



More than modern, contemporary. Riegl and the protection of cultural heritage in the last decade

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Abstract

*Although it has been more than a century since its publication, the *Moderne Denkmalkultus* still occupies a prominent place in the international culture of conservation, especially considering the global presence it has acquired in the last decade. Considered a true theoretical and methodological pillar on which were based the concepts of monument, memory and heritage, which structure the Western cultural landscape, Riegl's thinking does not seem to have aged. Instead, it continues to offer food for thoughts, even if the coordinates of today's global protection have well transcended the European geo-cultural borders, and refer by now to deeply changed philosophical and axiological references to the past. The reasons for this affinity between the reflection of the Austrian intellectual and the current issues of memory conservation go back essentially to the strong vanguard of his thinking: Riegl went beyond the historical-critical limits established by European culture to the theory of restoration during the 19th century and laid the foundations of a conscious and updated approach at the time, in open dialogue with a society in deep transformation and whose cultural capacity was maturing in proportion to its own development. What today still marvels of Riegl's thinking is the relevance of his early 20th-century "theory of values" compared to the relationship between contemporary culture and objects of the past, centered on emotional, affective or intellectual reactions that stimulate the individual and the community. For these and other reasons, it may be useful to reconsider the range of discourses that still lead us to appeal to Riegl and to his *Denkmalkultus*, which still remains among the most cited, recalled and beloved theoretical references in the literature concerning the transmission of the memory of the past.*

Keywords: Theory of values, antiquity value, world heritage, global conservation, memory, *patina*.

If, with the formulation of the Venice Charter, the culture of European protection became conscious of a long tradition of plurality of intentions in the preservation of undeniable cultural heritage, then Alois Riegl assumes an important role in this field as one of the most important representatives of the sector and the spiritual father of the discipline.¹

Ernst Bacher (1995: 40).

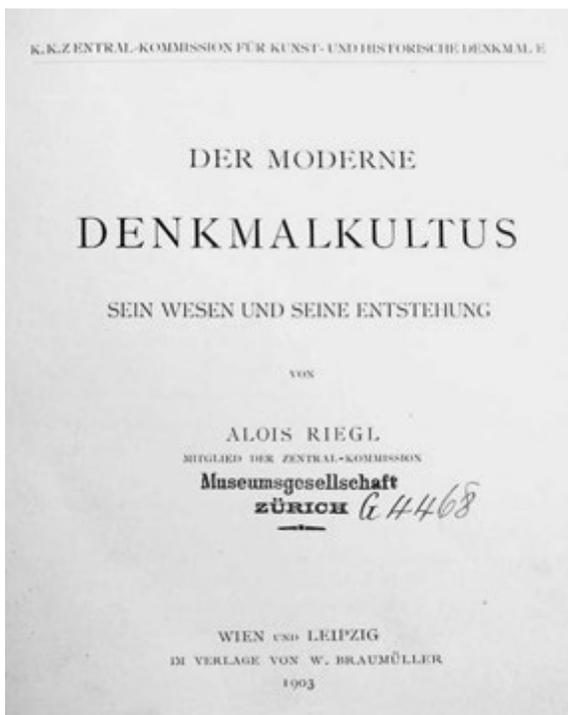
¹ Original quotation: *Se la cultura di tutela europea prese coscienza con la formulazione della Carta di Venezia di una lunga tradizione di pluralità di intenzioni nella conservazione dell'irrinunciabile patrimonio culturale, allora Alois Riegl assume un ruolo importante in questo ambito in quanto uno dei più significativi rappresentanti del settore e padre spirituale della disciplina.*

A precursor of the post-modern protection culture

Since the first issue of the *Denkmalkultus*, very well known today, it took a considerable time before Alois Riegl's thinking on the protection of monuments caught the attention of the specialists. This was due essentially to the linguistic obstacle it caused to researchers, who were then well-versed in French and English, but less so in German. An inversion of the critical disfavor of this text was unleashed in the early eighties of the 20th century, with its low translation into several languages². Actually, the reappearance of the text in the international arena after World War II, worked in favor of its better assimilation as Riegl's ideas could then immediately enter into circulation and easily take root (Grubser, 2005).

Since then, the success of Riegl's approach to the conservation of memory has known a widespread geo-cultural dissemination, which still continues today, earning the title of "first of the modern," "futurologist," precursor and anticipator (Choay, 2005: 256; Scarrocchia, 2008: 305-306). The reasons for this success, synthetically summarized by Jukka Jokilehto (1999: 215-217) –who attributed to the *Denkmalkultus* a leading role among the different systematizations that the thoughts related to European restoration received during the 19th and 20th centuries –today find new confirmations in the various shapes that the protection of the memory of the past has recently figured on a global scale.

The "Copernican revolution" occurred in the world of restoration at the end of the 19th century following Riegl's "theory of values" referred, in his reflection, to three central aspects: the shift from the focus of the debate from the object to the observer, the distinction between intentional and non-intentional monuments and the distinct interpretation between the value of antiquity and the historical value, as different terms of the values of memory.



DER MODERNE DENKMALKULTUS
Image: Public domain.

² The first translation of the *Moderne Denkmalkultus* is Italian and its first version dates from 1981 and the second one to 1982; it was also in 1982 when the English translation was made, and in 1984 to the French. In 1984 some extracts from the German version were re-published; in 1987 in Spanish, and in 1988 an integral version in German was published. On this succession of translations, with interesting notes on the diverse linguistic "orientations", see Grimoldi (2015) and Scarrocchia (2006: 35).



PALAIS SCHOENBORN, VIENNA, CA.1900. Image: Public domain.

The innovative *dimension*

The reasons for which Riegl's thought still retains an avant-garde and advanced character, and today constitutes a favorite reference in the international community, lay within the historical and geo-cultural context within which the "theory of values" was conceived. At the beginning of the 20th century, the *Denkmalkultus* unexpectedly pushed the debate on the transmission of architectural and artistic heritage beyond the conflict between romantics and rationalists, between conservation and restoration³, finding space for new and different assumptions. The idea that the value of an object shapes around the sensory reaction it provokes in the observer – aesthetic or emotional – was referred to an axiological system that was not necessarily based on history, aesthetics and art theory, but rather on the "congeniality" between the object and the observer. This broke with the idea that style and form represent an assumption of indisputable and absolute values. Protection – not conservation or restoration – was now understood as a reflexive activity that placed at the center the individual (and, consequently, the community) and his critical capacity. With this, at the beginning of the 20th century, Riegl proposed to overcome Historicism, which had structured 19th century European culture (Frodl, 1987: 45). Committed to propose new rules for the conservation of historical heritage in the transcultural climate of the Habsburg Empire (Frodl, 1995: 403), Riegl proposed a new and diverse interpretation, actually taking distance from the opposition between the extreme positions of the Violletian *restauration* and the Ruskinian conservation. The "theory of values," based on a "scientific" methodology for the assessment values, did not insist on the appreciation of image and form, but on the "desire" that man nurtures for the objects from the past. These could be accepted in very different declensions, as Riegl also dissolved the historical-critical impasse derived from the post-Enlightenment evolutionary approach to art history, proving that any object from the past can reach a unique and irreplaceable place in the formation of memory (Riegl, 1901).

³ Restoration: reconstitution of the original aspect or shape of a monument, through the removal of added or superimposed elements. Note from the translator.

At the time when Riegl was writing the *Denkmalkultus*, the debate around historical monuments was based on historical and philological criteria style but, also, on the relationship between ancient buildings and contemporary architecture and on their relationship to the development of the identity of the European nations: monuments were recognized almost exclusively as historical documents, and only secondarily for their artistic value, which was in fact considered as 'related' to the observer. The *Denkmalkultus*, perhaps intentionally, thus defined a common ground on which to cultivate a shared idea of conservation that would find an increasingly widespread dissemination in the European realm first, then in the wider Western one and, today, in the forum of intergovernmental institutions, including UNESCO.

The step towards the definition of anthropological values in cultural heritage and the beginning of a process of "patrimonialization" of the objects from the past (Choay, 1992) was brief and paved the way to a scenario that is still developing.

The global *dimension*

The fact that Riegl established a different "category" for non-intentional monuments, which acquire importance in the collective imagination without any predestination, has undoubtedly contributed to the development of the idea of "world heritage" coined after World War II by UNESCO, and to its "social-historical" dimension (Choay, 1995: 456). Since the second half of the 20th century, following two world conflicts, the *Denkmalkultus* has offered the terms for a peaceful debate, therefore representing an effective tool for intergovernmental organizations to face and solve conflicts among the world's different cultural identities.

Leaving behind the circuit of nationalist ideas of the 19th century, Riegl overcame the idea that value is acknowledged to monuments in relation to their representativity of the identity of the Nation, overturning the perspective: these were no longer considered to be an expression of each single nation but, rather, of humanity and, as such, a heritage to be universally shared and enjoyed. To this we must add that the distinction between intentional and non-intentional monuments opened to an unlimited set of objects, liable of a memory value; on the other hand, the shift of focus in the "cult of monuments" from the artifact to the observer, yielded the world of conservation to the "masses"—and indeed to the collective— which participate, together with the intellectuals and specialists, to the process of patrimonialization.

It is, therefore, not surprising that the international literature on protection is unanimous in considering the *Denkmalkultus* the starting point of the development of a global scale reflection, defined as a true and proper "international updated cultic hermeneutics," and in celebrating Riegl as the "founding father" of contemporary memory culture (Tomaszewski, 2005: 290) and a "pioneer of the planetary protection culture aimed at improving the principle of 'unity in diversity'" (Choay, 1995: 464).

In addition, the delays in the translations and the dissemination of Riegl's texts among specialists turned out to be anything but damaging. Introduced in the 1980s through the translation into several languages, the *Denkmalkultus* caught the attention of specialists as times proved to be mature enough to accommodate an idea of a "global" protection and ready to integrate it into the theoretical framework of global conservation, to the degree of producing a phenomenon called "Riegl-Renaissance."⁴

⁴ Riegl's thinking arrived late into the world of globalized protection though its first translation into English, edited by K.W. Forster and D. Girardo ("The modern cult of monuments, its character and its origin", *Oppositions*, 1982, 25), and not through the *Venice Charter* of 1964, the first document to gather the vision of European care of heritage, although the documents contains a synthesis of some references to the *Denkmalkultus*; on this subject, see Scarrowchia (2008).



THE OPERA HOUSE, VIENNA, CA. 1890-1906. *Image: Public domain.*

The rieglian “theory of values” proposed a tolerant, relativistic and contextualized approach in the sphere of values, adaptable to time and to the geo-cultural position of the observer, which offered international organizations, such as ICOMOS, the theoretical framework of an open reflection, able to effectively welcome a multicultural idea of conservation (Jokilehto, 2006). In perfect coherence with the mission of UNESCO, aimed at maintaining peace in the world through the affirmation and mutual recognition of its different cultural identities, Riegl’s thought represented –and still represents– a formidable premise.

Riegl analyzed and interpreted the dynamics of the appreciation of monuments, offering a key to a shared awareness of historical heritage beyond the disciplinary limits within which the cult of monuments was taking shape. The possibility of introjecting the value of the testimonies of the past from any cultural perspective and of supporting the needs of the international community dedicated to the effort of constructing a *globally* valid reflection, beyond the unavoidable differences, traces the profile of Alois Riegl as a true intellectual mediator.

The process of relativizing the foundations of conservation is, therefore, not a function of the object as, for example, assumed by Cesare Brandi. According to the aesthetics of Idealism, Brandi placed at the center of his theory the work-of-art, considered as an exceptional artifact of man who, recognizing it as such, recreates it in his own consciousness.; instead, in Riegl’s thought the work-of-art it is the expression of the “desire” – or *Kunstwollen* – of the observer. The ‘performing’ dimension of protection proposed by Riegl emerges in more interlocutory, open and flexible terms than other systematizing “theories,” such as Brandi’s *Theory of restoration*⁵.

⁵ Sandro Scarrocchia glimpses the separation that began at the beginning of the 1980s between the world of Italian restoration, led by Cesare Brandi, and the international one turned towards Alois Riegl; on this subject, see Scarrocchia (2006: 42).

The emotional *dimension*

While on the one hand Riegl solved the conflict that underlies the 19th-century dichotomy between rationalism and romanticism, on the other he opened a new front on what we would today define as the “sensory and emotional” aesthetic experience produced by monuments, which at this point, may correspond to almost any existing object. Memory value in Riegl (on which the axiological theory of the 20th century is based) is no longer structured only by the historical value as with time a different value develops, which he defined as “antiquity”. The observer is able to appreciate it through the senses, above all eyesight, without having to resort to intellectual interpretation: the “value of the old” indeed satisfies that “aesthetic need,” invites the senses and feeds the emotional sphere.

With much anticipation, perhaps excessive, as we have already noted (Korth, 1983: 44), Riegl predicted that monuments would no longer be appreciated only for their *intentional value* or *historical value*, but (and above all) for their *age value*. However, history did not immediately give him reason: a century after his death, at the turn of the second millennium, we have recovered his perspective which, in fact, is now well aligned with a pluralist, collective and emotional value of memory.

The idea that the “attunement” between people and things through emotions or psychological means represents a prerequisite for recognizing their value, originates in Riegl’s concept of *Stimmung* and refers to a new sphere of understanding: that of the appreciation of the monuments. Riegl, in fact, understood *Stimmung* as “mind disposition,”⁶ mediating from the language of literary criticism and aesthetics that establishes a link to contemporary philosophy of the “atmospheric spaces” (Schmitz, 2016) and, even, to the field of neurosciences.

The idea that monuments, or rather non-voluntary monuments, can move sensations, feelings and affective reactions represents a highly topical factor in Riegl’s thinking (Scarrocchia, 2006: 43). This allows us to retrieve into contemporary reflection the value of concepts set aside in favor of a totally scientific and deterministic approach, such as the appreciation of patinas of time, which are considered as a historical and aesthetic enhancement according to an emotional perspective and not only an intellectual one. The tendency to develop the approach to the objects of the past from rational presuppositions quietly left the need to compensate that emotional and psychological “lacuna” that had arisen with force following destructions caused by the war, but was then left aside by the optimistic euphoria of the successive reconstruction. The new millennium will lead to the formation of a collective awareness of the value of memory, for which the testimonies of the past are undoubtedly more valuable for the emotional effect they produce on the observer, than for scientific and disciplinary means.

In fact, a vein of sensitive thought regarding the psychological implications involved in the process of recognizing the value of historical relics had emerged in Italy with Roberto Pane and Renato Bonelli (Giannattasio, 2010); however, their thoughts did not penetrate the Italian and European culture between the 1960s and the 1980s, which was too “introverted” and centered on national themes⁷. Introducing a third “psychological” instance, in addition to the historical and aesthetic ones, meant an alignment between the emotional stratification sedimented by life within historical buildings, and the physical and material stratification that shapes monuments and historic centers. Understood in such broad sense, the witnesses of the past could finally be considered as a resource for the satisfaction of both aesthetic needs – declinable according to an intellectual and sensorial interpretation – as well as the psychological and affective ones.

⁶ [<http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/>] (consulted on 17 June 2018).

⁷ It is worth remembering here that the volume *Alois Riegl; Teoria e prassi della conservazione dei monumenti*, edited by Sandro Scarrocchia in 1995 marked the entrance of Riegl in the literature on Italian restoration; although he is often quoted, Riegl will never be “out into the system” of the theoretical development of the discipline in Italy, and will only be part of the theoretical debate on the conservation of the memory of the past in a tangential manner.

The future *dimension*

Despite the momentous changes that the conservation of memory faced during the second half of the 20th century, especially in the first decades of the new millennium, we continue recognizing a prominent role to the ideas of Alois Riegl. In fact, there are numerous and unexpected links between the anticipated topics of his literary production and the most relevant issues arising from the global development of memory conservation, that are based on the role of natural resources in the perspectives of world protection (Riegl, 1905), on the quantitative dimension that this must address when faced with the massive consumption to which cultural heritage is submitted, on the consideration of use value as a presupposition of entering the field of conservation of contemporary heritage, art and “modern” architecture; not to mention the debate that arose on the opposition between material and immaterial heritage or, rather, tangible and intangible heritage (Thordis, 2004; Carpo, 2007).

It is not easy to establish if, and in what way, Riegl will further stimulate reflection on this topic, but it must be borne in mind that the many retrospective readings of his thought are not immune to ideological impositions. In fact, it is not clear how he will shed light on the path of ‘conservation in the digital era’, as the feeling of a risk of falling into distortions and in the traps of ideologism overcomes, as in other cases (Harrer, 2017).

However, the *Denkmalkultus* –accepted as a pragmatic interpretative framework instead of a “theory” of conservation– has contributed to push the principles of protection beyond the geo-cultural borders of European countries, setting out a path that, after the recent *Faro Convention* (2005), has generated an idea of a “collective and individual heritage”; this, in my opinion, emanates from Alois Riegl’s ideas, and promises to be the ridge along which we will continue to develop the complex and fascinating relationship that links man to the objects of the past ever since.

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