John Ruskin’ “Lamp of Memory” is the first, and best-known, theoretical articulation of the concept of conservation, even though his text doesn’t mention the word, and his paternity of the term was later attributed to him by his followers. Ruskin’s theory began as a polemic against restoration, which he saw as a falsification of the material record of history. For him, architecture’s significance rested as much on the architect’s design as on its execution by craftsmen. There was, he argued, a big downside to restorations bent on turning ruins into speculative versions of what the original design might have been: the evidence of the labor of ancient workmen was lost under the modern facsimiles. These marks of anonymous hand labor, he argued, should be valued as part of the historical record too, as much as the intellectual work of architects. This was quite a radical argument on many levels. Academically, it struck against the idea that the architect’s work, the conceptual intention, is the most valuable content of a building. But Ruskin opposed academicism, and as a leading romantic art critic, he claimed that nature, not convention, was the source of all architectural beauty. Even as they weathered, or precisely because they did, the marks of labor acquired age value, a novel concept that Aloïs Riegl would develop and perfect fifty years later. His argument was also politically radical because it elevated the claims of the working class to the historical record. Restoration was for him a form of erasure that denied future generations an authentic historical record inclusive of the working class. This made restoration morally wrong—an offense against what we now call inter-generational equity. Instead, he conceptualized careful maintenance, or conservation as we know it, as a more moral way of preserving historic buildings. The principle of moral work, one that expresses selfless commitments to others and to the welfare of the community, is central to Ruskin’s Christian-socialist thought. Ruskin was born in 1819 in London. During his private education as a youth, he learned to draw, and continued to do so when he went to Christ Church, Oxford, where he also wrote poetry and began writing about architecture. During an interruption of his studies due to a breakdown in 1840, Ruskin met the painter J.M.W. Turner, whom he had long admired, and traveled in Italy and Switzerland, formative events for the first of the five volumes of his Modern Painters: Their Superiority in the Art of Landscape Painting to the Ancient Masters, published in 1843. He extended his treatment of the connection of aesthetic and spiritual values in The Seven Lamps of Architecture (1849), followed by The Stones of Venice (1851-53), influential on Victorian architects in its exaltation of the Byzantine and Gothic. Ruskin was appointed Oxford’s first Slade Professor of Fine Art in 1869. His later writings encompassed political economy and a broad array of natural and social subjects. Ruskin died in Brantwood, England, in 1900.

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