

# Heritage catechism: conviction, discipline and translation

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## **Abstract**

*If art history is the first methodological moment of monumental conservation, then the role of art historians in the construction of a conservation culture during the 20<sup>th</sup> century will be foundational. Understanding the validity of Dvořák's thought from the account of his critical development is an opportunity offered by his translation. Not only as the resource to facilitate the philological knowledge of a specific source, but also by pondering his contributions from the German language, and generating concepts that become convictions and theories. Considering that as a contemporary of Riegl, of whom we do have pre-existing translations into Spanish, it places us beyond the dogmas that feed his partial dissemination in limited and sectorial invocations, that dissociate technical and specialized work from its social and community meaning. Based on this, our reading of the contribution of Dvořák focuses on two topics. The first in relation to the scale of the monumental heritage, considering an early approach of the environmental concerns derived from the heritage landscape as an integration of cultural and natural attributes. And the second refers to an ethical position in the work of the art historian, who contributes arguments and develops a collective conscience about the civic friendship towards monuments, understood as an expression of common good.*

**Keywords:** Art history, heritage deontology, theory of conservation, translation.

*Decisive modifications of the urban landscape can only be made for practical purposes, never for aesthetic reasons, since these are subject to evolution, and as we have always made mistakes, we will continue to err in the future.*

*And, although we recognize our mistakes, we will not be able to reconstruct the monuments of the past that we previously destroyed.*

Adolf Loos (1993: 122)

## **Conviction: heritage is always today**

If the most iconoclastic forerunner of rationalist architecture declares the necessary responsibility toward a heritage threatened by possible interventions that they could be subject to, we are in the presence of convictions that go beyond the sphere of sectorial specialists and that respond to a broad understanding of the contribution of heritage to culture planning. This discards the ease with which those superficial interpretations of modernization processes are made, in which heritage is considered to be a barrier to development, and fix, on the contrary, the idea that heritage is the basis for sustainable development.

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The conviction that mobilizes a sustainable development agenda, and which today seems even obvious to us, implies an openness to viewing heritage issues as cultural phenomenon that transcend the limited efforts of those of us who work daily to safeguard it. This, perhaps, was one of the greatest contributions that took place during the historical moment of Vienna at the end of the century, when written convictions appeared on the shared responsibility that this effort implies, given that the culture of conservation claimed by some should turn into a heritage culture.

This heritage turn of culture (De Nordenflycht, 2012) has its foundation in texts that move from conviction to action, given that they activate the foundation of a public policy and also a professional deontology, on which we have had a sustained discussion during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Therefore, if the Austrian architect Loos published these observations only a few years after the text of the Bohemian art historian Max Dvořák (1888-1999) entitled *The Preservation Catechism* (*Katechismus der Denkmalpflege*), it was not a coincidence. The way we believe Dvořák understood “doing catechism” is far from repeating the formula of the dogma, and instead appeals to the construction of meaning.



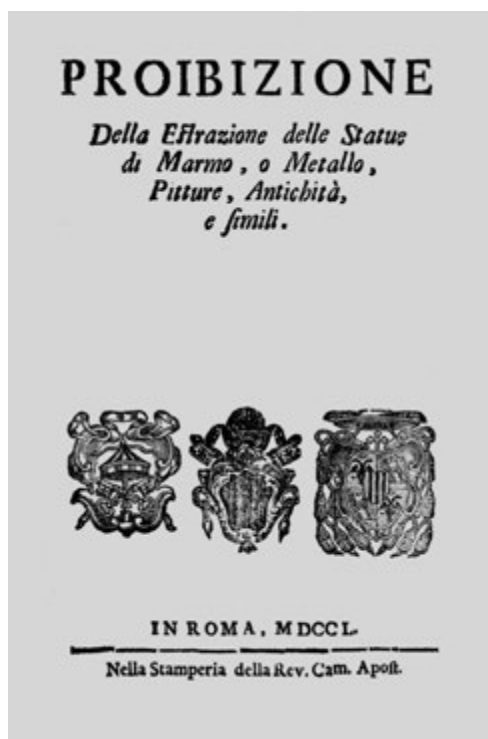
ADOLF LOOS  
Portrait, 1903.  
Image: Public domain.

We know that long before him, the intransigence or intolerance of the “heritage dogma” had become operative principles. Let us remember the famous *Proibizione della estrazione delle statue di marmo, o metallo, pitture, antichità e simili*<sup>1</sup>, which was drafted in 1750 by the *camarlengo* of Pope Benedict XIV (Papi, 2017: 211-218), and which sanctioned the idea that

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<sup>1</sup> “Prohibition of the extraction of statues in marble, or metal, paintings, antiquities and similar objects”.

in the efforts to protect the heritage, prohibition would be the preferred formula. Therefore, controlling what is heritage will be associated with the restrictions of a number of elements that do not belong to anyone, but at the same time belong to everyone. In other words, they are part of the common good.



#### PROIBIZIONE

*Image: Public domain.*

Hence the paradox is that prohibition is used as a means to permit it. Functional use and its eventual value of change is denied in order to open the possibility that the validity of its use as heritage be determined by future generations. It is prohibition that attempts to prevent present decisions in order to pass them on to an unlikely future. In this manner, heritage tries to control the future, which from the political and economic point of view, generates discomfort: the discomfort of presentism.

So the sense of what Dvořák invokes is not: think about the future based on what we try to know about the past. Instead it is the other way around: to know and interpret the future you have to think about the past.

Contemporary heritage is that which brings together all times. It is always today if our contemporary look reactivates the value of that which is preexisting, otherwise we would be assuming anachronistic values to try to defend old objects, and what it raises is rather the opposite: contemporaneous values that contain antiquity as recognition of their potential future value of future.

Collective memory is part of human dignity; this ethical question transcends the formalist question of beauty, understood as a mono-value attribute associated with the eventual artistic condition of a cultural asset. This is what the contemporary debate about heritage has shown through the committed work of art historians who base their opinions on authors like Salvatore Settis, who undoubtedly inspire the work of many of their colleagues (De Nordenflycht, 2013), but at the same time were inspired by other authors of which we do not know as much as we should.

Beyond the disciplinary biases, the corporate defenses and the positions of the trade associations, it is art historians who also build an operative knowledge, and that is why the rereading of Dvořák is an opportunity.

#### **Discipline: heritage art historians**

Art historians are not conservationists. We could become conservationists. However, the thing we cannot renounce is heritage. Therefore, the formula should state that art historians are indeed dedicated to heritage.

With a time lapse of more than a century since the texts of the art historians we are presenting in this volume, to declare that the first methodological moment of the intervention on heritage is historical research is very clear among those who practice the discipline. However, our colleagues from other disciplinary backgrounds have to be continually reminded of this, not because of ignorance or lack of knowledge, but rather the contrary. We know far too well that this is so and, therefore, the requirement for precision in cataloguing monuments, which should be reasoned out and definitive in the heterotopic 19<sup>th</sup> century, will also have as a counterpart the catalogs of those monuments that have been lost (*monumenta deperdita*).

The *monumenta deperdita* is the origin of a tradition about the remnant of the iconoclasm that we now call Heritage in Danger, or, as we should instead point out, is devastated by that danger. The potential of the culture of conservation based on risk management, risks that were inevitable whenever it became obvious that the actions of societies were the sources of said risk, in an artificial world where there are no natural risks, only bad decisions that are associated with natural variables that accelerate the obsolescence of cultural artifacts.

If my declared object of study is threatened, or even on the verge of disappearing, it is only logical to think of its destiny as a methodological problem. If art history is the first methodological moment for a monument's conservation, this logic is an unavoidable responsibility for a generation of art historians who carry out their work from what were the vast territories of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. And we say vast not for so much in the geographical sense, but also for cultural reasons. In a moment of "posthumous men" – according to Cacciari (1989) – which as we have already seen with Loos, this has been widely substituted by the recognition of a culture planning that promotes the review of modernity in the light of a cultural tradition.

In this context, the great problem of art history during its first century of institutionalized existence is its excessive nationalism. To the extent that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the great challenge of researchers and authors who signed their research in books and catalogs was to create a corpus of study that would conform to the idea of a national art school. In them, the triumph of each art history would be the stories headed by the Italian School, the French School or the Dutch School, and so on depending on the case. In fact, public policies to promote the arts in Latin American countries would aim at building their own national schools (Otero-Pailos, 2014: 291-296).

The catalogs of monuments are configured as long as the construction of the instrument, its application and evaluation are coherent according to the fields of a record sheet that must be declared, when establishing certainties with respect to attributes configured from empirical, concrete and authentic realities. Based on this, "narrating" the monument will mean conserving the action and building *documonuments* (Allais, 2017: 258), the task of the art historian.

This understanding of the complexity of the disciplinary contribution of art history to the field of heritage conservation confirms the advantages to reading the complete work of Dvořák. Such a task was undertaken by the architect Sandro Scarrocchia, editor of the compendium of texts by Dvořák on heritage, who has made available to other readers not only the original material of the Bohemian author, but who has also given us an extensive monographic study on the subject both in the volume in German and in a book in Italian (Scarrocchia, 2009).

Starting with his indispensable guidance throughout the work of Dvořák, which is contextualized in the political moment of the reforms of the ill-fated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, and until the critical fortune of his reception and impact in Italy in the journal *Paragone* and the translation of the *Catechism of monuments*, a wide range of references, drifts and relations of his contribution to cultural reflection and political action is configured.



PARAGONE  
Image: Public domain.

In the midst of all this, the possible genealogy that can be established from the *Kunsttopographie* proposed by Gottfried Dehio, Paul Clemen and Max Dvořák to the *Gartenkunst als Gartendenkmalpflege* (Scarrocchia, 2009: 47-ff) is especially relevant, where, if we consider that this environmental approach to valuing the cultural landscape associated to the natural attributes built by man was presented with such clarity over a hundred years ago, it becomes source of reference that should be reviewed in the face of what today's contemporary debate about heritage has named as a Historic Urban Landscape (UNESCO, 2011) and Historic Urban Public Parks (ICOMOS-IFLA, 2017), both in artificialization of nature through the idea of territory as domination, and the idea of landscape as representation. This absolute contemporaneity and validity of Dvořák reminds us today that the technocratic and economic views of conservation must be balanced from a deeply humanist sense, where the collective ethos is recognized in the efforts to conserve where care becomes a history of operative art.

### Translation: mobilizing heritage

Introducing unpublished texts in Spanish by Max Dvořák, Georg Dehio and Alois Riegl (Lehne, 2010: 69-80) would appear to be a gesture that is scholarly as well as academic, which could consume its usefulness to swell the references of a field of intellectual production from before the *Venice Charter* (1964), which would seem to offer nothing new in our 21<sup>st</sup> century.

However, when we came to Mexico to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Venice Charter*, convened by INAH's World Heritage Office (López y Vidargas, 2014), we realized that the aforementioned Charter was far from incorporating and fully assuming the status of the debate prior to its existence. It would rather seem to have only been a consensual and legitimized point of view from the references of its conveners and subscribers. In short, a bias, as any that may be contained in these documents deontological charters which are so popular among heritage conservation specialists.

The so often invoked *edictum*: "Traduttore, traditore", literally meaning: "Translator, traitor", turns out to be a true oxymoron, since even from that literalness in its direct version, it supposes the pristine utility of the first one at the risk of a malicious detour of the second one. In that way, translating is an effort to understand and enlighten, while betraying is an effort to divert and obscure.

Any disciplinary discussion that comes installed in a specific language raises the problem of translation. Far from being a submissive and obsequious attitude towards the original language of the text that sustains the discourse, the will to translate is a practice that develops hospitality as a way of making reciprocity productive. In this way, one translates due to curiosity and due to necessity ... the need to understand the others among us ... maybe to copy, assume and eventually rework. In all cases there is no act of bad faith that is associated with the practice of betrayal. On the contrary, the critical fortune of a large part of our intellectual collections has been attributed to the translations of texts. If Riegl is slightly familiar, it is because for the last thirty years we have had a Spanish translation of his most fundamental texts (Riegl, 1987). And if Dvořák is a distant author to many of us, it is simple because we had not translated it. In the case of Dehio, he was only present in the references of those most learned among us. Therefore, translating is a structural task that can generate great inflections (Grimoldi, 2015: 13-18).

From the *Catechism of monuments* by Dvořák, we know the Italian (Dvořák, 1972) and Portuguese (Dvořák, 2008) translations, in addition to the German version edited by Sandro Scarrocchia (Dvořák, 2012) in the context of a complete anthology on the heritage texts of the Bohemian art historian. From the perspective of his contribution to the historiography of art we have some critical studies and part of the corpus (Kultermann, 1996; Podro, 2001).

From the Spanish translation presented in this issue of *Conversaciones*, what most attract our attention are the declensions of the word "monument." If we list all the forms in which this word appears composed, associated, turned into an adjective and characterized in the German language *Denkmal* (Monument), in the texts of these three authors, we would find that we must take **care** of them (*Denkmalpflege*). We have to **protect** them (*Denkmalschutz*). Avoid the sacrileges against them (*Denkmalsfrevel*). And we must build the conditions for their **safeguard** (*Denkmalbewahrung*), through collegiate institutions such as the administrative **councils** (*Denkmalrat*), so that the **cult** of monuments (*Denkmalkultus*) becomes finally visible. However, we believe that the most interesting of the "denkmalisms" read in these texts is *Denkmalsfreundschaft*, translated as: **friendship** to monuments.

A friendship understood as a civic responsibility, as an interpellation to the common good from the values that are built on the basis of the attributes of physical pre-existences, which are the index of a greater meaning, that allows to convoke an idea of community.

If language constructs reality, or rather, as the Viennese philosopher Wittgenstein says: "the meaning is the use," it will be precisely the construction of the context of the meaning of these words on which the efforts of authors who think and write in German language will focus.

On one hand, our well-known Riegl and on the other our new renowned Dvořák, are those who raise convictions derived from their disciplinary work, which are absolutely relevant to translate at times when heritage is recognized as a synonym of common good (Younès, 2016: 259-263; Dezzi Badeschi, 2017: 88-90). That is how we want to understand them in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, from the convictions of those who thought the need to disseminate principles and establish certainties, through a catechism that makes it increasingly necessary to revisit and mobilize their dogmas at the service of present and future challenges.

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