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## Reflections on the Ethics and Aesthetics of Restoration and Conservation

Peter Lamarque

I

One of the standard practical field guides for archaeologists has the nice title of *First Aid for Finds*.<sup>1</sup> It is a good place to start my reflections as some intriguing thoughts emerge from it. The first is the prominence given to damage of various kinds. In fact a series of related D-words recur: decay, deterioration, destruction, dilapidation, disintegration. A primary aim of the book is to show the different forms damage can take according to the materials damaged: metals, stone, ceramics, glass, wall painting, wood, leather, bone, and so on. The lesson is that different ‘first aid’ procedures are required to protect against further damage in each case. From this perspective it comes to seem as if damage and decay and how to deal with them are at the very heart of archaeology. The variety of responses to different kinds of damage and decay is the topic of this paper.

A second theme in the book is also prominent, namely that work on site should consist primarily of recovering, storing and packaging the material rather

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<sup>1</sup> David Watkinson and Virginia Neal, *First Aid for Finds: Practical Guide for Archaeologists* (United Kingdom Institute for Conservation of Historic & Artistic Works, Archaeology Section, 1998)

than any kind of intervention even in the form of cleaning; the main thing is to get the materials off-site to a place where real conservation can begin. The skills of on-site recovery are different from those of laboratory conservation; the protocols are different. One maxim might be ‘Stop it getting worse’, another, for the later stage, ‘Try to make it better’.

This, thirdly, gives added poignancy to the title *First Aid for Finds*. The archaeologist on-site is like a battlefield medic doing just enough to stabilize the condition of the injured so they are in a fit state to be taken off the battlefield to help elsewhere: a hospital or in this case a museum workshop. Patching up, bandaging, stopping further deterioration—i.e. first aid—is what’s required.

The comparison between a wounded soldier on the battlefield and a damaged artefact on an archaeological site suggested by the title *First Aid for Finds* prompts the not unfamiliar analogy between a person and a valued artefact or artwork. Are not both, as is sometimes supposed, to be judged valuable for their own sake, as having intrinsic value, an identity to be preserved if at all possible? Yet curiously, according to archaeological protocols, there are even stricter constraints for what should be done to repair a broken artefact than to repair a broken human body. Few would argue that replacing an internal organ, like a liver or heart or lung, where it is possible to do so to preserve a life, or to replace external limbs, arms and legs, with prosthetic substitutes, is somehow threatening to the integrity of the human

being. What is intrinsically valuable for a human life seems not to rest (or not to rest exclusively) on what the human body looks like or what percentage of the body's physical composition is retained or lost in surgery, but rather on the preservation of factors much deeper in personal identity: self-consciousness, memories, the potential to feel and think, to live a worthwhile life, to avoid pain.

On the face of it, it seems hard to find direct analogues of these latter features in non-sentient artefacts, although later we shall look at an argument (from John Ruskin), coming out of concerns about restoration, that might suggest something similar in artefacts to those deeper identity-preserving factors in humans. Whatever the merits of such analogies it is not uncommon to hear it said that with artefacts (at least highly valued artefacts) preserving as much of the original as possible, and avoiding the use in restoration of too much extraneous material, are overriding priorities. In the human case there is less compunction about patching up the human body with any material that restores function.

## II

But perhaps this is to get ahead of ourselves. If the enquiry is to have value or interest it must proceed by reflecting on particular cases even if, in this context, there will inevitably be insufficient space for the depth of detail desirable.

My first case study concerns the recent restoration and conservation of the medieval stained glass in York Minster.<sup>2</sup> This has been a complex, painstaking enterprise that has involved dismantling the entire Great East Window and meticulously restoring and conserving the fragile panels. It is the underlying principles of this work and the protocols that have guided it that will be the focus of my reflections.

What were the aims of the conservation programme? What constraints operated? We are not without help in answering these questions. There is a substantial document that spells it all out: *Guidelines for the Conservation and Restoration of Stained Glass* (Nuremberg, 2004) published online by the Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi (CVMA) of Great Britain.<sup>3</sup> These guidelines cover in immense detail the practical procedures that are permissible and indeed mandated in the treatment of stained glass. Conveniently a statement of very broad constraints is also offered:

These preconditions are not only binding for the restorer, they dictate similarly the goals of scientific/technical research, towards which all treatment strategies should be directed.

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<sup>2</sup> York Minster is one of the largest, and arguably finest, medieval Gothic cathedrals in Northern Europe, dating, in its present form, from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 15<sup>th</sup> centuries (officially completed in 1472). An extensive five-year, multi-million pound, restoration and conservation project started in 2011 with particular attention to the East End with its magnificent Great East Window, completed by master-glazier John Thornton in 1408, the largest single expanse of medieval stained glass in Britain.

<sup>3</sup> See <<http://www.cvma.ac.uk/conserv/guidelines.html>> accessed 8 January 2016.

- the greatest possible retention of the original substance
- the highest possible protection against expected future damage (conservation)
- the closest possible rendition of the original artistic appearance (restoration)
- consideration of the possibility of undoing any interventions applied (reversibility)
- exact description of the state of the original and recording of the interventions applied (documentation)

All partners involved in the carrying out of this project had to commit themselves to fulfilling these requirements.

(‘Science in the Service of Restoration’, §1.3)

These rules might seem innocuous enough given their generality. But their application can call for difficult matters of judgment. For one thing, there can be tensions between them: between, for example, ‘the greatest possible retention of the original substance’ and ‘the closest possible rendition of the original artistic appearance’. The original substance might significantly have lost its original appearance through deterioration, discoloration, etc. Is original substance or original appearance more important? A dilemma familiar in restoration results:

retain the deteriorated substance and sacrifice the original appearance or reconstruct the original appearance and affect the original substance.<sup>4</sup>

A small example might illustrate the problem of balancing the demands of the protocol. Consider the panel (Figures 1 and 2) in the Great East Window, 4f, The Fourth Vial (Rev 16: 8-9). The Minster website offers this brief description:

An angel with yellow wings flies inwards from the left of the panel, and pours the liquid from the vial out over a sun with yellow rays. The people below attempt to shield themselves from the heat; two use their hats and two turn their faces away, raising their hands for protection.<sup>5</sup>

The panel was subject to fairly extensive restoration. Leading was removed and colours changed. Again, this is the Minster's description:

Art historical sources provided evidence for a pale blue cloud across the top of the panel. This cloud was reinstated by conservators and painted based on other clouds in the window. The blank red stopgap glass inserted during the

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<sup>4</sup> In an illuminating paper, Rafael de Clercq proposes a simple (and initially appealing) principle for restoration: 'restoration is to make as few alterations as possible while aiming to return those properties that the artist intended the work to have, and which at some point after completion it actually had' (p. 274). But the tension between retaining original substance and original appearance remains. Difficult judgements are needed as to which properties to prioritise and how to weigh different kinds of alterations. See Rafael de Clercq, 'The Metaphysics of Art Restoration', *BJA* 53 (2013), 261-275.

<sup>5</sup> See 'Panel of the Month', October 2014, York Minster website: < <http://www.yorkglazierstrust.org/york-minster/panel-of-the-month/october-2014>> accessed 8 January 2016.

1950's restoration below the cowering figure in blue was replaced with new red glass, painted with the suggestion of feet, to tone in with the surrounding original pieces.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 1: Panel before restoration (© Chapter of York: reproduced by kind permission)

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.





Fig. 2: Panel after restoration (© Chapter of York: reproduced by kind permission)

In a word, quite a lot of reworking was done. Judgments about colours were made, art historical sources consulted, removal of earlier restoration work condoned. Going back to the protocol, note how the term ‘original’ shifts in meaning (or at least reference) in the different clauses. Sometimes it refers to the substance or material that the restorers are immediately confronted with: so the requirement to provide an ‘exact description of the state of the original’ presumably covers the state of the panel as found (including ‘stopgap glass’ inserted in the 1950s). The conservators in this instance were happy to get rid of this more recent restoration. But the ‘retention of the original substance’ and the ‘rendition of the original artistic appearance’ clearly refer to the original that dates back to the time the panels were created. Of course quite what the window did look like over six hundred years ago can only be conjecture.

Taken literally any attempt to render the original artistic appearance would involve a massive amount of intervention that would surely conflict with most of the other rules in the protocol. The conservators do, however, have a good idea of the changes earlier restorers have wrought: in particular, for example, the addition of extra leading to give the panes more stability. Because of the strength of new resins much of this added leading could be removed and the pieces joined more directly, subject, as always, to the rule of reversibility, including repainting and regluing. The removal of later leading, then, is a clear example of seeking to retain (or restore) the ‘original artistic appearance’.

So far we can perhaps derive only somewhat unsurprising conclusions about the restoration work on the Great East Window: for example, that matters of judgment, both art historical and aesthetic, are integral to the process which, it follows, cannot be driven entirely by the science, sophisticated as that is. It might be tempting to suppose that scientific knowledge, for example, about the chemistry of damage and decay, about changes to pigments and varnishes over time, about what can and cannot be done, could largely determine how the protocols might be implemented. But we have found that the protocols are in tension with each other—minimal intervention conflicting with faithfulness to the original—so judgements are needed not just about what is possible but about what is desirable.

But a more fundamental question lingers in the background. It is a very simple question, in fact leading to others: *if all this painstaking and expensive work has the aim of prolonging the life of the glass, protecting it from further decay, and thus retaining it in the best possible state, why put it back in the East Window?* Why repeat this endless process of conservation every fifty years or so? Given that this is one of the finest masterpieces of ecclesiastical art in the world, why expose the precious panels to more potential harm both in situ and in the restoration process? Why not store them in perfect conditions free from further damage, no longer subject to corrosion and pollution?

The obvious initial answer is that people want to see the panels. But that is not decisive. For one thing an accurate replica of the panels could be installed in the East Window: in fact during the restoration there was an effective life-size photographic montage of the panels suspended at the Minster's East End. The real panels could be put on show for an interested public, one by one under controlled conditions, much as one can look at the Book of Kells in Trinity College Dublin, one selected page at a time. There are notable precedents for exhibiting replicas of famous works in the interest of conservation: for over a hundred years a replica of Michelangelo's *David* has stood in the Piazza della Signoria in Florence after the original was moved into the Accademia Gallery. On the Capitol in Rome a replica of the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius stands outside, the original being in the museum; likewise the horses on St Mark's Basilica in Venice are replicas, again the originals inside. And so on. Finally, the Minster's stained glass panels have been stored for safe-keeping before, for example, during the Second World War.

How should we respond to this suggestion? For some it is unthinkable that the Great East Window of York Minster should be replaced by a mere replica, even if a consequence is to protect the original and even if the original could be viewed, at least panel by panel, by an interested public, as indeed was the case during restoration. But is that outright rejection reasonable? Can more be said? In support it might be supposed that there is some kind of obligation

(even a moral obligation) for the Minster to display its finest work in its totality, in the location for which it was made. Not to do so feels like a betrayal both of the original creator, John Thornton, but also of the work itself. A replica might produce a superficially similar appearance to the original but there are well-rehearsed arguments in aesthetics that the two experiences cannot be identical.<sup>7</sup> The presence of the original informs the nature of the experience itself. And even if the original panels could be viewed close up—in some sense a much clearer view, even if not the view intended—it is the experience of the whole ensemble of panels that grounds the value of the work.

If morality does come into it there looks to be something like a moral dilemma here. There seems to be an obligation of some kind to preserve and protect so unique and invaluable a work; yet if these recent comments are right there also seems to be an obligation to display the work as it was intended and make it available to those who want to see it. The obligations conflict because the act of displaying the stained glass is also an act that puts its continued existence into jeopardy.

Let us grant the obligation to conserve the stained glass as far as possible. What about the obligation, if there is one, to display it as originally intended (i.e. in the full Great East Window)? What kind of an obligation is that? Perhaps it is an obligation to the artists and craftsmen who created the work, or

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Peter Lamarque, *Work and Object: Explorations in the Metaphysics of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), Ch. 6.

to those who visit the Minster, or even to the work itself. But I wonder if the focus of the obligation might, as implied earlier, be better targeted at the *experience* that the work, taken as a whole, makes available. Arguably to withhold that experience, to deny its availability, is in a sense a denigration of it, disrespecting the value of the experience in its own right.<sup>8</sup>

The experience of the stained glass in its original location bears a unique value, not shared by the experience of a replica. It is an experience imbued with theological and aesthetic significance, both didactic and inspirational. But is there an obligation to make this experience available, to let people view the window in its entirety? Might not obligations to the work in the end override any obligation to let people experience it? To preserve the work best would be to store it away and protect it from damage. However, why preserve the work if not for the experience it affords? One could not respect that experience while shutting the work away. The argument here might not be decisive but I suggest that when the focus is given to the valued experience itself, the case leans powerfully in the direction of displaying not storing the work.

No doubt fine judgements are needed to find the right balance between the different obligations. A clear case going the other way would be that of the

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<sup>8</sup> It should perhaps not be thought of as an obligation to promote any individual's experience. There is surely no moral obligation that I, in particular, or any individual, should experience the stained glass or even, all things being equal, be given the opportunity to experience it. But the relevant experience might be identified as a *type* that could be multiply instantiated, rather as proposed by Malcolm Budd when he characterises the artistic value of a work of art as the intrinsic value of the experience-type the work offers (Malcolm Budd, *Values of Art* [London: Allen Lane, 1995], 4).

prehistoric cave paintings, for example, at Lascaux or Chauvet where the physical, environmental dangers (to the paintings themselves) that would result from giving people direct access to the caves far outweigh any values the experience of the paintings might afford (and few would begrudge the making of replicas in these instances). However, the cases are not the same. The stained glass is simply not in comparable danger and every effort is made to avoid further deterioration. Nor, it might be added, is it obvious that the prehistoric paintings, unlike the glass, were ever intended for general view.

### III

It will be helpful to look at these kinds of obligations through other cases. However, before that, let us reflect a moment longer on the very idea of restoration in this context. Restoration, as opposed to conservation or preservation, is not always viewed positively. For example, the art historian John Ruskin viewed it entirely negatively:

Neither by the public, nor by those who have the care of public monuments, is the true meaning of the word *restoration* understood. It means the most total destruction which a building can suffer: a destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered; a destruction accompanied with false description of the thing destroyed. Do not let us

deceive ourselves in this important matter; it is *impossible*, as impossible as to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture.<sup>9</sup>

Ruskin is thinking of restoration as reconstruction, his primary focus being on architectural restoration. He gives several examples from his own period, where significant parts of buildings had been demolished to be replaced by an ‘imitation’:

The first step to restoration, (I have seen it, and that again and again—seen it on the Baptistery of Pisa, seen it on the Casa d' Oro at Venice, seen it on the Cathedral of Lisieux,) is to dash the old work to pieces; the second is usually to put up the cheapest and basest imitation which can escape detection.<sup>10</sup>

Do not let us talk then of restoration. The thing is a Lie from beginning to end. You may make a model of a building as you may of a corpse, and your model may have the shell of the old walls within it as your cast might have the skeleton, with what advantage I neither see nor care: but

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<sup>9</sup> John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Ch . VI, The Lamp of Memory, in *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London: George Allen, 1903), vol. 8, 242.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.



the old building is destroyed, and that more totally and mercilessly than if it had sunk into a heap of dust, or melted into a mass of clay.<sup>11</sup>

It is not clear what Ruskin would have thought of the restoration work in York Minster. With respect to the stained glass he surely would have applauded the prescription of ‘the greatest possible retention of the original substance’, as well as the condition of reversibility. But he might have been less impressed by the removal and replacement of crumbling stones and carvings in the building’s fabric, as took place, although it was hardly the wholesale destruction he deplored.

Ruskin had no objection to repair and conservation, indeed he made practical suggestions for them:

Take proper care of your monuments, and you will not need to restore them. A few sheets of lead put in time upon the roof, a few dead leaves and sticks swept in time out of a water-course, will save both roof and walls from ruin. Watch an old building with an anxious care; guard it as best you may, and at *any* cost from every influence of dilapidation. Count its stones as you would jewels of a crown; set watches about it as if at the gates of a besieged city; bind it together with iron where it loosens; stay it

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

with timber where it declines; do not care about the unsightliness of the aid; better a crutch than a lost limb; and do this tenderly, and reverently, and continually, and many a generation will still be born and pass away beneath its shadow. Its evil day must come at last; but let it come declaredly and openly, and let no dishonouring and false substitute deprive it of the funeral offices of memory.<sup>12</sup>

The phrase ‘do not care about the unsightliness of the aid’ might be in tension with the protocol applied to the stained glass aiming at ‘the closest possible rendition of the original artistic appearance’. Ruskin elevates conservation over restoration, finding an obligation to promote the former and restrict the latter. The quoted phrase also recalls the ‘first aid’ analogy between repairing a human body and repairing an artefact. I suggested earlier that in the human case retaining something deeper (in personal identity) seems to be a higher priority than retaining mere outward appearance. Ruskin finds something comparable in ancient buildings, which he calls a ‘spirit’: ‘the life of the whole, that spirit which is given only by the hand and eye of the workman, never can be recalled [i.e. through restoration]. Another spirit may be given by another time, and it is then a new building; but the spirit of the dead workman cannot be summoned

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 244-245.

up'.<sup>13</sup> A deeper identity, and thus a deeper value, can be found beyond the merely material:

the greatest glory of a building is not in its stones, nor in its gold. Its glory is in its Age, and in that deep sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, of mysterious sympathy, nay, even of approval or condemnation, which we feel in walls that have long been washed by the passing waves of humanity.<sup>14</sup>

It is as if Ruskin credits the walls with their own special knowledge and consciousness of human affairs, a fact, he believes, that demands a deep kind of respect and makes reconstructive restoration all the more intolerable.

Ruskin's influence on later conservation principles has been extensive, both in establishing limits on what is permissible in restoration and in laying the groundwork for what came to be called 'trusteeship'.<sup>15</sup> Related to the latter, he wrote:

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 233-4.

<sup>15</sup> The importance of Ruskin in modern conservation theory is emphasised in Peter Burman, 'A Question of Ethics', <[http://www.buildingconservation.com/articles/ethics/conservation\\_ethics.htm](http://www.buildingconservation.com/articles/ethics/conservation_ethics.htm)> accessed 8 January 2016), originally published in Jonathan M H Taylor, ed. *Conservation and Repair of Ecclesiastical Buildings* (BCD Special Reports), Cathedral Communications Ltd, 1995.

it is again no question of expediency or feeling whether we shall preserve the buildings of past times or not. *We have no right whatever to touch them.* They are not ours. They belong partly to those who built them, and partly to all the generations of mankind who are to follow us.<sup>16</sup>

Ruskin's principles were incorporated into the Manifesto that William Morris wrote for The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (1877 ) with its plea 'to put Protection in the place of Restoration, to stave off decay by daily care, ... and otherwise to resist all tampering with either the fabric or ornament of the building as it stands; ... in fine to treat our ancient buildings as monuments of a bygone art, created by bygone manners, that modern art cannot meddle with without destroying'.<sup>17</sup> These principles are widely acclaimed today.

#### IV

My second case study is Michelangelo's *Pietà* which has been subject to much debate about restoration, some closely recalling the concerns of Ruskin. After the serious damage done by Laszlo Toth, a mentally disturbed Hungarian-Australian geologist, who attacked the sculpture with a hammer in May 1972,

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<sup>16</sup> Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 245 (italics in original).

<sup>17</sup> William Morris, Manifesto, The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, 1877: <<https://www.spab.org.uk/what-is-spab-/the-manifesto/>> accessed 8 January 2016.

there were different opinions as to how best to repair the work. The restoration was carried out under the supervision of Deoclecio Redig de Campos who in fact decided early on, even if controversially, to use what are called *integrative* methods: in other words, where there are missing fragments to replace them with new material, the principle being to hide the damage as far as possible. De Campos said that if the missing pieces of the eye and nose of the Madonna were not replaced, the statue ‘might have had value as historical evidence but not as a work of art’.<sup>18</sup> A reporter for *American Artist* commented on the finished work and drew a comparison between two modes of restoration:

I could scarcely make out the thin hairlines of restoration. The public will not see them at all. The Pietà has been reborn, more beautiful than before, for the statue has been washed as well as put back together.... The principle followed was that of an *integral* rather than a *purist* restoration. Historical rigor in this case—that is, not replacing anything that was not Michelangelo's—would have entirely destroyed the piece. A scratch on the Pietà is more disfiguring than the missing arms of the Venus de Milo.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted by Mark Sagoff, ‘On Restoring and Reproducing Art’, *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978), 453-470, at 457.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted by Sagoff, *ibid*, 457.

Again it is hard to conjecture what view Ruskin would have taken in this case but judging from the remarks quoted earlier one might expect him to incline towards the 'purist' school which objects to any integrative reconstruction; he might have preferred the restoration to have been restricted only to the original material and the rest left in its damaged state.

Although I suspect most of us are grateful for the work de Campos did, it would be wrong to dismiss the purist case out of hand. Mark Sagoff has produced an elegant defence at least of the motivation behind it.

A purist restoration allows viewers to imagine a work of art as complete, yet, at the same time, to see what is authentic and what is not. The integral repair succeeds, on the contrary, if the viewer is at a loss to tell even that the work has been restored. The purist may object to the integral repair, therefore, because of its similarity to the undamaged work. This similarity in appearance may be felt to be an indignity, given the disparity in substance. Spectators cannot tell what is carved, what cast; what is marble, what plastic; what is Michelangelo, what de Campos.<sup>20</sup>

He continues:

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 460.

The integral repair introduces a macaronic element into a work of art which makes nonsense of our experience. This is merely comic in some cases, but it adds insult to injury when the subject is a masterpiece. We simply owe more to a Michelangelo than to replace its parts with polymers, as if the appearance of the statue meant more to us than the statue itself. But what is valuable – a stimulus? a response? or a work of art? The purist believes a work of art may be so valuable that it is worse to repair it integrally than to let damage to it stand.<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly the purist case, as constructed by Sagoff, rests on the lack of integrity of an experience grounded merely on outward appearance. On Sagoff's account preserving the surface experience without preserving the work itself is an 'indignity'. The argument is similar to that against replacing an original work with a replica. As such it has plausibility. But, looking back, it applies only awkwardly to the stained glass case. I have suggested there is an obligation to display the glass in its entirety precisely because of the value of the experience thus presented. Yet evidently it is far too late, so many centuries later, to undo the integrative and reconstructive restoration that the glass panels have sustained over their six hundred year life. The experience, on these terms, is already severely compromised. Nevertheless, it seems reasonable for the

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 461.

modern conservator to aspire to restore, where possible, the original appearance, a small step at a time, with care and without further destruction.

Indeed the purist argument—for leaving the damage visible—looks even weaker in the stained glass case than in the *Pietà* case. If no integrative restoration (suitably constrained by protocols) is allowed then the conservator's task would simply be to preserve whatever state of deterioration the panels suffer between each period of restoration. The very chance of protecting the original experience of the panels would diminish in each generation.

But the purist case for the *Pietà* doesn't look strong either, taking the actual circumstances into account.<sup>22</sup> For one thing the reconstruction was relatively minor; it was also reversible such that under ultraviolet light all the new joins are visible and the resin used is soluble. Furthermore, it is not credible, given the very limited work required, to compare the experience of the post-restoration *Pietà* with the experience of a replica. The post-restoration experience could not be called different in kind from the experience available from the original. The accuracy of the repairs was crucially aided by the existence of a finely executed cast taken in earlier years.

Maybe the distinction cannot be laid down with great conviction but I am inclined to think that while the obligation in the case of the stained glass is grounded in the experience the entire window affords in situ, the obligation

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<sup>22</sup> Rafael de Clercq also makes the case that there are no 'principled, a priori grounds' for promoting purist over integral restoration in every instance, 'The Metaphysics of Art Restoration', 270-271.



regarding the Pietà is more centrally directed to the work itself. If ever there is something like a moral obligation to protect and preserve a work of art it is to a work like the Pietà. Why? Because the Pietà is not just of cultural significance—however rooted is its subject in Christian culture and iconography—but somehow of trans-cultural significance, a work of universal human value as much as of localised cultural value. The attack on it was a kind of desecration, a sacrilege, which offends something deep within human sensibility. To attempt to destroy a work of such supremely exquisite aesthetic value—not to speak of its theological, historical, artistic values—is morally reprehensible. And to right such a wrong seems itself like a duty. Furthermore, to go only as far as the purist wants, leaving parts in their damaged state, would constantly and painfully—and surely gratuitously—draw attention to a moral outrage.

## V

Is something similar always true when a beautiful object is damaged? Take the case of the three Chinese porcelain vases accidentally smashed to pieces in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge in January 2006 (Figure 3). The Museum never hesitated in the decision to repair the vases and there seems to have been less debate than in the Pietà case as to the place of integrative restoration. There was filling both in the joins and where flakes were missing but, acknowledging

a 'purist' intuition, it was decided there would not be additional retouching at the joins. The Museum contrasts the policy they adopted to that sometimes favoured:

Some restorers completely cover their fills by spraying on the retouching paints. Usually the spray extends on either side of the fill to blend in with the original surface. This makes the repair 'invisible' but also covers up some of the original object. This method tends to disguise the restoration and may deceive the viewer. It is increasingly regarded as a less ethical approach for museum quality objects.<sup>23</sup>

The reference to deceiving the viewer recalls part of the argument in the purists' case used by Mark Sagoff. Too perfect a repair involving retouching gives a false appearance and, to the extent that it involves deception, is characterised by the Museum as inviting ethical sanction.

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<sup>23</sup> <<http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/gallery/chinesevases/retouching.html>> accessed on 23 October 2014.



Fig. 3: Chinese porcelain vases from the reign of Kangxi (1662-1722). Image post-restoration reproduced by permission of the Syndics of The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

Was there a moral obligation to repair these vases, to restore them to something like their original appearance? In this case it is less clear than in the *Pietà* case what that might amount to. These objects are historically important and aesthetically beautiful and both facts might be sufficient to generate an obligation to attempt restoration. Setting aside any obligation arising from the preservation of the historical record, I wonder, taking the aesthetic stance, if there isn't somewhere in the background a weaker obligation—prudential rather

than moral—which applies widely, namely, something like this: *If possible, and in the absence of countervailing circumstances, you ought to try to preserve a beautiful object.* This applies as much to the Pietà as to the Chinese vases but the obligation on the former seems stronger (or at least different) both because of what I called the unique transcultural value of the Pietà and because of the nature of the harm done to it. The damage to the vases seems less obviously a wrong that demands restitution.

Are these differences just based on culture-relative value-judgments? I do not think so. If they were English, French or Italian vases from the same period (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) a similar point would hold. No doubt the vases afford an intrinsically valuable (aesthetic) experience worth preserving but arguably, in lacking both the singularity and the additional emotional and spiritual dimension associated with the stained glass and *Pietà*, the experience they offer seems at least qualitatively different, if not different in kind, from these other cases. The vases for all their individual character are instances of a type of artefact—decorative pieces made for the European export market—that afford an experience broadly similar across comparable exemplars. Their aesthetic value is grounded in a visually pleasing outward appearance and the aim of the restorers was to recreate that appearance as far as possible (subject to the constraint mentioned earlier).

But note something remarkable that has taken place in this case. The restored vases have acquired something like celebrity status. There is heightened interest in them—still partly an aesthetic interest—just in virtue of the story and achievement of the restoration. The near miraculous reassembling of the vases from, in some cases, tiny fragments has changed the nature of the experience they offer. They are no longer just pleasing decorative forms but objects of wonder and curiosity. This might be a further justification for not entirely disguising the repair. In such strange ways can restoration enhance the aesthetic value of an object.<sup>24</sup> While the Pieta is admired in spite of the restoration, the vases are admired because of their restoration.

## VI

My next two case studies I will take together. They are cases of damage done to buildings, in both cases accidental damage, albeit extensive. Both cases too are buildings of historical importance. And both, as it happens, are near York in the UK. The first is Castle Howard, the eighteenth century masterpiece of John Vanbrugh and Nicholas Hawksmoor (although their original design was never

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<sup>24</sup> In Japan there is a traditional method of repairing pottery, named *kintsugi*, which uses lacquer dusted with gold or silver or platinum not to disguise the joins but to draw attention to them. This has been associated with the aesthetic of *wabi-sabi* which sees value in the signs of ageing and decay in objects. It might count as another kind of ‘purism’ in eschewing any attempt at deception in restoration. Interestingly, in some cases it can radically alter the appearance of the object giving it different (even perhaps newly attractive) aesthetic qualities. I am grateful to John Hyman for reminding me of this technique in this context.

completed).<sup>25</sup> The second, Newburgh Priory, is a building more modest in scale, dating back to an Augustinian priory from 1145 but turned into a Tudor manor house after the dissolution of the monasteries in the sixteenth century and substantially modernised in the eighteenth century.

In 1940 extensive damage was done to Castle Howard by a fire; many rooms were entirely gutted and the magnificent central dome collapsed into the Great Hall. Nearly a third of the building was open to the elements and the house stood as virtually a ruin for over twenty years before restoration work was started in the 1960s and the dome rebuilt. There are still rooms that have not been fully restored, although it is hard to tell looking at the dome that it is the product of rebuilding (Figure 4).

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<sup>25</sup> Castle Howard has acquired international visibility by featuring in the 1981 TV adaptation of *Brideshead Revisited*, starring Jeremy Irons and Anthony Andrews, and also in the 2008 feature film of Evelyn Waugh's novel, directed by Julian Jarrold.



Fig. 4: Castle Howard, after restoration, South Face. Image reproduced by permission of Toby Lamarque.

Newburgh Priory also suffered a devastating fire, in 1947; the stories are similar because at the time both houses were being used as schools. At Newburgh there were also renovations carried out in the 1960s but not all rooms were restored and the whole long gallery wing was left as a ruin (Figure 5) and is now a walled garden.



Fig. 5: Newburgh Priory, with ruined wing on the far right side. Image reproduced by permission of Alice Denny.

The case for restoring these damaged buildings and the strictures on how the restoration should be carried out seem rather different from the considerations that arose in the other cases. What kind of obligations, if any, were there to do the restoration work? No doubt the prudential obligation to preserve beautiful objects if possible applies here but it is hard to see any further obligation to do so, grounded in the special nature of the objects themselves. Both houses are privately owned and the decision to restore them was taken by



the owners, seriously constrained no doubt by cost. But was there an obligation on the owners to restore their houses whatever hardship that brought to their own lives? Probably not. Historically many houses have been damaged by fire and subsequently abandoned. This is a tragedy for the owners and it might be an architectural tragedy, a severe historical loss, but it is not obvious that there is any moral obligation on individuals or the State to support every architectural restoration project.

What about the nature of the restoration work itself? Do the principles that applied to the stained glass carry over in this context? We recall: ‘The greatest possible retention of the original substance’; the ‘highest possible protection against expected future damage’; the ‘closest possible rendition of the original artistic appearance’; the reversibility of all interventions. None seems to be directly applicable to these fire-damaged buildings. Is that because the buildings are not of sufficient architectural or historical interest? That cannot be an overriding factor. Even with the devastating fire at Windsor Castle in 1992 it was decided that only certain rooms—just over half the number in fact—would be restored to anything like their original state while the opportunity was taken in other damaged parts of the Castle to redesign and even modernise.

No doubt when the dome of Castle Howard was rebuilt it was decided as far as possible to retain the appearance of the original dome. However, no

question of the reversibility of the repairs arose. Why would anyone want to undo the repair and start again? If they did, perhaps because of faulty work, they could simply knock down the replacement dome and try again. Also, the issue raised by the purists about the Pietà that making too perfect a reproduction of the original would somehow compromise the integrity of the whole (in this case the whole building) would seem absurd and hyperbolic in the restoration of the dome. The very point of the reconstruction was to hide the fact that any reconstruction had taken place. What mattered was to restore the vision of Vanbrugh and Hawksmoor and preserve the vista of the house from the surrounding park. Ruskin's severe demand of ancient buildings, '*We have no right whatever to touch them*', might apply to over-jealous reconstruction of ancient churches but barely seems relevant to the repairs under consideration in these examples.

The decision to leave the long gallery at Newburgh Priory as a ruin and turn it into a walled garden might have been taken for a number of reasons, including cost, but surely not under Ruskin's strictures. On the other hand, it is hard to say that the owners did the wrong thing, that they were duty bound to try to restore the original wing of the building. As it is, that part of the building is now pleasantly integrated into the experience that the house and gardens afford. It does not seriously detract from the aesthetic pleasure of the whole.

Perhaps architecture, both domestic and public, differs in important respects from fine art. It is not uncommon for buildings to undergo extensive redesign and rebuilding in their lifetime. Newburgh Priory has changed beyond recognition since its days as a working priory and each century has seen radical new additions and replacements. It is the same with Castle Howard and the addition of a Palladian wing in the mid-eighteenth century, out of keeping with the original Vanbrugh design, has left even to this day a curious disjointedness in the overall appearance (most notable in the North Face). The point is that while there might be objections to particular changes at different periods on aesthetic or architectural grounds, few people object in principle to tampering with buildings, knocking bits down, adding others and even, as at Newburgh, leaving parts as a ruin.

## VII

This brings me to my final topic which I will reflect on only briefly. That is the topic of ruins, and in particular the aesthetics of ruins. Surprisingly, I can find little in Ruskin directly on the subject, apart from some incidental remarks about the pleasures he finds in viewing certain ruins. It is surprising because an earlier quotation (above) saw him quite resigned to the consequence of his restoration policy which in effect allowed that the buildings he loves will

eventually end up as ruins: ‘Its evil day must come at last; but ... let no dishonouring and false substitute deprive it of the funeral offices of memory’.

One thing seems clear, namely that Ruskin would abhor any attempted restoration (rebuilding) of ruins. An egregious example, after his time, would be the notorious restoration work carried out by Sir Arthur Evans at the Palace of Knossos in Crete from about 1905 into the 1920s. Evans was a distinguished archaeologist and there was nothing slipshod about his analysis and documentation of the site, but his legacy is tarnished by the reconstructive work he undertook, an object lesson, it is said, on how not to do archaeological restoration. Evans rebuilt sections of the palace with concrete and red paint. And he got a talented French artist Émile Gilléron and his son to paint murals roughly based on the fragments that remained. There is no mistaking the similarity of these depictions to fashionable *art nouveau* designs from the 1920s.<sup>26</sup> The example, although applied to ruins, seems a clear vindication of Ruskin’s caution about restoration. Yet Ruskin would surely accept that ruins need careful stewardship subject to rigorous conservation procedures (and even repair).

It is curious how the word ‘ruin’ with such seemingly negative connotations in most usages has managed to acquire a positive connotation in archaeological or historical contexts. If you ruin your health or your life or your

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<sup>26</sup> See Cathy Gere, *Knossos and the Prophets of Modernism* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009).

prospects all seems lost, there is no room for hope or recovery. To be ruined is to face disaster. Yet archaeological ruins are enjoyed and sought out. Any disaster is in the past, the present offers delight. As Carolyn Korsmeyer nicely puts it, ‘*ruin* is not just a description of things that have undergone deterioration; it marks as aesthetic category of its own’.<sup>27</sup> We must ask what kind of response is appropriate to the damage and decay evidenced by a ruin. Unlike our other cases, it is not (normally) a response to seek to restore an original appearance. That itself might seem puzzling.

What is a ruin? Robert Ginsberg defines it as ‘the irreparable remains of a human construction that, by a destructive act or process, no longer dwells in the unity of the original’. But, he goes on, acknowledging the positive aspect, it ‘may have its own unities that we can enjoy’.<sup>28</sup>

Focusing on ruined buildings, it is helpful to distinguish a ruin from a merely derelict building even if there is no sharp line between the two. Derelict buildings, such as factories, farm buildings or abandoned houses, seldom have much aesthetic appeal and, more importantly, probably had little historical or archaeological interest before they became derelict. Also a derelict building could be restored, rebuilt, given a new use, without Ruskin-type strictures against restoration. Ruins, in contrast,—Ginsberg is right here—are irreparable.

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<sup>27</sup> Carolyn Korsmeyer, ‘The Triumph of Time: Romanticism Redux’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72 (2014), 431.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Ginsberg, *The Aesthetics of Ruins* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), xvii.

To attempt to restore a ruin can seem a desecration, as in the Knossos case, although conservation to stop further deterioration is encouraged.

Another thought sometimes associated with ruins is that only grand monuments can be ruins—castles, monasteries, temples, amphitheatres, palaces. That, though, seems too restrictive. There is no reason in principle why more humble dwellings could not become ruins, such as crofters' cottages, old village halls, an explorer's hut, but again there is usually at least a historical interest in the original to give value to the ruined remains; out of that a further aesthetic interest might arise.

Our question, then, might be posed like this: why is a ruin left as a ruin and neither bulldozed away nor reconstructed? What is the appeal that prompts leaving a ruin as it is? Of course there is no single answer. Interest in ruins is multifaceted. Some fairly obvious interests can be readily identified. Perhaps the most obvious is the preservation of the archaeological and historical record. The conservation of ruins is partly aimed at conserving that record. I will take that for granted even though there is more to be said, not least about the appropriate conservation constraints.

What about aesthetic value? A key point is that the aesthetic appreciation of a ruin focuses on the ruin *as a ruin*. In effect a ruin has become a new kind of object inviting a new kind of response, different from the response that the original building might have elicited. To appreciate a ruin aesthetically is not a

weakened form of an aesthetic response to the original, even if part of the appreciation might involve imagining what the building must have looked like. It is an appreciation of an object in its own right.<sup>29</sup> It is conceivable that a ruin might give more aesthetic pleasure than the original.

What kind of appreciation is this? First of all, it might be largely formal. The shapes and shadows of a ruin can have beauty as pure forms (Figure 6). As we move in and around a ruin we can see changing shapes and changing juxtapositions: a rose window seen through an arch, a column aligning with a façade. These can afford familiar kinds of aesthetic experiences. Sometimes the serendipity of what remains can give added poignancy to the forms. As Elizabeth Scarbrough notes, ‘one can marvel at the ominous looming quality of the broken flying buttress reaching out into empty space’.<sup>30</sup> But delight in purely formal appearances might equally arise from the derelict factory or even the rubble of a demolition site.

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<sup>29</sup> Mock-ruins, in the form of ‘follies’, built as such, were popular in the eighteenth century to adorn large estates, e.g. Hagley Castle, a mock-medieval ruin, built in the grounds of Hagley Hall. They reinforce the idea of a ruin as a new kind of object to enjoy. Again, thanks to John Hyman.

<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Scarbrough, ‘Unimagined Beauty’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72 (2014), 447.



Fig. 6: Ruin of Byland Abbey, North Yorkshire. Photographed by Peter Lamarque.

With ruins there is usually more than pure form to catch our attention. There is also in many cases the evocation of a past that fascinates and haunts us. Aesthetic appreciation is heightened when informed by knowledge from history and circumstance. What was it like to live here? What led to its ruination? Our thoughts, as Ruskin suggested, might turn to what these walls have witnessed, the ‘passing waves of humanity’.



A third kind of aesthetic experience comes from a sense of decay and loss, of time past and the fragility of human endeavour: the Ozymandias syndrome. Ruins carry a familiar moral message that even the finest works cannot outlast the ravages of time: ‘rocks impregnable are not so stout, / Nor gates of steel so strong, but Time decays’ (Shakespeare’s sonnet 65). Here then is another of the melancholic pleasures of the ruin: a reminder of this salutary truth. No doubt the love of ruins by the nineteenth century Romantics, from Wordsworth to Turner to Tennyson, was partly motivated by the sense of loss and melancholy, even if, as Korsmeyer notes, this can lapse into ‘indulgent sentimentality’.<sup>31</sup>

## VIII

We end then where we began in the ubiquity of damage and decay. Field archaeologists dig it out, conservators and restorers decide how to deal with it. The decisions are not easy. Often conflicting obligations seem equally compelling. Are we duty bound to preserve all fragments of the past? Should we seek to improve the condition of what we find or should we defer to the integrity of the fragment? Must the storing up of knowledge take precedence

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<sup>31</sup> Korsmeyer, ‘The Triumph of Time’, 432.

over the pleasures on offer from the objects recovered? I have looked at a handful of cases where the answers seem to point in different directions.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented to a workshop on The Aesthetics and Ethics of Archaeology in November 2014 at the University of Durham. My thanks to the audience there and at York for comments. I am most grateful also to John Hyman for several suggestions for improving the paper.