**When Shrines Grow Tired: Caring for Cultural Artefacts**

**in the Premodern World**

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*You see that stones are worn away by time*

*Rocks rot and towers topple. Even the shrines*

*And images of the gods grow very tired*

*Develop cracks or wrinkles, their holy wills*

*Unable to extend their fated term*

*To litigate against the laws of nature.*

*And don’t we see the monuments of men*

*Collapse, as if to ask us: ‘Are not we*

*As frail as those whom we commemorate?’* [[1]](#footnote-1)

*They went to search for old broken statues of the Buddha to worship. They brought them there to piece together and repair with mortar, to mend and restore into large, fresh-looking and exceedingly beautiful statues of the Buddha. (Inscription no. 2 from Sukhothai, Thailand, mid-fourteenth century)* [[2]](#footnote-2)

Any meditation on ruins, reminds us Marc Augé,[[3]](#footnote-3) is also a meditation on time. In Book V of his *De rerum naturae* (*On the Nature of Things*), Lucretius articulated the divergence between the eternal aspiration and the impermanent constitution of statues and shrines honouring the immortal gods and memorializing champions and heroes. Recognition of the caducity of shrines and memorials entailed a paradox that was at once practical and philosophical. An adept of Epicurus, Lucretius regarded the decay and demise of animate beings and inanimate objects alike as being intrinsic to their nature, hence inevitable and not to be lamented. The same position is expressed by the Buddhist tenet of impermanence (Pali, *anicca*), one of the marks of existence along with suffering and the absence of self. In the ‘Sermon of the Arrow’, the Buddha announces: ‘In this manner the world is afflicted by death and decay. But the wise do not grieve, having realized the nature of the world’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Another canonical Pali text, the *Dhammapada*, likewise explains at verse 277: ‘All conditioned things are impermanent. When one sees this wisdom, one turns away from suffering. This is the path to purity’. In the pan-Asian transformation of Buddhism into a soteriological faith, these doctrinal principles were however contradicted by the diffusion of the cult of the Buddha’s bodily relics and of man-made “reminders” such as images and reliquaries (stupa), which were believed to emanate beneficial energy but to also demand the care of worshippers in return for blessings and protection.

Such reciprocity is by no means exclusive to Buddhist devotion. Recent scholarship[[5]](#footnote-5) has examined the nexus of religiosity and materiality underpinning beliefs that were widespread in the premodern world, and by no means extinguished today, in the preternatural powers of cult sites and objects. By establishing a channel between the worldly and the otherworldly, the visible and the invisible realms, cult sites and objects functioned as “media for the production of divine proximity.”[[6]](#footnote-6) It is thus not surprising that across cultures, priests and priestesses acted literally as curators *avant la lettre* by guarding shrines, ritually bathing and anointing sacred images, dressing and parading them around and outside temples, and writing their biographies (such as the semi-historical chronicles of renown Buddha images composed by monks in East and Southeast Asia). Worshippers, who generally enjoyed only indirect contact with cult objects, manifested their care via offerings, from incense to newly spun cloth and sacrificial animals, presented by individuals and, more significantly, entire communities during the religious festivals that hallmarked the social life of ancient and medieval cities.

Care for cultural artefacts in the premodern world was thus predominantly a facet of cult – including civic and state cult often subsumed by modern scholars under the domain of politics – that combined piety and artistry, faith and ideology, as illustrated by the epigraph’s stone inscription from medieval Thailand, which records the recovery and restoration of dilapidated Buddha images to mark the inauguration of a royal monastery. This approach to caring for artefacts I shall term devotional conservation; its primary motivation, and the worldview that underpinned it, differ significantly from modern, scientific conservation, as I argue in what follows.

Framed almost invariably from the perspective of European cultural history, studies of the twin practices of architectural conservation and restoration place their intellectual origins in fourteenth-century Italy, at the time of the rise of Humanism, and identify its precursors in the scholars and collectors who studied and sought to revive classical antiquity.[[7]](#footnote-7) In this perspective, the history of conservation parallels that of antiquarianism, both valuing material along with textual remains of the past as entry points into the ancient world, viewed as an object of curiosity.[[8]](#footnote-8) In his *De re aedificatoria* (1452), Florentine architect Leon Battista Alberti, reprising Vitruvius, distinguished three approaches to restoration: *emendare* (to amend), *instaurare* (to renovate), and *restituire* (to return to the original state). Admiration for, and imitation of, classical art and architecture in the Renaissance did not, in fact, put an end to the medieval practice of recycling building and sculptural materials from ancient structures. Throughout the middle of the nineteenth century antiquarian interests accorded with an aesthetic of ruins that approved of the seamless reintegration of lacunae and inventive reconstructions. In the entry ‘Restoration’ of his *Dictionary of French Architecture*, the influential architect Eugene Viollet-le-Duc stated unambiguously, “The term and the thing itself are both modern,” and went on to opine: “To restore a building is not to preserve it, to repair or rebuild it; it is to reinstate it in a condition of completeness that could never have existed at any given time”[[9]](#footnote-9) (an objective Viollet-le-Duc pursued in his controversial restorations of France’s Gothic cathedrals, by which he sought to recreate an imagined stylistic coherence).

Written as the preamble to his report for the Austrian Commission for Monument Preservation, Alois Riegl’s *The modern cult of monuments* (*Der moderne Denkmalkultus*, 1903) is regarded as modern conservation’s theoretical manifesto.[[10]](#footnote-10) Although the expression *Denkmalkultus* is closer in meaning to appreciation than cult of monuments, in discussing their “age value” (one class in a triadic categorization including “historical value” and “commemorative value”), Riegl likened the universality of its appeal (from a modern Western perspective) to that of religious sentiment, both capable of stirring emotional responses in beholders regardless of their education. Riegl also remarked that the continuing use of historic churches as places of worship demands that they be not only structurally sound, but also pristine in appearance—even as he noted the growing concern for historical authenticity as the cause of dissatisfaction with earlier “stylistic restoration” à la Viollet-le-Duc (previously stigmatized for producing falsifications by John Ruskin, champion of the Romantic aesthetic of ruins that resonated in Riegl’s “age value”).

Emerging in an intellectual climate dominated by historicism and positivism, the modern idea of conservation as a technical-scientific procedure informed by the empirical knowledge of the past accrued by the disciplines of history, art history, and archaeology, was also consistent with the nationalist project of institutionalizing a professedly shared culture as a source of, and rallying point for, collective identity —heritage, in the now current sense of the word. In 1931, at a time when colonial powers still dictated the world order, the first International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monument gave historic conservation a global mandate by drafting the Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments. In 1964, following the unprecedented destruction wrought on European cities by the Second World War, the Athens Charter’s seven articles were expanded into the sixteen articles of the Venice Charter. Article 3 of the latter states: ’The intention of conserving and restoring monuments is to safeguard them no less as works of art than as historical evidence’. Since 1972, the ‘duty to conserve’ has been embraced on an international scale under the auspices of the UNESCO Convention for the Protection of the Cultural and Natural Heritage. The Convention’s historicist rationale, whereby the authenticity of a built structure is measured by the extent of preservation of its physical fabric, prevailed throughout the 1990s. Only in the past two decades, alternative concepts such as intangible heritage have been formulated that depart from criteria rooted in the modern West’s cultural experience by accommodating notions of cultural authenticity associated to the structure’s continuing spatial presence, regardless of reconstructions, and its social function.[[11]](#footnote-11)

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I intend to show how, long before the formalisation of modern conservation with its attending technologies, scientific protocols, and specialized professional figures, concern for the fate of cultural objects produced in both Western and Asian societies a variety of technical, liturgical, doctrinal and juridical responses. When considered as a whole, these responses amount to a modus operandi, if not quite a method, which is noteworthy not for the fact not that it encompassed approaches that are today methodologically distinct (preservation, restoration, reconstruction and replication) along with others (reuse and pastiche) that are deemed no longer acceptable; but that it sought to achieve the abolition of time, as Lévi-Strauss has argued of ritual;[[12]](#footnote-12) or more precisely, the restoration of eternity through the regeneration of the artefact’s material fabric as well as its aura – not in the sense theorized by Walter Benjamin, though, but in the literal sense of a bodily breeze, as denoted by the Hindu rite of the installation of breaths (Sanskrit, *pranapratisha*), which is performed to animate (i.e., breath life into) sacred images.

The sacred time of ritual approximates eternity, notes Mircea Eliade in *The Sacred and the Profane*, where he reports two earlier scholars’ remark about the etymological kinship of the Latin terms for “temple” (*templum*) and “time” (*tempus*), the former designating the “spatial aspect” and the latter “the temporal aspect of the motion of the horizon in space and time.”[[13]](#footnote-13) From the “cosmotheistic” viewpoint of polytheistic religions, which may be taken to also include Buddhism and pre-Reformation Christianity, “Images and rites make earth resemble heaven and integrate the human world into the cosmic order.”[[14]](#footnote-14) The ability of cult objects to connect the visible and invisible realms underpins Mary Brooks’s cogent comment: “Repairing the [cult] object is thus also repairing harmony with the divine. The idea of ‘prolonging the present’ of the object is key; the time of making, breaking, and repairing are fused so the object can continue to exist.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

“Wounded objects”[[16]](#footnote-16) require mending because their physical integrity is critical to their performative efficacy, which damage and decay compromise by inhibiting inherence in them of the supernatural energy (*dynamis* in Greek, *saksi-siddhi* in Sanskrit) that makes such objects receptacles of talismanic powers—and, occasionally, malevolent powers as well. Throughout the ancient, medieval and early modern world, there were statues that enjoyed a fearsome reputation for punishing people who insulted, injured, and treated them carelessly. (Ostensibly stemming from beliefs in the invisibility of the true god and disdain for inanimate matter, the Judaic and Islamic ban on images reflects fear that statues could be animated by sorcery, as in the Jewish folktale of the golem.) Devotional conservation aims to maintain cult objects and sites in an uncorrupted state that mirrors eternity (the dimension of sacred time), for an artefact that is consigned to historical time is bound not just to decay, but to lose its thaumatugic strength. Devotional conservation’s underlying conception of time thus differs profoundly from that underlying scientific conservation, which seeks to remedy the destructive effects of the passing of time while accepting that these effects are part and parcel of the artefact’s historicity.

Concern with the injuries wrought by historical time on cultural artefacts entails the idea, internationalized by UNESCO, that their preservation is the moral duty of every current generation towards future ones, a duty that is crucial to the transmission of cultural memory. Egyptologist Jan Assmann, who proposed the concept, defines cultural memory as “that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch,” and argues that it was first institutionalised in the literate societies of the ancient Near East, where writing led to the codification of canonical traditions. Whereas “communicative” (i.e., verbally transmitted) memory is quotidian and profane, cultural memory is festive and transcendent for Assmann, who designates “mythical primordial time” as the temporal horizon of cultural memory in contrast to communicative memory’s “recent past” (i.e., the timespan encompassed by three to four living generations). Accordingly, “cultural memory is imbued with an element of the sacred.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

The functional and ideological opposite of devotional caring is iconoclasm—notwithstanding Tzvetan Todorov’s astute remark that “religious conquest often consists in removing from a holy place certain images and establishing others there instead, preserving—and this is essential—the cult sites in which the same aromatic herbs are burned.”[[18]](#footnote-18) The aim of iconoclasm, whatever its degree (removal, mutilation, destruction), is to terminate the life of sacred sites and objects by destroying their physical as well as their semiotic structure, as argued by Rambelli and Reinders, who propose to broaden the notion of iconoclasm into that of hieroclasm.[[19]](#footnote-19) Even though “the specific reasons for smashing images differ from one country to the other and from one age to the other,”[[20]](#footnote-20) iconoclasm can be seen as the violent reaction against that “power of images” that stirs up veneration to begin with. The disfigurement of statues of emperors, kings, and dictators is, likewise, not a merely symbolic act, but one reflecting the belief that “by damaging the representation, one damages the person whom it represents.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

The distinction between religiously and politically motivated iconoclasms (and, hence, between devotional and historical conservation) reflects, in fact, the modern understanding of religion and politics as two separate spheres of social life, a separation that one should be careful not to project back in the past. The official removal and spontaneous demolition of statues and portraits of disgraced Roman emperors underscored their place in Rome’s civic religion as foci of public worship and stand-ins for the ruler, whom they could even represent in state ceremonies.[[22]](#footnote-22) The connection between politics and commemoration, as well as its contrary, social amnesia—of which the erection and upkeep (or contrariwise demolition) of monuments is a vehicle—is, of course, an old one. This is most obviously the case of restorations that political leaders claim as their personal projects. Augustus, in his autobiography, famously boosted to have rebuilt eighty-two temples in Rome, “omitting none which at that time stood in need of repair”—an endeavour in line with his project of restoring republican Rome’s stern moral values. This particular illustration of the many historical examples of the overlap of monumental and political restoration supports understanding of the twin practice of conservation/ restoration as praxis in the Marxian sense, that is to say, a material articulation of ideology.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Drawing on Rambelli’s and Reinders’ semiotic approach to iconoclasm, one can similarly argue that conservation/restoration is “a cultural practice that changes the materiality or the meaning of the object involved, or both. . . . Operating on the materiality—on the body—of a sacred object affects and modifies its symbolic status—its meanings and functions in its cultural contexts.”[[24]](#footnote-24) A semiotic reading of conservation as a sign carrying autonomous signifying value from that of the object on which it intervenes is suggested by the ancient practice of applying oils or paint onto bronze objects for protection and beautification, which produced an appealing artificial patina (termed by the Roman writer, Pliny the Elder, *patina nobilis*) perceptually different from the tarnishing grime accumulated over time (*patina virus*). This semiotic approach would arguably be most productive in examining the making of copies as a means of both preserving the original artefacts from physical degradation and reproducing their symbolic and magical powers (along with their availability in the market for relics, which was thriving in ancient times). Because of the synchronic and universalistic principles of structural linguistics that inform semiotics, a semiotic theory of conservation is however at risk of overlooking historical and cultural specificities, and also, no less importantly, the diverse environmental conditions affecting the lifespan of artefacts (wooden and sandstone edifices decay faster than structures of stone or marble, more so in tropical climates; metal oxidation is likewise variously affected by climate).

Being motivated by the maintenance of the cosmic order in which both humans and gods dwell, premodern caring for cultural artefacts might appear far remote from the impassable quandary between nationalist cult and commercial exploitation in which museums and historic monuments are presently caught up according to critics of the “heritage industry.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Yet Carol Duncan has persuasively likened the contemporary experience of museum going to a ritual—the ritual of citizenship – taking place, like religious cult, in a “space carefully marked off and culturally designated as reserved for a special kind of attention.” As Duncan argues, it is not just the dominant neoclassical style of nineteenth-century museum buildings that marks off their space culturally, but the behaviour visitors are expected to display therein (bodily decorum, contemplation, even awe) that make museums “sites which enable individuals to achieve liminal experience—to move beyond the psychic constrains of mundane existence, *step out of time*, and attain new, larger perspectives.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Such considerations resonate strongly with Jas Elsner’s description of the ancient Roman context of “ritual-centred viewing” as “a special space set apart from ordinary life … [a] liminal space [where] the viewer enters the god’s world and likewise the deity intrudes directly into the viewer’s world.”[[27]](#footnote-27) The study of conservation/restoration as cultural practice spanning many diverse epochs and cultures can indeed take its clue from the study of visuality understood as the socially constructed and historically situated practice of viewing.[[28]](#footnote-28)

For the purpose of today’s discussion I propose to focus on two questions arising from this overview of my research project. The first concerns the qualification of my concept of devotional conservation owing to the specific material dimension of the religious cultures encompassed in this study as well as historical evidence concerning the maintenance, not immediately motivated by devotion, of civic edifices and infrastructures (entrusted in the Greek city-states to magistrates called *astynomoi* and in Rome to the *aediles*, whose duties included the *cura urbis* together with the supply of grain and the organization of public entertainments). The second question asks what can a cultural study of conservation tell us about related topics, such as the cult of ruins and, especially, the distinction of original and copy—central to the discipline of art history as well as art connoisseurship—given that replication was widely practiced in both premodern Asia and Europe as a means to protect highly venerated cult objects and circulate their thaumaturgic power.

1. Lucretius, *The Way Things Are: The* De Rerum Naturae *of Titus Lucretius Carus*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington, IN, 1968): 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Prasert na Nagara and A. B. Griswold, *Epigraphical and Historical Studies* (Bangkok, 1992): 393. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Marc Augé, *Les temps en ruins* (Paris, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Salla Sutta: The Arrow,” *Sutta Nipata* (Sn 3.8), trans. John D. Ireland (1994). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, among others, Carolyn Walker Bauman, *Christian Materiality: And Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York, 2011); Dick Houtman and Birgit Meyer, ed., *Things: Religions and the Question of Materiality* (New York, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Jan Assmann’s, *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford, CA, 2010), 71. On the materiality of religion see, among others, Caroline Walker Bynum, Christian *Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York, 2011); David Germano and Kevin Trainor, eds., *Embodying the Dharma: Buddhist Relic Veneration in Asia* (Albany, NY, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Francoise Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument* (1992), trans. L. M. O’Connell (CUP, 2001); Alessandro Conti, *History of the Restoration and Conservation of Works of Art*, trans. Helen Glanville (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2007); Jukka Jokilehto, *A History of Architectural Conservation* (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 1999). An exception is Alain Schnapp’s *The Discovery of the Past* (New York, 1997), which mentions antiquarian and conservative endeavours in the ancient Near East. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Among recent studies that broaden antiquarianism’s cultural and chronological compass, see Peter N. Miller and Francois Louis, eds., *Antiquarianism and Intellectual Life in Europe and China, 1500-1800* (Ann Arbor, 2012); Alain Schnapp et al., ed., *World Antiquarianism: Comparative Perspectives* (Los Angeles, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Eugène E. Viollet-le-Duc, *Dictionaire raisonné de l’architecture française du xi au XVI siècle* (1854-1868), vol. VIII, p. 14. Entry ‘Restoration’ translated in M. F. Hearn, ed., *The Architectural Theory of Viollet-le-Duc: Readings and Commentary* (MIT Press, 1990), 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A full translation of Riegl’s essay is available as ‘The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origins’, trans. K. W. Forster and Dianne Ghirardo, *Oppositions* 25 (Fall 1982), 21-56. For a partial translation, see ‘The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Essence and its Development’, trans. Karin Bruckner and Karen Williams, in Nicholas Stanley Price et al. ed., *Historical and Philosophical Issues in the Conservation of Cultural Heritage* (Los Angeles, 1996), 69-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Matthew Hardy, ed., *The Venice Charter Revisited: Modernism, Conservation, and Tradition in the 21th Century* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2008); UNESCO, *Asia Conserved: Lessons Learned from the UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation 2000-2004* (Bangkok, 2007). On the impact of the two world wars on twentieth-century conservation, see Lucia Allais, *Designs of Destruction: The Making of Modern Monuments in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago, 2018). It is a sound criticism that, by adopting a procedure driven by individual nation-states, the inscription of sites on the World Heritage List actually contradicts UNESCO’s universalistic rhetoric by giving a global audience to nationalist claims about cultural primacy and uniqueness. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, 1966), 235-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Orlando, FL, Harcourt, Inc. 1959), 75, citing Werner Müller, *Kreis und Kreuz* (Berlin, 1938), 39. The common etymology of *tempus* and *templum* is probably the Indo-European root *tem*, whence the ancient Greek verb *temno*, ‘to cut’, and the noun *temenos*, ‘sacred compound’, i.e., a space ‘set aside’ for rituals (= Latin *fanum*, whose contrary is *profanum*). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Assmann, *Price of Monotheism*, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Mary M. Brooks, ‘Decay, Conservation and the Making of Meaning through Museum Objects,’ in *Ways of Making and Knowing: The Material Culture of Empirical Knowledge*, ed. Pamela H. Smith, Amy R. W. Meyers and Harold J. Cook (paperback ed. New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2017): 377-404 [quote 386] [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. This suggestive phrase was the title of a 2007 exhibition on traditional African methods of restoring artefacts held at the Musée du Quay Branly, in Paris. See the exhibition catalogue: *Objects blessés. La réparation en Afrique* (Paris: 5 Continents Editions, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Jan Assmann, *Religion and Cultural Memory*, trans. Robert Livingstone (Stanford, CA, 2006), 34-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York, 1984), 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Fabio Rambelli and Eric Reinders, *Buddhism and Iconoclasm in East Asia: A History* (London, 2012). In a similar vein, Assmann writes in *Price of Monotheism* (70), ‘Iconoclasm is tantamount to theoclasm: the gods are to be smashed together with the images in which they are worshipped’. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Moshe Barash, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York, 1992), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago, 1989), 413. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Jas lsner, *Art and the Roman Viewer* (Cambridge, 1995), 167-172, 348n15, 349n25. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Giuseppe La Monica, *Ideologie e prassi del restauro* (Palermo: Edizioni della Nuova Presenza, 1974), xxiv. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Rambelli and Reinders, *Buddhism and Iconoclasm in East Asia*, ix-x. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. For the early critic who coined the expression, see Kevin Hewinson, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London, 1987). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Carol Duncan, *Civilising Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London and New York, 1995): 10, 12 (emphasis added). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Jas Elsner, ‘Between Mimesis and Divine Power: Visuality in the Greco-Roman World’, in Robert S. Nelson, ed. *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing as Others Saw* (Cambridge, 2000), 45-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Besides Elsner, notes 22 and 27 above, see Jas Elsner, ed., *Art and Text in Roman Culture* (Cambridge, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)