By the time Cesare Brandi (1906-1988) entered the field of preservation in the 1930s, the theory that historic architecture and art should be conserved rather than restored had hardened into dogma, even if in practice some restorations continued. Conservators had developed an aesthetic language of their own, such as infilling areas of loss in paintings with ‘neutral’ colors such as greys or off-white, or capping the top of ruined walls instead of completing them in kind. Such treatments were meant to show the preservationist’s restraint against the urge to restore them. Brandi had the courage to question the accomplishments of conservation treatments, a dangerous contrarian position for a young official of the Italian Administration of Antiquities and the Fine Arts. But Brandi argued his case with a devastating eloquence learned in the prestigious halls of the University of Siena’s Law School, and later refined, for the purposes of a career in preservation, through his training in art history at the University of Florence. He asked a very basic question: are conservation treatments really accomplishing their goal to preserve works of art and architecture? They were certainly adding endurance to the materials out of which art and architecture were made. But art and architecture were more than raw materials, they were also and more importantly aesthetic objects. The aesthetic composition, what he called the “image,” was the reason why those raw materials were assembled in the first place, and the basis for our appreciation of them as art. If a conservation treatment stood in the way of our perception of the artwork’s aesthetic integrity, then it had destroyed the artwork for all practical purposes, and reduced it to raw material. Conservation treatments, he thought, could not avoid aesthetic scrutiny. They had to restore the image to some degree. Brandi realized that his argument could be a slippery slope towards old fashioned restoration treatments. So he was careful to establish a methodology that would prevent such slippages. The central tenet of his method was that the restoration of aesthetic integrity should be based exclusively on the information found on the artwork or building, not on analogies to other works. For example, if the upper portion of a gothic facade had gone missing before any documentation, then it should not be restored according to stylistic analogies to other gothic buildings. The remaining sections of the building should simply be conserved. But if the lacuna, or area of loss, was small enough that its appearance could be inferred and copied from the adjacent fabric, then it was acceptable to restore it in order to preserve the aesthetic integrity of the work. Another important aspect of his method was to insist that infill areas should play an aesthetic double game of appearance and disappearance. Infill should blend into the image and not distract from its integrity, but it should also be distinguishable to the expert eye. The most successful application of Brandi’s preservation aesthetic was in the infilling of lacunae in paintings with a technique he called “trateggio,” which involved painting with miniature linear brushstrokes that would be easily distinguishable from the original upon close inspection, but unrecognizable from the distance from which the artwork’s image was typically apprehended (e.g. a few steps away from the painting). In 1938 Brandi became the founding director of the Central Institute of Restoration (Istituto Centrale di Restauro) in Rome, shaping it in the course of two decades (he stepped down in 1959) into one of the most influential international centers for preservation theory, science and technology. Generations of preservationists were trained there according to the theory that conservation treatments should be just as concerned with making aesthetic experiences endure as with making materials last.
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