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Aesthetics and Principles of Paper and Book Conservation-Restoration

Abstract

Aesthetics is now understood as the philosophy of art criticism – extensive knowledge based on the reflection on a work of art, its creation and reception.¹ At the same time, aesthetics is an objectivised philosophical discipline with a separate subject matter and research methods. Apart from philosophy, the domain of aesthetics is strongly related to the theory and history of art, psychology, sociology, theory, pedagogy and theory of culture. Since the mid-18th century, together with the definition of aesthetics as the study of the aesthetic judgment, the foundations of valuating theories began taking shape, which later contributed to the development of the conservation of works of art. Aesthetics is associated not only with creativity, but also with the art of reproducing, the issues of interpretation – consequently, it also has ties in with the conservation/restoration of objects of art. In our time, aesthetics has ceased to be merely a philosophy of art and has significantly expanded its field of research. One of the reasons is the collapse of rationalism in the late twentieth century and “aestheticization” of our entire reality. Nowadays, aesthetics as the term refers not only to art, but also to reality, becoming also an important element of its description. Contemporary man has changed not only perception abilities, but also his relationship with reality through new electronic media. The changes currently taking place in aesthetics are not left without influence on the theory and practice of art conservation.

The most important trends defining the aesthetic of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are considered to be postmodernism, embracing also issues related to new media, and the broadly-defined ecology.

1 Gołaszewska (1986), p. 9

The impact of postmodernism on conservation is significant, yet complex. As a radical eclecticism, it has influenced the acceptance of diversity of aesthetic practices in the conservation of works of art, e.g. the equality of many "reconstruction paths". Postmodernism has also changed our perception of material and construction elements, in which we now unconsciously seek some communicative structure, and accept them as the carriers of artistic intent. Consequently, in a historical work under conservation, one readily accepts combinations of natural and synthetic materials as well as the application of both past and contemporary technologies. Sometimes not only the technology is exhibited, but also the process of its conservation. Contemporary philosophy has brought about also a reflection upon the complex relations between a work of art, the time and the recipient. Postmodernist aesthetics has developed the concept of the "phase identity" of work, highlighting its lack of continuity in time. There has arisen a concept of art as an intrinsically open form that undergoes constant change in the infinite process of consecutive interpretations of the recipients. The aesthetic concept of "the open work", formulated upon the analysis of selected works of modern art, has very important references to the conservation of works of art.

By contrast, ecology is now an extremely strong and resonant interdisciplinary trend. In aesthetics, ecology appeared initially as so-called "environmental aesthetics", a holistic philosophy highlighting the complex network of social, cultural and psychological relations.

This trend was undoubtedly the source of conservation projects embracing both the work and its natural environment, based on the awareness of the integrity of some complex structures. Nowadays, aesthetics has stepped into the realm of philosophical anthropology, accompanied by the conservation of works of art. Attention has been drawn to the cultural identity of the conservation process as well as the fact that certain values in the conservation of works of art are not universal. All these phenomena, recognized in aesthetics, have had their references in conservation principles, although aesthetics would not always be taken into account as a valuating element in conservation. The importance of including aesthetics in the process of formulating a conservation theory will be stressed.

Over several decades of efforts to protect cultural heritage around the world, dozens of various documents have been generated, of different rank and range, that contained general norms and recommendations concerning the issues related to preservation, protection and conservation of the material and intangible cultural heritage. Some of the most important statements, such as the Venice Charter, the Nara Document of Authenticity and the Yamato Declaration and Burra Charter, will be analysed in regard to the trends of aesthetics. Similar to the whole of contemporary culture, where globalization is accompanied by tendencies to hyper-localism, contemporary conservation doctrines, apart from the attempts to generalize, take up also specific aspects that are more local and thematic.

This paper examines the manifestations of contemporary aesthetics and their possible references to conservation principles, presenting also some examples of conservation practices in the field of book and paper conservation. An attempt at such an analysis seems to be extremely important in view of the growing need of a discussion on theoretical approaches in this field of conservation.