—[...] Do you want me to say it openly? When the restorations are carried out with the theory of Mr. Viollet-le-Duc, which can be called the romantic theory of restoration, a theory that until the day before yesterday was universal and nevertheless is followed by many, indeed even by most in Italy, I prefer badly made restorations to well-made ones. Whereas those, by virtue of their beneficial ignorance, let me distinguish clearly the ancient from the modern part, these, with admirable science and cunning, by making the new appear ancient, put me in such a fierce perplexity of judgment that the pleasure of contemplating the monument disappears and studying it becomes a most fastidious labor.
—Oh, that’s a good one! Better, thus, an ass of a restorer than a learned restorer!
—Listen. Months ago I stopped in a little city where I had never been before to see a church of the thirteenth century, one of those churches with small orders of columns superimposed on the façade, with capitals full of monsters and friezes full of intricacies. I had with me notebook and pencil. The first impression, at a certain distance, was good; but then, as I examined the church, a thousand doubts and suspects began to grow in me. The building had been restored so sublimely that one could not distinguish the old from the new; the same materials, the same sculpture, the same color revered over the centuries. I see a very bizarre corbel and begin to sketch it; my soul was worried; I have someone give me a ladder, and I climb to the top, I touch, hit, scratch, scrape: it was modern stuff. This is the problem I had to confront at each and every moment: do I see a thing of the thirteenth century or one of recent years? There were no old drawings, there were no old photographs. The sacristans, young, hadn’t seen anything; the priest, decrepit, didn’t remember anything. I put back notebook and pencil, and went straight to the station to take the train that would take me away, cursing his excellence the restorer, and calling him a liar, a cheat, a forger, a...
—Calm yourself, please, and let me too say a few words. It is thus the men of the seventeenth century, the baroques, that, as restorers, must be to your liking. When they set out to restore, for example, a Christian basilica, they would make, around the columns of cipolin and eastern granite, by means of mortar and gypsum, the pilasters [pilastracci] clumsy, and would smear the delicate Roman capitals by superimposing on them some flowered patterns similar to their wigs, and under the
architraves they would build, always in lime mortar and gypsum, sqiggle arches, and under the roof made of beautiful supports [cavalletti] they would build with timber centering an elliptical vault with lunettes and ribs; then they would cover everything with an indigestible jumble of volutes, curls, cartouches, and contrivances pompous like the frills of their dresses, and with a multitude of statues so boisterous and heavy that one trembles in passing next to them: all things in cement and stucco; and of the old basilica not even a scrap of a cornice is visible.

—But the day in which a sculpture or some piece of an arch or of a vault falls to the ground, the day in which, for love of thy neighbor [per amore alla vita del prossimo], one removes gypsum, stucco, and timber, that day the pure Christian temple reappears intact under the mantle that, by concealing for a long time the temple’s architectural members, did not damage them.[...]

—In order to conserve, then, should one bury? Then, why is so much money wasted to dig out of the ground the walls, the temples, the theaters, the palaces, the tombs of antiquity? What a sublime restorer, the gravedigger![...]

—[...]The monument, in my opinion, loses, I repeat, all or almost all its importance when the scholar can reasonably doubt that the restoration has more or less altered its forms or added forms that seem original, which is ultimately another way of altering the antique. Now, between the restorer that in this way damages the monument irreparably, and the restorer that, yes, hides the monument but keeps it intact for the discovery of posterity, I choose the second.

—And, what if it occurred as with many books or parts of books that were famous in antiquity and were mislaid or lost forever? That’s some reasoning [Bel costrutto]!

—One thing is a book written on tablets or on parchment, another is a monument of marbles, stones, and bricks. If inside a baroque temple there is a Christian basilica, everybody knows it, in the name of God, or chance sooner or later reveals it. Neither do I approve of the baroque restorers; to the contrary, I maintain that whoever wanted to imitate them today would be crazy. Only I blame and loathe even more the romantic restorers. Let me take up again your comparison: the monument, then, is a book that I intend to read without reductions, additions, or revisions. I want to know with certainty that everything written in the book came out of the pen and the style of the author[...]

—In a word, you want to conserve, not to restore.

—You said it right: conserve, not restore.[...]

—You, as a wise man, put your hands forward not to hit your nose on the ground if you stumble. But let me say how, according to your opinions, here it is not a matter of art but only of archaeology, helped not by imagination, since you exclude any development and even any completion or addition, but helped, where need be, by the shrewd science and practice of the modest builder, which contents himself with keeping the building standing and, for the sake of posterity [per amore dei nepoti], consolidates the old building.

—And yet art has much to do with it, whether one wants it or not. To look after the conservation of a monument one needs the thousand prompt and delicate cares of burning love or passionate charity, as with the sick the assistance of a spouse or of a
Would you find those virtues in the heart of an engineer or a master builder? Doesn’t it seem to you that the fervent soul of the artist is necessary? Let me be the pedant. I will separate, mince, distill, I will use numbers, brackets, parentheses; I will be ineffably boring. And, to begin, I caution how in architectural monuments one or the other of the following three qualities prevails: archaeological importance, picturesque appearance, architectural beauty. Therefore it is legitimate to divide the art of restoration into

- Archaeological restoration (Antiquity)
- Picturesque [pittorico] restoration (Middle Ages)
- Architectural restoration (Renaissance, etc.)

I hasten to add how here it is a matter of something similar to the temperaments of the human body. In the lymphatic system, blood and nerves are not missing; in the blood system, nerves and lymph; in the nervous system, lymph: and blood; nevertheless the medical doctors, in studying the disease, in writing the prescriptions and in ordering a diet, take into account temperament. […]

—It’d be time, indeed, to get some rest, for those that listened to us are already asleep. I take advantage of this to go back to the same singsong: one should not deceive either one’s neighbor or posterity. And, in order not to deceive them, that is, in order to show that a work of addition or completion is not ancient, I want to propose to you no less than eight ways to follow depending on the circumstances:

1. difference of style between the new and the old;
2. difference of construction materials;
3. suppression of profiles or decorations;
4. exhibition of removed old pieces, installed next to the monument;
5. incision in each restored [rinnovato] piece of the date of restoration or of a conventional sign;
6. descriptive epigraph carved on the monument;
7. description and photographs of the different phases of the work, placed within the building or in a place close to it, or description printed in a publication;
8. notoriety.

I’ll start from the end to clarify with examples, that is, in the quickest way, some of these points. Number 8: That the façade of Santa Maria del Fiore is not by Arnolfo, Giotto, Orcagna, or any other author of the time there is no need to let be known to anybody; everybody knows and will always know that the façade is an excellent work of the nineteenth century by Emilio De Fabris, as they know and will know that the façade of Santa Croce is an unhappy work of our time by Matas, as they will also know that the façade of the Duomo in Milan will be, when they manage to complete it, by the poor Pippo Brentano. Number 7: That one of the two towers of the basilica of Sant’Abondio in Como has been added in perfect imitation of the other, ancient tower (and this was, at the least, useless work) by my poor friend the abbot Serafino Balestra there is no need to tell to scholars of Comacine things, since
all of them must have at hand the work of Dartein, where one can read the old and new history of the building, illustrated in all its parts; but the book would not suffice without the help of some other measure, the number 6 or the number 5. Number 4: That in the Palazzo Ducale in Venice some capitals of the ground floor portico and of the first floor loggia have been redone everyone understands immediately by examining in the nearby gallery the ancient capitals, exposed for those who want to see them; but here too measures 5, 6, or 7 are again necessary.

—For Heaven’s sake, let me breathe; and then answer, please, an objection that concerns the first three numbers together. Isn’t there perhaps a danger that archaeological sincerity, the meticulous respect of the monument as a document, would end up lessening the impression that a work of art should stir in the soul? For it is a matter, after all, of a work of art, and if, by way of ifs and buts, we stifle the work of art, our office will not be that of surgeons but of gravediggers. Look: for paintings and frescoes, an order of the Ministry establishes that the lacunae and the holes be filled with the same neutral color, so that the viewer cannot be deceived by the skilful restorer; but the sight of a dirty patch [macchia] right in the middle of the dear face of a Madonna, or of the snow-white bosom of Maria Maddalena, or of the fleshy thigh of Venus, is like a punch in the face.[...]

—Your observation, my dear sir, seems to me correct up to a certain point. But if, on the other side, a painting, even in its nonessential parts, lets me doubt of its genuineness, delight and emotion turn into bother [fastidio]; and then, for a reason different from the one you mentioned, goodbye all the same moral and aesthetic impression, goodbye art. Every theory, we know, wants to be contained in some discrete limits. If, taking up again our numbers, reversed from 3 to 1, I put in a façade in order to match a corresponding gentle capital, a rough-hewed stone; if I leave some clear pieces [candidi tasselli] in the middle of a work already all burnished by time; if in a façade of polished marble I replace an old column with a new column quite rough or of a vulgar stone; if to a building in Greek style I attach an addition in the Gothic style, there’s no doubt that I am being unreasonable, and in order to save the truthfulness of archaeology I forget the rights of art. In the additions, the mass, the contour, the overall appearance should not clash with the monument; the differences will be in the details.[...]

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