We owe the belief that we must distinguish between copying and imitating a historic building to Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy. For him, copying was a mere mechanical procedure, whereas imitating required intellectual comprehension of the architectural design principles underlying a building. Copying was acceptable only as a relatively mindless way to infill areas of loss in antique buildings. He argued that, since Roman and Greek buildings were composed of many identical parts, missing elements could be easily restored with copies of the same extant components. But he cautioned that to design new buildings in the classical style required more than just piling up copies of parts of ancient buildings. It involved understanding the principles of composition that the ancients used to bring all the parts of a building into a harmonious whole. He defined such an understanding, applied to new design, as imitation. The work of imitation was more than a display of the architect’s intimate knowledge of ancient techniques, it was also a tested his creativity and ability to measure himself up to the ancients. Quatremère believed only the greatest architects and artists of his time could truly imitate, such as his good friend Antonio Canova, whom he considered the greatest neoclassical sculptor. Imitation was difficult, and even Canova humbly acknowledged the superiority of Pheidias when he refused to restore the Elgin Marbles. The association of copying with restoration and imitating with new design also established a hierarchy that placed restoration architects decidedly below new construction architects.

Quatremère defended the importance of maintaining the integrity of architecture through proper restorations, and he strongly opposed the practice of removing the more valuable parts of buildings to museums. He opposed the emergence of the first architectural museums, such as Alexandre Lenoir’s Musée des Monuments Français (1795), on account of the damage that well meaning curators did to buildings, and because the exhibited fragments could no longer be properly understood in relation to the architectural composition of which they were once a part. He raged against architectural museums for encouraging copying and denying the possibility of imitating.

Quatremère was born in Paris in 1755. He initially trained to practice law before studying art and history and apprenticing with sculptors Guillaume Coustou and Pierre Julien. He developed an interest in classical architecture on a visit to Naples with Jacques-Louis David. During the French Revolution, Quatremère led the conversion of Paris's church of St. Genevieve into the Panthéon, and promoted neoclassicism in architecture. An advocate for artistic freedom and copyright protection, he was elected to the National Assembly and the Council of Five Hundred. However, he was twice nearly executed over alleged involvement in royalist plots, and went into exile in 1797 in Germany. After returning to France in 1800, Quatremère became Intendant Général des Arts et Monuments Publics in 1815, and served permanent secretary of the Académie des Beaux-Arts from 1816 to 1839. In addition to essays on art, architecture and museums, he published biographies of a number of Italian artists. Quatremère died in Paris in 1849.

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