

NOLI ME TANGERE – ON TOUCH

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Abstract

This paper discusses the issue of physical interaction with monuments. John Ruskin suggested that “...we have no right whatsoever to touch them...”. At the same time, Violet le Duc took the opposite position, encouraging contemporaries to enter into creative interactions with relics of the past. During the hundred and fifty years this controversy remains a classic issue. At the beginning of the 21st century we face new quandaries as a result of our ‘traditional reality’ gradually migrating into ‘virtual space’. Do we still need physical interaction with authentic historic items during the current era, given that our perceptions can be so readily deceived? The human need for creativity and experience may be satisfied by digital tools, which are created and exist in the ‘virtual world’ – away from physical reality. Perhaps this is the ideal moment to discuss such dilemmas, since we have the benefit of more than a century of informed discussion and an urgent need to understand our presence in the context of the modern world, before change overwhelms our understanding of the past. Shifts in attitude towards Neo-Gothic structures are illustrated through examples from Kraków and Oxford, plans to demolish urban heritage in Vienna, Chester and Liverpool and through commercialisation of prehistoric artifacts in the Lascaux cave system.

Keywords: theory of conservation, heritage, conservation philosophy

Introduction

Impatiens noli tangere is the Latin name of the ‘touch-me-not’, a common herbaceous plant often found in damp places. When touched, its pods explode seeds and the life of the flower reaches its end – hence the name.

In “The Lamp of Memory” John Ruskin wrote about monuments: ‘...They are not ours. They belong partly to those who built them and partly to all the generations of mankind who are to follow us. The dead have still their right in them...’ [8]. Both the dead, that is and our successors, but not us. What sense did this interdiction have? Is it still relevant today?

We are a generation experiencing the end of an era: we have witnessed the collapse of the free-market myth, together with the pyramid built upon faith in unceasing economic growth. This is the end of a two-hundred-year era of industrial revolution based on fossil fuels and the relentless conquest of the Earth. Some say that we are heading towards a global environmental disaster. As a civilization, we still have huge potential but surprisingly few ideas how to put it to good use. We are the first generation who will bequeath future generations a world covered in waste, polluted by radioactive leaks, with a disturbed and genetically modified ecosystem. It is a great paradox of our production-governed times that, leaving heaps of indestructible waste, we are not in the least focused on durability! Our knowledge, experience and even art are ephemeral; we record it onto non-durable media which require complex technology to be decoded – the recordings are not even resistant to cosmic radiation. How far are they removed from works carved in stone, created with the use of lengthy and complex technological processes? It is all mind-boggling and difficult to comprehend. Obviously, also for us – art restorers and preservationists, the time has come to make some crucial reassessments.

As history suggests, each period poses new challenges for conservation-restoration. However, this does not mean that old principles are no longer used; it means that nothing gets accepted once and for all and principles undergo verification, sometimes in a very painful way, as a result of dramatic events. This does not necessarily mean that old principles should be discarded, thus: how should the Ruskinian 'do not touch' mantra be understood today? Times and the world have changed and new technologies have appeared. In the context of more than one hundred years of experience, this appeal sounds like a warning, like a directive coming from the past. Can it inspire us, in whose hands lies the duty to preserve what we inherited from the previous generations and the choice of what we should pass on to those who will follow?

It can be concluded, rather perversely, that even *no* intervention is *some* kind of intervention in fact; for leaving an object to itself means agreeing to it being transformed – destroyed by natural processes. However, this is not what Ruskin meant. He simply opposed any material interaction with the historic fabric, because he wanted it to be preserved with all secondary additions brought on by the passing of time. But let us look at those whom Ruskin denied the right to touch. During his era, conservation of architecture was synonymous with rebuilding and renovation; archaeological sites were freely dug through and irreversibly damaged and discovered artefacts went to supply private collections. Coats of varnish and overpainting were brutally removed from paintings, frescos were experimentally transferred. Those were times when methods of structural consolidation or hydrophobization were still unknown; times when Violet le-Duc, a self-appointed constructor of Gothic cathedrals, raged on the Continent. In a phrase: those were entirely different times.

To be honest, however, it seems that no one ever did take the Ruskinian principle literally. His appeal was a reaction to a specific situation and it sprang from his exceptional sensitivity. Ruskin was a person – if I may put it this way – who was deeply aware of the essence of what he was looking at. A mind incapable of reflection, which looks without seeing and listens without hearing, will fail to perceive the hidden values of the surrounding world. A visible sign of Ruskinian insight is Venice, which he discovered for his contemporaries, even though at that time most travel guides suggested it was best to steer clear of the city.

'Not to touch' is perhaps the most difficult task for a restorer, for how can one resist touching when it is so easily possible? In its classical definition, art conservation excludes passivity – it is an action whose aim is to preserve, protect from damage and deterioration. Even 'preventive restoration', whose aim, as defined by Brandi, is to bring back the artefact's value into a recipient's consciousness, not necessarily involving any direct interaction with the artefact, is an action [1]. According to every definition that has ever functioned, the restorer's task is to maintain the life of an object and take care to preserve its fabric and meaning. So we preserve the fabric, the substance of the work, and take care of its artistic form and its meaning by documenting it.

As I mentioned above, each new era poses new and surprising challenges to restorers. The period of Romanticism, of searching for national identities, was a time when relics of the past were cherished, collected and contemplated. Collecting passions gave rise to scientific research and development of new branches of knowledge: archaeology, conservation and art history. A dilemma unavoidably appeared - how should one deal with historic artefacts? What should be done to preserve their state, restore their greatness and reveal their exceptional features? The nineteenth-century instances of restoration sprang from the needs of that society and while they did contribute to increasing interest in monuments and more generally in historic artefacts, the scale of damage they caused must have made those sympathetic to Ruskin's view cry out: *Noli tangere!*

Then, just when it seemed that the principles of handling relics of the past, as formulated by Riegel and developed by Dvořák, would remain unchanged, the two world wars brought out the necessity to verify them. The complete reconstruction of destroyed built heritage became not only acceptable, but simply necessary. The object's existence in a specific, historically documented form became more important than its authenticity. The trauma of war damage showed how addicted we had become to matter, how submissive we were towards the primacy of historic fabric. It took a major re-evaluation of the former way of thinking for the decision to be taken to rebuild the Old Town in Warsaw, which meant to reinstate the *genius loci* of the destroyed capital using entirely new materials, while not being entirely faithful to the original form.

The second half of the 20th century, with the economic prosperity of the West and the poverty of the East, brought new challenges. After years of estimating losses and rebuilding destroyed historic cities, in

the ruins of which millions of artefacts of lesser and greater importance and of different periods got lost, there appeared a new slogan – *modernity*. This slogan, inscribed on banners displayed by proponents of ‘progress’, became a challenge to the past and, although it was not entirely clear then, to historic artefacts and buildings. It is surprising that the power of this word circumvented the barrier of the Iron Curtain and despite the economic differences between the East and West, the process of destroying cultural heritage proceeded in a similar fashion simultaneously on both sides. The need to break away from the aesthetics of the old and the destroyed was overpowering. In Poland, some objects carried the additional burden of the Partitions; being branded as work created by invaders, while others, in turn, were seen as exposing the backwardness of the Polish countryside vernacular. There was absolutely no place for them in the modern Socialist reality.

And so, the 1960s irreversibly changed the appearance of many European cities. For example, in Liverpool during 1966, the city council earmarked for demolition *seventy-eight thousand* buildings which made up the core of the residential area in the city centre. Derek Latham commented of that time: “Councils seemed to vie with each other to complete destruction of their built heritage, encouraged by government and supported by architects and planners, who presented watercolour images of a sunlit concrete world peopled with brightly painted figures living under a blue sky” [6].

Mario Schwarz and Manfred Wehdorn, discussing one hundred instances of restoration of historic town buildings in Vienna, recall the danger which loomed over many of them in the 1960s and 1970s, giving the example of Spittelberg, a street which was planned to be entirely razed to the ground [9].

On our Cracovian ground, an excellent illustration of those changes is the discussion about the leading Neo Gothic building in Cracow – the Jagiellonian University, Collegium Novum. This is probably the most important building of Cracovian Historicism. The modern seat of the oldest Polish university, the edifice was erected between 1882 and 1887, mainly using funds drawn from the Austro-Hungarian invaders thanks to the cunning of University professors. The building was designed with passion; every detail was discussed by a circle of professors, eminent architects and historians of art and the main idea held by the building committee was to introduce as many motifs typical of the Polish Gothic style as possible. At the time it was constructed, it was a synonym of Polishness for the nation living under partition.

Subsequently, in the 1960s, Karol Estreicher, the most eminent Cracovian historian of art at that time, publicly voiced an opinion that the Neo Gothic style in Cracow was first and foremost a tool of Germanisation. This was a very strong argument, especially if we take into account the fact that it was voiced only 20 years after the war. What is more, Estreicher not only criticized the architectural design, but also questioned the knowledge of art historians participating in the project, calling them flatly dilettantes. In his article, Estreicher writes: “The most important work by Książarski, which up to this day is regarded as his original architectural creation, that is the Collegium Novum of the Jagiellonian University, is – simply put – an instance of architectural plagiarism. It has to be said once and for all for the sake of truth. Książarski reproduced here, from the outside, the Kreuzgymnasium in Dresden (...), and from the inside, in the staircase, the vaults of the Teutonic Castle in Malbork” [3].

The opinions voiced by Estreicher affected not only the architectural value of the Collegium Novum, but the value of Neo Gothic architecture in general, although obviously one cannot put the whole blame on Estreicher. He was, in colloquial terms, “a child of his times,” involved in a common trend contesting Historicism and Art Nouveau. Even though one might have expected that the war experience and commonly accepted principles of conservation-restoration would have been an effective antidote which protected historic buildings from devastation, the objects erected at the end of the 19th century were not under protection; they were eagerly adapted and their furnishings were thoughtlessly destroyed.

At almost exactly the same time in Oxford, a dramatic decision was taken to dismantle the Oxford University Museum of Natural History – an architectural masterpiece, co-created, paradoxically, by John Ruskin. This magnificent building, which masterfully resolved the dilemma of constructing a modern structure on the basis of historical patterns, which displayed ingenious solutions concerning the interiors and through which Ruskin could actually bring to life his conceptions concerning granting creative freedom to simple workers – this magnificent edifice was to be pulled down to make way for a modern concrete structure. The *opus magnum* of the nineteenth century architecture of Oxford ceased to be attractive, which was borne out by the words of T.S.R. Boase, the English counterpart of Estreicher: “The museum has never been widely admired” [7].

Obviously, the heritage protection millieux did not stay put. In 1962 in France, the *Loi Malraux* was formulated: it was the first directive which expressed the need not only to protect, but also to revitalize historic sites as a whole [10]. Another document was the *Venice Charter*, whose entire fourteenth chapter

was devoted to this subject; it was the first to take into account the inextricable connection between an object and its context, thus making Max Dvorak's conceptions legally valid. The Charter also emphasized artistic and cultural values displayed by "humble objects". In Polish circles, the Venice Charter was supported by the Warsaw-Nairobi Recommendation.

The 1970s carried a whiff of a breakthrough. Several phenomena contributed to this fact. First and foremost, there appeared the so-called 'best preserver' – the money shortage caused by the recession during the second half of the 1970s. Due to the economic slump in Western countries, demolitions were suspended, which rescued, for example, the market square in Chester – one of the more valuable medieval cities in Britain, even though the rest of the city was unrecognizably transformed. The 1970s also brought an important cultural breakthrough, mistakenly perceived only to be 'rebellious youth' and the associated rise of new musical forms. However, it was the 'Flower Children's' generation who appreciated the history of civilization and culture and by searching for Romantic references in the past, they changed the approach to historic artefacts. The year 1975, hailed as the European Architectural Heritage Year, turned out to be crucial for European art restoration. Many initiatives and organizations were launched and the first entries appeared in the UNESCO World Heritage List. The following years further widened the scale of protection, whose range was then defined in the Washington Charter of 1987. Apart from historic architectural assemblies, the natural, archaeological and social aspects were noted, thus making cultural landscape the object of heritage protection.

The rehabilitation of the Neo Gothic style did not happen until the 1980s, when the first art history sessions devoted to art of the second half of the 19th century were held. It was during this period that Collegium Novum was finally accepted as one of the peak achievements of the Polish Neo-Gothic. Shortage of money also rescued the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, although part of the assembly, i.e. the curator's house, was demolished.

It is difficult to estimate the scale of damage done across Europe as a result of earlier aversions. Today, we can freely call it 'a holocaust of cultural landscape'. Under the excuse of 'progress' and modernity, not only thousands of buildings, but also their furnishings were destroyed. Amongst the Neo-Gothic furniture of Collegium Novum only that of the assembly hall remains; the rest was burned. No one appreciated the splendid artefacts of pre-war craftsmanship: tiled stoves, wooden staircases, old chandeliers, wrought iron bars, stuccos, or window woodwork. The arrival of the entry-phone led to the loss of decorative door handles. Changes came, as they still are coming – the world is in a state of flux, under permanent reconstruction...

Noli tangere. Today we, the next generation, are crying and lamenting the damage done by our predecessors to artefacts which, according to Ruskin, did not belong to them. Our fathers only inherited them from their fathers. If only they had listened to Ruskin – the historic centres of European cities would look very different today. Wooden and military architecture, so mercilessly demolished in Poland, would have survived.

And what about today? Let us have a look at the most recent years which preceded the end of the neoliberal economic boom and left us in the dramatic present-day situation. In the 1980s profit expectations were transferred from money-markets to production efficiency, which resulted in the lowering of employment costs through automation and consequently the rise of mass-produced items. This process caused massive social changes: traditional craftsmanship declined and mass production began to oust local products. Ruskin's anticipations became reality: the creator turned into a consumer.

With mass production there naturally appeared a mass culture. The roots of this culture can be traced to the process of cultural globalization. It is assumed to be remote from local creativeness, hence locally created objects are alien to it, although they may be attractive – but only as products. That is why, at one point, marketing specialists suggested we refer to monuments as 'tourist products' and those whose interest should be awoken – the 'target'. Thus, heritage became subject to economic estimation. Today, nobody speaks of memorial or historical values anymore; the historic artefact has been given a new *material* value. It had to be so, since every historical period tends to perceive the world 'through its own glasses'. Who is going to spend money on protecting something of an intimate unspecified sentimental value? Ours are different times. Since the material value is part of the value of a historic artefact, its merits will be considered in the context of it being 'a worthy investment', and consequently worth protecting. This breeds tension between restorers and users, for the values for which we protect historic artefacts are not always saleable. On the other hand, searching for consensus is necessary if we truly want to save our heritage.

Is there still a place in contemporary culture for objects which are deeply rooted in native tradition and landscape, but fall short of economic challenges? Where in this globalized reality is there room for historic artefacts? What is the restorer's place?

A possible answer to these questions may be found in the case of the mosaic on the façade of the Cracovian Biprostal building. A magnificent abstract 600-square-metre decoration, on the wall of the only high-rise building erected in Cracow in the 1960s, was to be torn down during thermal modernization in 2010. Information about this appeared on social networks and was quickly picked up by the media. The proponents for its destruction put forward the following arguments: the owner is allowed to do anything to the building, the economic aspects of using the building are more important than the mosaic and insulating the walls would lower the running costs. Why should the building be protected when it is not even a monument? and, last but not least, the mosaic is "hideous" – even if some people like it, it is devoid of any value. It is worth noting that none of the arguments quoted above belongs to the realm of art, culture, restoration or heritage protection. They all belong to a world driven by the logic of the free-market and consumption. The conviction that the mosaic is not a monument springs from a belief that a monument must be a listed object protected by the law. Moreover, a contemporary perspective conforms to the idea that a monument should be "pretty". Unlike their 19th century predecessors, who may have appreciated the charm of ruins, for example, the materialists fail to reflect upon the passing of time. In turn, the proponents for keeping the mosaic intact emphasized its uniqueness as well as its perfect integration with the building for which it had been designed. (It should be noted that such ceramic decorations, popular in the postwar period, were almost all destroyed during the last two decades). Eventually, social pressure and numerous protests, along with letters and appeals to conservation-restoration authorities rescued the mosaic, since it is one of the very few left in Cracow. *Noli tangere*. After all, it didn't belong to us!

The above example shows that we cannot discuss cultural heritage protection using the language of economics. This language is suitable for planning a budget, or concluding a credit agreement, but not for heritage protection. In the same way, nobody will discuss the intangible value of goods within the field of banking.

The best illustration of the change in approach towards cultural heritage during the 20th century are perhaps illustrated by two prehistoric painting galleries: the caves in Lascaux and Chauvet. The Lascaux system of caves, discovered in 1940, was quickly opened to visitors and became a major tourist attraction, bringing economic revival to the region and attracting thousands of visitors. With time, it became evident that such intensive intrusion distorted the caves' delicate microclimate, leading to an invasion of microorganisms which is causing problems to this day. We now know that re-establishing the climatic balance inside the cave through air conditioning is impossible. The cave contains a complex ecosystem and functions like a living organism. Letting people enter it irreversibly distorted that balance. The Chauvet cave was discovered half a century later in the 1990s and was immediately sealed. The assembly of paintings discovered inside is nearly twice as old as those in Lascaux. It is possible to enter only with a consent from the French Ministry of Culture for research purposes and only for a few hours a year, with a small group of people. Werner Herzog's four-member team were allowed only three hours to shoot material for the film: *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*. It was recorded in 3D and gives one a feeling of being inside the cave – even of experiencing the almost physical presence of the prehistoric painters. No tourists. No crowds, stalls or shops – the cave is closed. The stone walls and steel doors protect its unsalable values. The paintings in Chauvet are not to be touched.

Ironically, it is during our extremely materialistic and consumerist era that tools have been created which allow us to protect historic artefacts without touching them. We have the power to restore an object, make it readable to contemporary tastes – as Brandi desired – using no treatment at all. A damaged original can be placed safely in a repository. An art restorer can apply virtual treatments to it: remove yellowed varnish, reconstruct it and then invite visitors to view it in a virtual gallery. Given that even now we can take virtual walks, soon we will likely be able to experience an almost real-life full-sensory experience of visiting, for example, the Acropolis from any geographical location. Will this possibility heighten or diminish the rank of this place, which for many today is little more than another 'must-see' on a trip itinerary, unreal in the sense that it is usually filled with crowds of perspiring and disinterested tourists?

Let us put these futuristic visions aside. If there is one important lesson to be taken from the experience of the past then it is that we are unable to foresee what will happen next, what needs will arise, what principles and expectations will appear. Our task is to protect heritage from thoughtless destruction and to persuade people that even if they cannot respect the works of past generations, at least they should grant their successors freedom of choice. In the face of looming cultural homogenisation, it is art restorers who

will lay claim to objects belonging to different periods and cultures. It will be a new and important challenge for them, for they will no longer fight for individual masterpieces, but for the very embodiment of the cultural richness of the past.

Looking back at the damage done during the 20th century, we may arrive at the conclusion that the erroneous thinking lay in ascribing specific values to cultural objects and in the continuous assessment of whether they were of value and what exactly that value and the rank of the objects were. It happened regardless of whether the highest value was perceived as historic, as it was in the past, or material, as it is today. A generation will perceive particular values in a particular way and future generations will formulate their own perceptions anew. However, is it possible to protect historic artefacts without ascribing *any* value to them? Yes, if we think like Ruskin did: “They do not belong to us.” They just *are* and the only thing we should do is pass them on to our successors. We can interpret them, use them as a source of knowledge or aesthetic experience – they may even evoke anger or repulsion in us – but we have no right to destroy them simply because we fail to notice in them values that we currently deem significant. Not touching, then, will be an indicator of the highest form of respect, not only to an artwork itself, but also to previous and future generations.

Conclusion

Noli me tangere are the words with which resurrected Christ addresses Mary Magdalene, who is the first person to meet Him outside His tomb. “Touch me not,” or, “Don’t hold me.” The words that follow sound very mysterious: “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to the Father” [11]. Thus: “Do not touch” so as not to disturb an ongoing process.

What significance do these considerations have for us as people of the 21st century? Perhaps, before touching, it is worth asking, “What is the point of touching?” Maybe this question should be asked more often today. Perhaps sometimes it will help us verify our attitude towards an artefact and do what for the art restorer is the most difficult thing to do – accept the state of the work and the process it is in; agree to its untouched state and in this way, paradoxically, step out of time, in that very moment. *Noli tangere* tells us – do not touch, instead, look, see or think, or as a philosopher would put it: Just rest within your being, if by some curious coincidence you have been given this experience.



Fig. 1. Collegium Novum, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, 1882 – 1887, F. Księżarski. Photo: M. Bogdanowska, 2012.



Fig. 2: Collegium Novum, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, 1882 – 1887, F. Księżarski. Assambly hall after restoration carried in 1998/ 99. Photo: K. Polesch, 2003.



Fig. 3. Oxford University Museum of Natural History, 1855 – 1860, T. Dean, B. Woodward. The main court. Photo: M. Bogdanowska, 2007.



Fig. 4: Biprostal, Kraków, 1964. M. Wrześniak, B. Czapczyński, mosaic decoration designed by C.Styrylska – Taranczewska. Photo: M. Bogdanowska, 2010.

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