By his mid-twenties, Sigurd Curman (1879-1966) had found his calling in preservation. But he felt ill equipped for the task, having little knowledge of architecture—his training was in mathematics, physics, chemistry and aesthetics. After a few unfulfilling years of night courses on building construction at a technical school, he resolved to educate himself by going on a two year study trip of Europe, and training in preservation bureaucracies in France, Italy and Germany. Stylistic restorations were still being carried out across the continent, but Curman sensed that they were intellectually bankrupt. His opinion was deeply influenced by Paul Clemen, Provincial Conservator of the German Empire’s Rhine Province, whom he assisted in inventorying of the province’s monuments. They also visited Metz, just over the border in the District of Lorraine, which the German Empire conquered from France in 1871. Preservation in Metz continued to follow French principles, which Clemen viewed as backward because restorers in pursuit of stylistic integrity destroyed valuable historical traces from other periods. Following his mentor, Curman sought to modernize preservation by making it more scientific. He theorized the importance of past alterations, even those that damaged the building’s original stylistic integrity, as essential to understanding its history. He instantly recognized that his idea could undermine the ability of preservationists to protect monuments by providing precedents for adding contemporary alterations. Against the idea of precedent, Curman argued that contemporary society did not think about monuments like their ancestors, so they should not act like them either. The modern conception of monuments was as historical documents, which meant they should be conserved, not altered. Curman made a further distinction between the building and its context. While the building should be conserved, any changes to its immediate context, such as new building additions, should be done in a clearly contemporary style. Curman believed that to be modern meant to have broken with the past, not just intellectually, but also aesthetically—an conviction shared by the leading architects of his generation, from Frank Lloyd Wright to Walter Gropius. After serving as a professor of architecture at the Royal College of Fine Arts from 1912 to 1917, Curman was building adviser to the public buildings board from 1918 to 1923, when he was appointed National Antiquarian of Sweden, a post that he held until his retirement in 1946. He built an extensive organization and laid the methodological foundations for modern preservation and heritage management. His theory that additions should be unmistakably contemporary in expression remains current to this day.

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