to be accepted, without questioning its essence, as it has entered the field of our perception and thereby our experience. By restricting the work of art in this way, consideration can be given to all the aspects that escape us if we question only the essence of the work: aspects that range from its material composition (and therefore its condition), to its museum presentation.

Indeed, if a work of art is considered in its essence, it is clear that, as Hegel has said, everything regarding the external material is a given. What is made of the environmental conditions in which it exists, or should exist, or the museological measures to be taken for its display to the public—all these are irrelevant. Yet, the work of art, precisely for the reason that it is essentially a work of art, because of that does not stay suspended outside of our experience. Indeed, once it is recognized as such, and especially as it is recognized as such, it has a right to be exempted from the phenomenological world, and—through this small restriction in the world
of life—to be treated strictly in relationship to the recognition that has taken place. Now, this recognition, through the particular *epoché* that has been used, teaches that the work of art comes to us as a closed circle, as something in which we have no right to meddle except on two conditions: to conserve its integrity for as long as possible; or to reinforce it, if necessary, when its material structure fails. Conservation of integrity is therefore opposite in concept to reperfecting, even though it might appear, in some cases, that the operations required by conservation and by reperfecting are one and the same. But reperfecting claims to enter into the closed circle of creation, replacing or standing in for the artist, whereas conservation of the work’s integrity means treating the work only when—because of inappropriate treatment, or the action of time—the work has been disfigured by additions or modifications that do not produce a new synthesis. Thus, reperfecting comes down to an empirical intervention of historical and creative replacement, daring to impinge on a moment in the life of the work of art that had been closed by its creator, and which is irreversible. In conservation treatment, however, we do not go beyond the moment when the work of art entered into the *world of life*, thereby acquiring a second *historicity* with respect to its first appearance, through the long or short elaboration required of its creator, in the *world of life*.

If this point is clear, then the theoretical premise for treating lacunae is also clear. Indeed, once it has been established that the work of art with which we must deal is the one that enters into our experience, into our present historicity, it is evident that we must limit ourselves to consulting the work of art in its current presence in our consciousness. While consulting the work in this way, there is no intention of questioning its essence, which is taken for granted, but rather of treating it as the object of our current experience.

This observation will then sway every aspect, of the work of art’s material being, as well as its present environmental context and presentation, including background lighting or lighting of the display space, if it belongs to the category of “moveable” objects. Within this limited observation of the work of art as a phenomenon, albeit in a class of its own, the problem of the treatment of lacunae can also be examined. It will be seen immediately that any treatment performed to integrate the image with its lacunae (by induction or approximation), is an intervention that goes beyond the kind of consideration for the work of art that we are constrained to observe. As we are not the artist, the creator, we cannot, with any legitimacy, ignore the march of time and insert ourselves into the moment when the artist was creating the part that is now missing. Our only valid attitude toward a work of art that has entered into the world of life is to consider the work through its current impact on our consciousness. Our behavior towards a work of art must be limited to respect. This approach implies conserving the work and respecting the integrity of what has come down to us, without jeopardizing its future.

With such an attitude, we must limit ourselves to enhancing enjoyment of what is left and can be seen of the work of art, without integrations by analogy, so that there will be no doubt whatsoever about the authenticity of any part of the work of art itself. At this point, but only at this point, can the question be examined of whether or not what remains of a work of art is, in fact, more than its material remains; that is, whether or not the oneness of image of the work would permit reconstruction of certain lost sections, precisely as a reconstitution of the potential oneness that the work of art possesses, because it is a whole and not a sum of parts. I feel that, within acceptable limits, this is admissible and even to be desired, but I should stress that, with such a consideration, I am going beyond the particular *epoché* that I set myself. This suggested integration is a phenomenon within a phenomenon and, as such, is not hidden but stands out more than going by others’ experience.
From what has been said, it is clear that the hypothetical integration of some lacunae is only a partial solution for certain, usually marginal, cases, because just to give a practical example, it is impossible to accept a solution that replaces a missing head or something of that order. Hypothetical integrations, put in brackets like those inserted in texts by philologists, would be admissible for those linkages that could be reconstructed on the basis of the especial metalogical aspects of the image, and which the image’s context allows, with no possible alternatives. Only here is the case-by-case approach allowed. Even so, in most examples such hypothetical integrations will not be possible, and so the problem arises of the lacuna in and of itself. This brings me to a favorite topic, Gestalt psychology, which indirectly proves the method I have promoted throughout twenty years of experience at the Istituto Centrale del Restauro.

What is a lacuna that appears in the context of a painted, sculpted, or even architectural image? If we return to the essence of a work of art, it is not difficult to feel that a lacuna is an unjustified, even painful interruption in the form. Moreover, if we remain within the limits of the epoché (that is, if we remain within the limits of immediate perception), through the spontaneous pattern-making of perception, we will interpret the lacuna in terms of a figure and ground. The lacuna will be sensed as a figure that relegates the painted, sculpted or architectural image to the background, against which the lacuna “figure” stands out. The disturbance produced by the lacuna comes much more from this receding of image to ground, and from the lacuna’s violent intrusion, as a figure, into a context that tries to expel it, than from the formal interruption that the lacuna produces within the image.

Thus the problem is well defined. A reduction has to be made in the prominent figurative value taken on by the lacuna with respect to the real figure—which is, of course, the work of art. That said, it is clear that solutions on a case-by-case basis, as called for by the lacuna, have not strayed from the guiding principle; which is to reduce the lacuna’s perceived prominence as a figure. Here, too, Gestalt psychology will help us in seeking a specific solution. Any ambiguity caused by the lacuna must be suppressed; that is to say, its reabsorption of the image, which would thereby be weakened must be avoided. It would therefore be advisable for the lacuna to be at a different level from the surface of the image. Where that is not possible, its tone should be softened in order to create a different spatial situation from the tones expressed in the image itself. At this point, it can be seen how the empirical criterion of a neutral zone is always flawed, for—even if not combined with the consideration of a lacuna’s emergence as a figure—it still represents a treatment that is almost as arbitrary as a completion based in the imagination.

Nonetheless, it will be observed that our perception’s spontaneous organization of data, upon which we rely, is not completely spontaneous but also in part acquired: for example, the system of reading from left to right, inculcated in us by Byzantine painting, is acquired, and classical antiquity knew nothing of it. But this objection I myself have expressly set out does not change the substance of the problem, or its solution. I did not want the problem of treating lacunae to be solved in a way that jeopardized the work of art’s future, or changed its existence. I have established some points beyond dispute: the full recognition, without difficulty, of all integrations that achieve the potential oneness of the image; and the reduction of the lacuna’s prominence as a figure. These points allow for a great variety of specific solutions, all of which will still be consistent with the principle from which they derive. It is clear that, where such spontaneous schema of perception evolve, in the future it will always be possible to treat lacunae in a way that includes this refinement of perception. Therefore, I have not provided recipes, nor will they be provided: nonetheless, the principle does not change, and the two moments in the history of art will always remain separate, as will the historicity of the work of art (as created by
the artist), from the historicity it enjoys once it enters into the world of life. Nor can it be
debatable that we, who deal with the reception of a work of art, must dwell on this second
historicity, and must model our behavior to favor the work of art, no matter how incomplete or
full of lacunae it might be.