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Theoretical Fundamentals in the Conservation and Restoration of Books: How Helpful are the Theories of Alois Riegl and Cesare Brandi in Practice?

Abstract

This contribution deals with the philosophical and ethical fundamentals of conservation and restoration today, from a general point of view and emphasizing, in particular, the field of book conservation and restoration.

Starting with the two most important historic theories for the preservation of cultural heritage and the restoration of works of art, Alois Riegl's "Der moderne Denkmalkultus" (The Modern Cult of Monuments) and Cesare Brandi's "Teoria del restauro" (Theory of Restoration), the writer will contemplate the complex and fascinating question as to what extent these theoretical issues could be helpful when dealing with the conservation and restoration of books.

Riegl's theory of values ("Denkmalswerte") was not shaped for historic objects in museums or libraries, but for "living" historic monuments and their everyday preservation problems in the area of conflict between memory values and present-day values. But Riegl's system of values, with all its comprehensive cultural and social aspects, can undoubtedly go beyond the field of historic monuments to confront the multiform demands of all objects created by man.

Contrary to Riegl's theory, Cesare Brandi's "Teoria del restauro" was written explicitly for works of art and their specific demands. Brandi formulated and addressed his principles to the "classical" works of art, i. e. mainly to painting and sculpture. Nonetheless, based on the fact that Brandi created the very useful instruments of the "istanza storica" (the historical case) and the "istanza estetica" (the aesthetic case), emphasizing the strong dialectical connection of the historic and aesthetic dimension in every activity of conservation and restoration, his theory is able to provide many recommendations on the handling of books today.

On this basis, this contribution will show that strong and comprehensive suggestions in formulating current philosophical basics in the conservation and restoration of books can come from the complex theoretical thoughts of Riegl and Brandi.