Preservation inevitably involves selection. But on what basis do we chose to invest our individual or collective resources to preserve one building and not another? What if the building is incredibly ugly and everyone hates it? Should the government go against public opinion and invest in its preservation? Before Alois Riegl (1858-1905), only buildings that were unanimously regarded as the highest achievements of architecture were ever preserved. The question of preserving anything else but the most beautiful examples simply did not come up. Riegl was already a well-established art historian and curator when he was named President of the Austro-Hungarian Royal and Imperial Central Commission for the Study and Preservation of Monuments in 1903. He only served two years, as death took him prematurely, but it was enough for him to write this essay, which he intended to set a new philosophical direction for preservation in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In reality, Riegl’s thinking set in motion a new approach to preservation across the German-speaking world, then with each translation, across the globe. Riegl brought the teachings of the Vienna School of Art History, of which he was a protagonist, to bear on preservation. Influenced by positivism, the Vienna School wanted to make art historical methods scientific. In order to achieve objectivity in evaluating the artistic achievements of past epochs, it was important for the historian to bracket out his or her own prejudices, especially any bias about beauty. Ideals of beauty, argued Riegl and his colleagues, changed over time so it was a methodological mistake to study old artworks according to contemporary notions of beauty. The task of the historian was not to gauge the beauty of an artwork according to his taste, but rather to establish the relative value of that artwork within the larger historical development of art. By extension, Riegl made historic significance into the primary scientific criterion for selecting which buildings to preserve. The task of the new modern preservation administration would be to protect historic buildings, thus “historic preservation,” not beautiful buildings or monumental works. This expanded the purview of preservation enormously. Now works by minor architects, vernacular houses, and other neglected buildings could be protected. In his books, especially Questions of Stile (1893) and The Late Roman Art Industry (1901), Riegl had established the historic significance of buildings and objects that other historians had entirely overlooked to the development of architecture and art. For Riegl, architecture and art evolved continuously, as artist tried to adapt and refine the internal formal logic of aesthetic compositions over time, such that no period could be discounted as irrelevant. He opposed the prevalent view at the time that the Baroque was a degenerate period of no ultimate consequence, and tried to stop the trend to restore Gothic churches by removing all Baroque interventions. To that effect, he started a book on Baroque architecture, published posthumously in 1908. Riegl believed preservation should be at the service of the whole of society, not just art historians. He recognized that the non-expert public had different criteria for judging monuments, and tried to analyze them—he had just developed a new theory of reception for his book The Group Portraiture of Holland (1902). The general public, he concluded, tended to valorized buildings that showed signs of age over those that didn’t. This more expansive notion of age value, dovetailed well into his theory of historic value, as it did not exclude buildings on the basis of style or perceived beauty. The public’s general interest in the monuments of the past could therefore be well served under the historian’s criteria for selection.

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