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Concerning The Preservation of The Monuments and Antiquities of Our Country
(1815)
Translated by Jonathan B. Blower

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With the mandate that a member of our faculty received from one of His Highness’ Ministries, namely to investigate the structural condition of the first church of the Reformation and to submit proposals for the preservation of this monument, a matter was brought up which has been the subject of our considerations for some time and whose effective and comprehensive treatment has hitherto been hindered by unfavorable political circumstances. This subject is the preservation of the monuments and antiquities of our country.

Given the more favorable prospects that have now opened up, we here take the opportunity given to us by the Ministry in the abovementioned mandate to submit a preliminary draft as an introduction to the undertaking we have in mind, namely, as to how the preservation of public monuments might be brought about, how an interest in them might be aroused in the general public, and how their influence on popular education might be promoted.

The administration and care of these artifacts, which previously represented no direct advantage to the state, have not hitherto been allocated to any particular authority. Any decisions of this sort were made by the governments, the clergy, or the magistrates and landowners, whichever one or the other of them assumed that right, quite at random and usually without further consultation at a higher level. It was unfortunately all too often the case that there was no voice within these authorities that was guided by a sense of the venerability of the artifacts, one that felt sufficiently equipped to take up their defense against marauders, or that often only contributed to the demise of many a wonderful work through hastily preconceived judgments. In this way our fatherland lost an endless number of its finest ornaments, which is most regrettable, and unless quite universal and thoroughgoing measures are now taken to stem this course of things we shall soon find ourselves standing uncannily naked and barren, like a new colony in a formerly uninhabited country.

For these reasons it seems expedient that independent authorities be created and entrusted with the welfare of this matter. The parishes certainly contain plenty of capable men who would gladly volunteer to work within these authorities and take up their positions in the same good spirit as those who administer the public property of the urban episcopates.
These authorities would therefore be protective deputations made up of the various professions. It is essential that their members be drawn from the various professions because experience has shown that the clergy alone, for example, to whom the largest and most important portion of our monuments have hitherto been entrusted, were not in a position to protect them. In fact, since the decisions lay solely in their hands, it was often the case that they were guided by a base desire for profit and, in exchange for meager financial gain, handed over church treasures that will be mourned by the fatherland forever. One instance taken from many shall suffice as proof of this, namely that an entire side of the richly painted glass windows at Cologne Cathedral was sold to an Englishman who assured the church a small endowment as well as having the windows reglazed with white glass (which, incidentally, was of advantage to the master glazier, who enjoyed the protection of a senior clergyman for a number of dubious reasons). [...]

Now first and foremost, in order to obtain knowledge of the existing artifacts once the necessary protective deputations have been set up, their initial task will be this: to produce inventories of everything located in their provinces and to accompany these inventories with reports on the state of the artifacts and how they might be preserved. [...]

In order that these inventories do not become too large, the following guidelines might be adopted: such artifacts that can without any doubt be dated in their entirety to the second half of the seventeenth century or later shall not be included, though a report must be made in uncertain cases. On the one hand these artifacts are better preserved than the older artifacts anyway, and, because they are newer, they are esteemed more highly by the common man. On the other hand they are of far less historical and artistic interest than the earlier artifacts.

Once an overview has been provided by the inventories a plan could be made as to how these monuments might best be preserved in order to appeal to the people and to promote national culture and an interest in the history of the fatherland.

The principles followed by the French in these matters would not be allowed to find any sort of application here: namely hauling anything of importance out of its location and into the great museum in the capital. This sort of approach means the degradation of whole regions, towns and villages that had formerly enjoyed possession of venerable reminders of their history, the mere sight of which evokes so many grand sentiments, and particularly in the minds of the young. In addition though, when these artifacts are relocated from their original positions to a foreign environment they also lose a large portion of their significance, and it has often been observed how the effect of an individual work is diminished by the excess of effects in too large a collection.

Property of this sort ought to remain an eternal sanctum for every province, and yet these diverse artifacts—some of which can no longer be enjoyed, have become entirely unrecognizable to the people over time and were therefore virtually lost to them until now—ought to be given back to the people in renewed form as a gift from the state. This would primarily be achieved by bringing these lost treasures back to the light of day, by seeing to it that they are returned to their former glory in a competent manner, at least to the extent that this is possible in such a difficult and, for
the value of the things themselves, dangerous business, and then by keeping all such treasures together in a beautiful and comfortable room that is worthy of them, where they might please, edify and instruct the people. In this much it will be expedient for the sake of supervision alone if all the artistic treasures of a place (with the exception of those that are still appreciated in their intended place, such as altarpieces over altars that are still in use) could be brought together in one collection where they could be shown to the art-lover, albeit under supervision, and exhibited in an orderly fashion, perhaps with a few explanatory notes.

The side room of many a beautiful old church, a fine room in an abbey or an old palace could be used for this purpose, and suggestions could be obtained in advance from the protective deputations. Any decision in this matter would be deferred until a consul has traveled the whole land purely for this reason, and the selection would be made after deliberation and on-site inspection, in the spirit of the principles here established. Many a half-devastated building of definite historical or artistic value could be fully reconstituted in the spirit of its own era, as a place to keep these treasures; it would thus be put to use in the worthiest manner whilst also serving the higher purpose of preservation.

An appreciation of our national treasures thus introduced and implemented throughout the entire fatherland would perhaps be the finest monument to the present age, especially if one were then to organize the art schools in the provinces in conjunction with the undertaking, for not only would they draw instruction from the institution; the institution would also engender such a fine spirit in them that they in turn would contribute to its perfection.

As these institutions expand, the collections of artistic treasures from various places could soon be augmented and made more interesting for study at the art schools by the production of casts or other reproductions of the finest works from other collections, just as it would also be expedient for copies and casts of the principal examples of our artistic treasures to be gathered together in a large collection in the capital, which would provide a fine overview of the existing monuments and could in many cases serve as a form of control.

The deans and teachers of these new art schools would also be well qualified to provide members of the protective deputations. This would have the considerable advantage of winning pupils over to the cause and thus ensuring a beneficent spirit in the next generation. Furthermore, when such institutes as the cathedral chapter at Cologne are reconstituted, it would certainly be a thing of great significance if the appointments were no longer determined by birth alone. Instead, a higher degree of education, particularly in artistic matters, would prepare the way for a worthy handling of the task when such a society is entrusted with the care of so important a symbol of the fatherland. Even more recent times have shown how deplorable this lack of education can be for such an institution: when the famous reliquary box of the three kings at Cologne took flight to Bohemia it had already long since lost the larger part of its huge hoard of old and beautifully carved stones, and now we see how valuable it would have been to have had casts of the missing parts. Now that it is to be returned to its former place it has been robbed of much of the beautiful wrought and gilded silverwork that adorned it in order to cover the transport costs. And in order to cover up the gaps, painted panels from a modern enamel factory—the blemishes of
our own age—have been left behind on this venerable relic, which had gone untouched for so many centuries. If even a single expert had taken an interest here one would at least have had copies in bronze to replace any originals that might have been stolen at some stage. […]

Should one of His Highness’ Ministries take up these preliminary suggestions and issue ordinance for an introduction to this important subject we would ask that we be made aware of it so that one of our consuls, who would give particular attention to the matter on the forthcoming journey, might be informed as to how far the whole has progressed in order to then be able to give instructions on site, but also to enable us, for our part, to raise awareness of the matter among architects in the provinces on behalf of the Ministry.

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