

Between interpretations and rules. (More) Reflections on restoration theory

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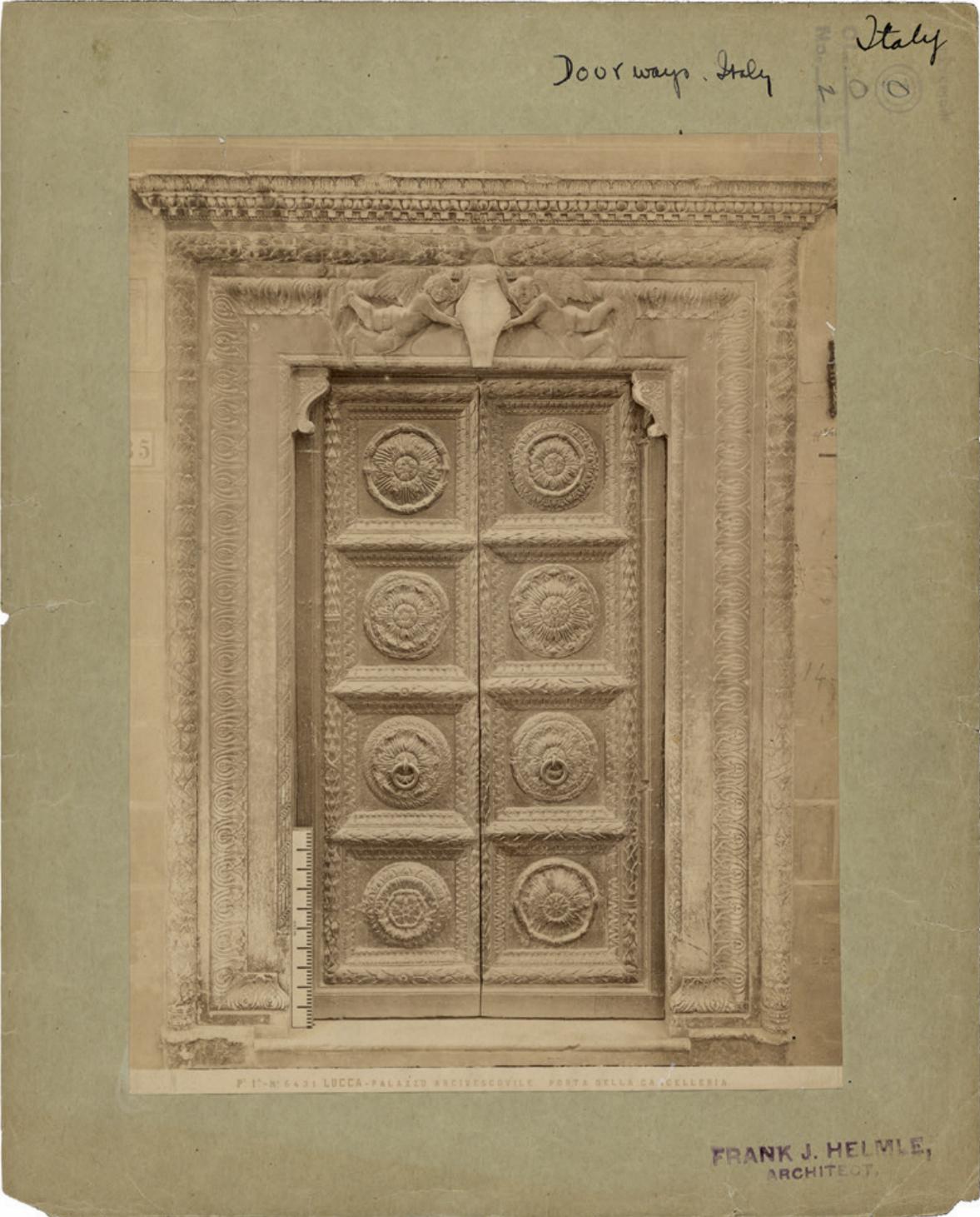
Abstract

The question this essay attempts to answer is what the role of theory is today in the complex world of restoration and conservation. But that is not all. The aim is also to bring back to the centre of the discipline the theoretical nodes, which too often take second place to the design and technical aspects, such as those that give substance to the discussion on heritage and patrimonialisation. Much has been said on the critical formulation of a restoration project, especially today, in the face of global phenomena becoming ever more complex there is a necessity to recuperate the theoretical and notional values of the discipline. Faced with the advancement of technical solutions and the ever-increasing intrusiveness of scientific instruments, restoration risks losing its theoretical foundations. In addition to questions about laboratory investigations, sustainability, climate change issues or the choice of green products, it seems more necessary than ever to return to the more strictly philosophical-humanistic questions that must then necessarily be the foundation of restoration work.

Keywords

Restoration, conservation, theory, heritage.

In recent years, much has changed on the ever-expanding horizon that defines the sky of restoration¹. The first, and perhaps most difficult to govern, is the dialectic between history as an examination of the sources, which inform the restoration, and “presentism” which is emphasized by the enhancement. The question is whether the *tout est present* and the *tout est patrimoine* can coexist, and whether they are irreconcilable or reveal a contradiction that requires a new conception of the space and time of the restoration². If the aim of restoration is to maximize the symbolic value, which can engage architecture in a game of checkers on the table of *enrichissement* (Boltanski, Esquerre, 2017), this raises the question of what might affect its “historical” legitimacy. Perhaps it can be limited to a tool for narratively enriching the value that an artefact can acquire if it somehow becomes part of a collection, to then perhaps embody an “image” to be expended on the globalised tourism market³. In that case it would no longer be necessary to speak only of a *Poverty of Theory* (Thompson, 1978),



Fratelli Alinari, Palazzo Arcivescovile,
Porta della Cancelleria, Lucca (about
1870-1890).
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but of its reduction to the certainly central element of a narrative that legitimises a theory of values that is apparently entirely symbolic, and in fact for the most part chiefly mercantile.

If we do not accept the almost ontological reduction of what is produced by a restoration to goods that can be collected, the question then becomes what can a restoration work transmit other than a testimony, which must be the very reason for its existence (Collet, 2007).

The cognitive and operative sequences that lead to the recognition of a heritage often contrast with procedures that, if followed, would ensure the patrimonial value and social and/or cognitive processes sometimes shared and sometimes challenged by that recognition. What comes into play, especially in restoration, is the role of the instability of the values that should be transmitted (Prigogine, Stengers, 1998), so the use of protocols seems to be a remedy capable of ensuring both the authority of those who intervene and the ordinariness of the work carried out (Olmo, 2020).

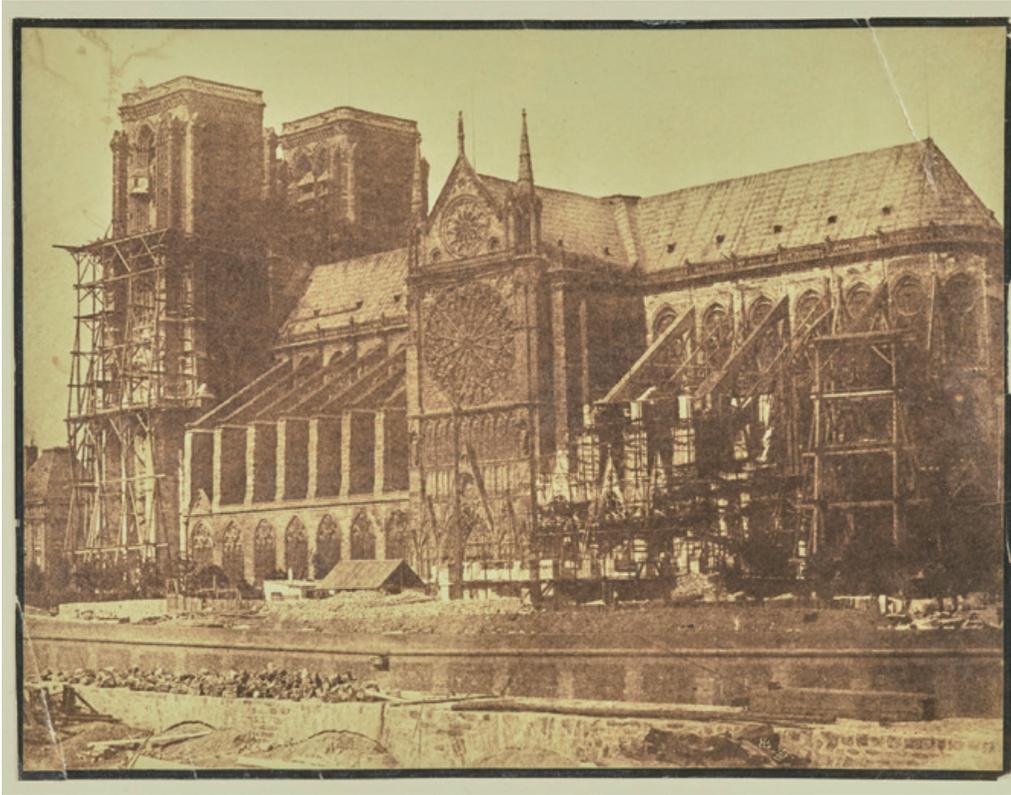
When patrimonialisation translates cognitive plots into worksite practices an alteration of the “fact” occurs, as well as possible a juxtaposition between hermeneutical integrity (sometimes abused by patrimonialisation) and methodical integrity safeguarded by inventories, dictionaries and legislation, which fill the shelves of libraries and professional studios. Ultimately, perhaps no human activity is focused on the paradoxes that come with patrimonialisation, such as restoration. A material trace (a place of worship, a factory, a service station, but also a garden or terrace) undergoes a metamorphosis and becomes a monument when a policy, in Europe at least, invests it with the issue of identity (local, national if not universal). This happened, not without creating another paradox, in the early 19th century, for example, when the same name, Gothic, was given to two different and conflicting temporalities, as occurred between Great Britain and France. The transition from a revival to an *adventure des mots*, even measured by attention to and the translation of key words in the restoration language, is very short.

So today, restoration should define what it actually deals with. In an attempt to outline a theory, this transition, as mentioned, is fundamental. The first answer still derives from a now forgotten Dewey: empirical evidence is what guides the restoration work (Cerutti, Pomata, 2008)! This is the basis for establishing legitimacy that can then be validated by documents and archives.

At this point, however, there are too many instances where the document replaces evidence that would be provided by the work (Caccia Gherardini, 2017) and instead it is documents that question the work and define its genealogy. This is the philological drift that so excited restoration theorists early on.

Resuming the discussion of what actually occurs during restoration work, of how and who constructs it, given that it is a social production, and of how three forms of interpretation – cognitive, decisive, creative (Pino, 2013) – coexist in each action that shapes an existing work, becomes the true shroud of Penelope. First of all, as there is more than one Penelope weaving the shroud, the actions and actors (roles and rules), and not just principles and values, must be placed back at the centre of theoretical reflection⁴.

Restoration is embodied in a project and is *therefore* both an intentional act and an expression of collective conventions, and not a mere artistic intention in its broadest sense but a continuous negotiation between interpretations (and subjective responsibility) and rules (dictated by the societies in which the restoration takes place): a form



Hippolyte Bayard, South side of Notre-Dame, Paris, during restoration (1847).
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of informal negotiation, which knows no protocols⁵. This is why, when it comes to restoration projects, the issue of interpretations and decisions in uncertain conditions arises time and again (Coretto, 2002).

A restoration project needs to address the complexity of phenomena, with all the particularities which each field of interest entails. This means keeping a uniform vision of the different problems analyzed in specialized and multidisciplinary approaches, while integrating the different fields of knowledge with an in-depth examination in order to guarantee the greatest conservation of the single asset with the minimum intervention. To combine the totality of our analytical knowledge in order to bring about the inter-reaction of disciplines and ways of thinking which are often so different – from “rhetoric” to “logic” (Preti, 1968) – presupposes a culture which contradicts the uncritical recourse to text-book formulas, but which is able to re-elaborate principals, rules, and experience in the light of differing doctrines. To restore certainly does not mean to re-write, but to enter into the culture of the object in order to understand the aspects which lie behind a particular text, to read and knowingly conserve all the material stratifications. Today the discipline has adopted the idea that a project is founded on the awareness and reading of what exists, almost on the model of the famous book by Carlo Ginzburg (Ginzburg, 1981); a complex process which does not correspond with the mere acceptance of material documents or immutable significance. It is the dynamic acquisition of information which interfaces with the designer, with his culture, where the same information is enriched, and gives rise to a continuous flow of interpretation of all new facts as they are acquired. An asset changes and develops layers in the long processes which pass through different uses, readings and interpretations.

A lively discussion between disciplines and the many theoretical formulations which have all come together in a well-established literature have not been able to produce standards and regulations for restoration practice, but they have without doubt contributed to the improvement and consolidation of terms and procedures.

Although the issue of the terms used in restoration is very complex and not yet completely resolved. For over twenty years we have been discussing, for example, the abuse of the term heritage (Caccia Gherardini; Olmo, 2015). From Dominique Poulot to Nathalie Heinich, from Gravari Barbas to Harrison (Gravari Barbas 2005; Poulot 2006; Heinich, 2009; Harrison, 2013), sociologists, geographers, historians and restorers have thrown a warning about “everything is heritage” or heritage as a possible tool to build consensus. Perhaps today it is worth recalling the reflection on the historical construction of the category of heritage. Heritage is primarily a legal category and is linked, as Françoise Fortunet points out (Fortunet, 2005), to the delineation of the limits assigned to private property by Napoleonic Codes. A definition that makes public-private opposition radical, and which becomes even stronger when heritage, starting from 1960s, is detached from the social construction of the nation and an attempt is made to confer heritage a universal value.

A parabola that joins another: that of the transition of heritage from a mercantile to a non-mercantile value. It then returns, especially after the end of the 80s, to being linked to logics and policies related to economic enhancement.

A parable that tends to replace, as the matrix of the definition of heritage, the law with various and necessarily conflicting theories of values. A parable that is emphasized by the appearance of the idea of intangible heritage, either linked or not to the tangible one. If heritage is both text and paratext, it is almost taken for granted that paratext is not only historicized and linked to a place but is also familiar with all the disarticulations that Arjun Appaduraj and Angelo Torre describe well (Torre, 2011; Appudarai, 2016), when the place is replaced by the creation of locations. It is just to be recalled how imaginaries – artificial but pervasive – of mass tourism and real estate market internationalization participate today, as Salvatore Settis highlights (settis, 2007), in defining the characters of a heritage (for example, George Ackerman would have written about the villa) in order to realize that today each investigation of heritage cannot be approached without reflecting on the types of heritage value as suggested by Harald Fredheim e Manal Khalaf in an article published in 2016 (Fredheim, Khalaf, 2016).

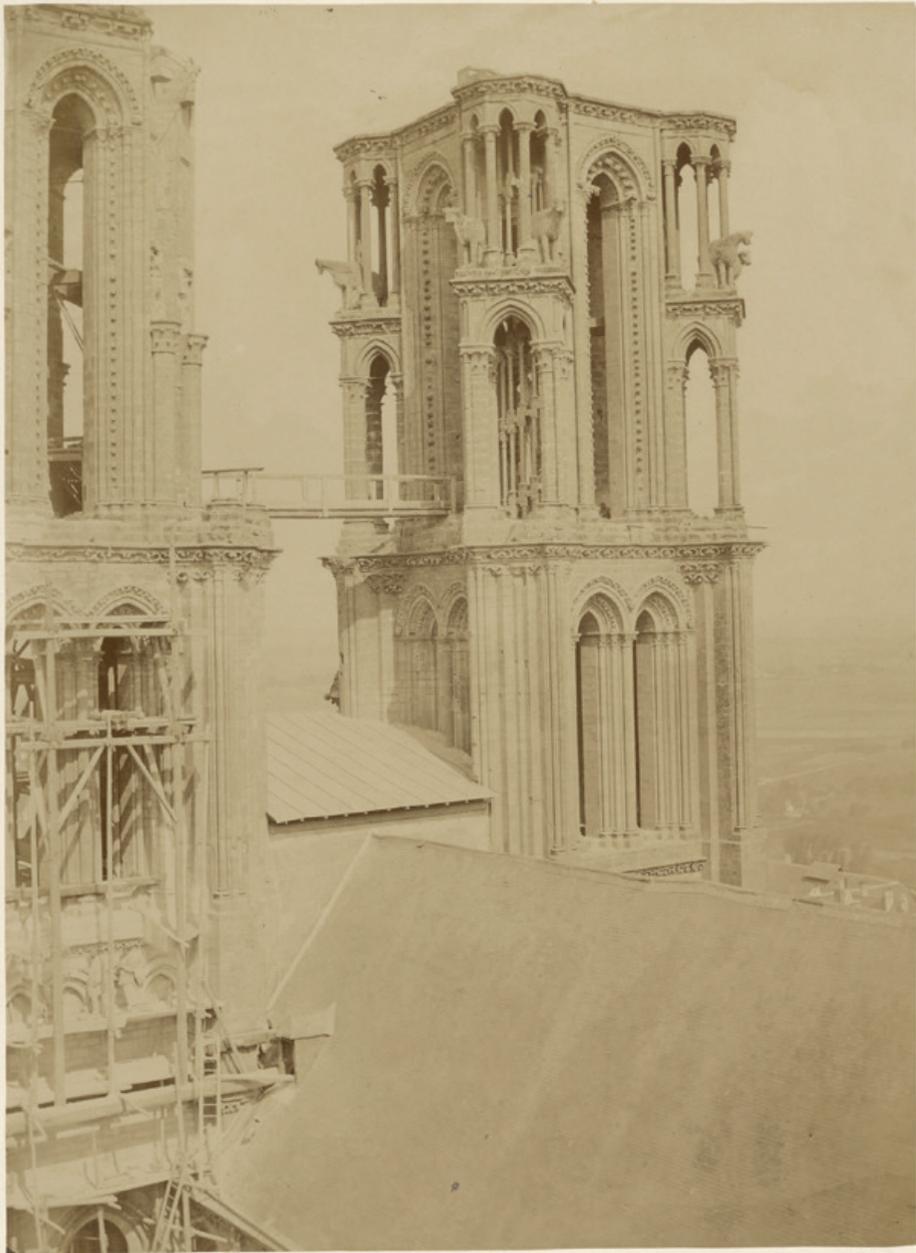
Then, when the word heritage enters the complex game of transcription-betrayal that the translation carries within itself anyway, the theories of values on the nature of property are joined by the theories on the relationship between how collective memories - as firstly Halbwachs, then Paul Ricoeur call them (Ricoeur, 2000) and historiographies of skilled knowledge (primarily of restauration) are formed, and which articulate in very different ways in the different countries.

The intertwining of archival and recollective concerns is joined, as Pierre Nora recalls (Nora, 1984-1994), by the increasingly acute perception not only of the historical significance of memory, but also of the fragility, and sometimes of the transience, of national traditions and of the imaginative nature of traditions which claim to be universal.

A situation that is emphasized by the continuous decrease in time provided to define a value significant when building a tradition and even more when building a living collective memory. When translations-transcriptions are then given the role to legitimize

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Charles Marville, Laon Cathedral, West Facade Towers, view from NE (about 1855). Albumen silver print from a collodion glass negative - 84.XM.505.13
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procedures – both scientific and operative (Caccia Gherardini, Olmo, 2020) –, the attention to those values that a word such as heritage carries within itself anyway, has perhaps to be even more effective and critical. The conflict that can arise between the obsessive accumulation and the erudition being considered as a value in itself, as well as a “marchande” (mercantile) use of memory does not lead towards what Tzvetan Todorov already denounced in his pamphlet *Les abus de la Mèmoire* (2004). However, the conflict makes even more negotiable, always and anywhere – following in the footsteps of a hermeneutic being an end in itself –, the value of what is considered to be the cornerstone of a collective memory as well as, almost accordingly, the use of the “Naming without Necessity” when translating the word heritage (Almog, 1986). And this is truly not only a self-referential path, but one without exits, mainly to give significance to conservation both of stones and words.

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above

Carlo Naya, Colosseo, Roma (1870 s.).
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below

Sommer & Behles, Pantheon, Roma (1860-1872)
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Unknown maker, Italian
photographer, "Il Campanile
di Giotto", Firenze (about
1870-1890).
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Note

¹ The essay takes up and deepens issues partly already addressed in Caccia Gherardini, 2019.

² François Hartog's full reflection accompanies this discussion, from Hartog, 2003 to Hartog, 2018.

³ "Le dispositif de la collection permet, au même titre que les opérations financières quand elles s'éloignent de l'investissement *stricto sensu*, d'engendrer de la rareté à partir de tout ou, ce qui revient au même, de rien – y compris de déchets – puis qu'en prenant appui sur la construction de formes sérielles de totalisation, il crée des manques qui réclament impérativement d'être comblés" (Boltanski, Esquerre, 2017, p. 292).

⁴ From the Second World War onwards, numerous theories of actions have been developed, starting with its foundations, American in particular, by Parson, Ships, 1951. But it is French philosophy from between the Sixties and Seventies that links a possible theory of the text, a theory of action (increasingly described as a theory of decision) and a theory of history as a tool to decipher the values that the action not only brings play and transmits, but translates and often betrays (Ricoeur, 1977; Taruffo, 2018).

⁵ The two most valuable references in this sense are Marcel Mauss and Karl Polanyi.



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