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Material Authenticity in Conservation Theory

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ABSTRACT. In September 1997 a strong earthquake shook the Italian regions of Umbria and Marche, in central Italy. The 13th century *Basilica of San Francesco of Assisi* was harmed, the precious frescos on its vault reduced to wreckage. The work of restoration began immediately. Hundreds of conservators scoured the rubble for remnants of the paintings. This painstaking work of retrieval led to the recovery of thousands of tiny fragments, most of which no bigger than a one-euro coin. Analysing the fragments and relocating them to their original position took years. In 2006, however, the restoration was finally completed. Though this is certainly a heartening story, it is also a surprising one in many respects. The question is, particularly, why the restorers put such effort to recollect the frescos' original pieces, no matter how scattered and unrecognizable they were. In this paper I suggest that their reason for doing so was based on a widespread interest in art appreciation for what I call 'material authenticity'. What is this interest from a philosophical point of view? And how does it affect decisions regarding conservation? My contention is that our concern for material authenticity, whilst culturally-dependent, is based on some deeply entrenched ideas we have about what artworks are ontologically. These ideas, placing great value on the substance of which artworks are physically composed, have informed conservation in the past, and despite recent challenges, continue to be the main principle behind conservation theory today.

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1. Introduction

On the night of September 26th, 1997, at 2:43 a.m., a 5.6 earthquake on the Richter scale shook the regions of Umbria and Marche in central Italy injuring one hundred people and causing massive material damage. The 13th century *Basilica of San Francesco of Assisi* was damaged, its vault severely cracked. Only a few hours later a team of technicians and conservators was at work trying to secure what was at risk. Sergio Fusetti, a restorer who was there, recounted what happened that morning. He was standing in the central nave next to the altar when the doors of the church suddenly flew open. Looking up he saw thousands of minuscule fragments falling from the ceiling like confetti in the bright sunlight. It was 11:42 a.m., and a second violent earthquake was taking place. Large parts of the ceiling fell killing two technicians and two friars. Fusetti managed to find shelter, and recalling those moments, said "I heard voices but could not see anything through the dust, so I thought the entire vault had collapsed"[2]. In fact, not everything had collapsed that morning, but a huge part of the vault had come down. The frescos of Saint Girolamo and the Four Doctors, attributed to the young Giotto, Cimabue's St. Matthew and the Four Evangelists, the 19th century starry vault over the altar, as well as many other decorations on the counter-faced arc were reduced to miniscule pieces.

The work of restoration began immediately. Conservators from the *Istituto Superiore per la Conservazione e il Restauro* (ISCR) under the

[2]See: Basile (2007a). My translation from Italian.

guidance of art historian Giuseppe Basile, scoured the rubble for remnants of the frescos. This painstaking work of retrieval led to the recovery of thousands of tiny, almost unrecognizable, fragments, most of which were no bigger than a one-euro coin[3]. Analysing and cataloguing the fragments and relocating them to their original position took years, in what seemed an impossible undertaking. Despite growing scepticism, on the first anniversary of the earthquake the figure of *San Rufino* was re-established in its original position, more than 20 meters above the floor. In 2006, the restoration was finally completed: "At the end of this long and difficult task", Basile commented enthusiastically, "we can say that we have achieved our goal!".[4]

This may seem just a heartening anecdote, yet it is also a surprising one in many respects. Why did the restorers take on the task of collecting the original pieces of the Assisi frescos in spite of how scattered, fragmented and unrecognisable they were? What drove them into it? Consider also that the frescoes are so high on the vault that even before the earthquake 'merely a blur of colour' could be seen by the many pilgrims, churchgoers and art lovers who visited the basilica.[5]

My suggestion is that the Assisi case provides a compelling example of one element that most of us find essential when relating to artworks, namely, the significance of experiencing authentic material art objects as

[3]To be precise, the fragments from the entrance vault with the *San Girolamo* and the Eight Saints fresco were almost 80,000, while the number of those from the vault above the altar exceeded 200,000 in total.

[4]See Basile (2007b). My translation from Italian.

[5] Compare with Leech (1999).

opposed to reproductions, however good they might be. But why is dealing with authentic artworks so relevant to us? Is our caring for *material authenticity* reasonable at all?

These are complex questions involving an intricate web of philosophical, historical and cultural questions. In this paper, I will try my best to unravel at least a part of this web. I will contend that our penchant for material authenticity is grounded on a widespread conception of what an artwork is ontologically. According to this conception, a work of art is primarily a physical object whose identity depends on the material that composes it. The greater the physical integrity of the object's material, the greater the authenticity of the work. Relevantly, this has consequences upon how the aim of conservation is interpreted.

2. The Problem of Material Authenticity

The Western civilization has always set much store by preserving the material of art objects. Recent historical evidence, for example, has shown that the Etruscan already cared much about conserving the authentic material of potteries they considered aesthetically valuable, such as those attributed to important masters like Euphronios, working in the VI century B.C. (Pergoli Campanelli 2016, p. 26). Ancient Romans, on their part, devoted many decrees of the *Ius Civile* to settling the issue of how best to

protect the original material of monuments and buildings.[6]

Today, in the era of mass tourism, people are willing to travel distances to view some authentic art objects, even if they wouldn't be able to distinguish them from reproductions and even if reproductions could offer a more rewarding experience. Wouldn't we be able to appreciate Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* better by viewing a good full-scale copy of it without a crowd of tourists vying for a front-row position to photograph the painting with their smartphones? However logical this may sound, the answer is negative. The fact is that most of us would prefer to view the authentic artwork no matter how good a copy might be and even if it is indistinguishable from the original. This helps explain the monetary worth of originals. In the Louvre bookshop, a poster of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa* only costs around 20 euros, yet the actual painting is priceless.

Why is viewing originals so important to us? This question has been at the core of a long-standing philosophical quarrel centred around art and authenticity, significantly started with Goodman's discussion of authenticity in Chapter III of his *Languages of Art* (1968). While some theoreticians have argued that our preference for originals is justified (Sagoff 1976, 1978;

[6] An interesting figure of this regard is Cassiodorus, living between the V and the VI centuries. As renown, Cassiodorus took an interest in philology, which he coupled with a concern for ancient monuments and artworks. His writings demonstrate a surprising awareness of the relevance of restoration, both in its theoretical and practical dimensions. A whole vocabulary of specific terms such as *reparare, innovare, serbare, reficere, conservare, custodire, roborare* is employed to indicate the kinds of interventions to be executed when preserving various monuments (see Pergoli Campanelli 2015).

Levinson 1987, 2004; Farrelly-Jackson 1997; Dutton 1979, 2003; Korsmeyer 2008), others have retorted that it is just fetishism, sentimental attachment, or, at its worst, plain snobbery (Lessing 1965; Zemach 1989; Jaworski 2013).

2.1. The Aesthetic Relevance of Authenticity

Among the many philosophical justifications that have been advanced to our preference for material authenticity, I will here survey three representative examples offered by Mark Sagoff, Denis Dutton and Jerrold Levinson.

Mark Sagoff (1978; 1976) claims that we assess ordinary things (artworks included) not only for their visible features, or for their effect, but for what they are and for how they were created, namely, for what he calls their "history of production" (Sagoff 1978, p. 456). Because of their history, we believe that works of art are valuable in a distinctive way, *per se*, thus irreplaceable. We treat artworks differently from ordinary objects: we would never accept the idea of a replacement for a fresco like Cimabue's *The Four Evangelists*, in Assisi; conversely, if we lose a pen a replacement is precisely what we want, and we feel no regret since most pens are perfectly interchangeable to us. This, on Sagoff's view, demonstrates that when it comes to appreciate art we seek more than just (aesthetic) gratification: [people] "value a work of art in itself: they recognize the goodness of art as inhering in it rather than as arising in an experience produced in them; they admire the work, then, as being the particular subject of these

characteristics, not the characteristics, as it were, detached or detachable from their subject." (Sagoff 1978, p. 463). According to Sagoff, we cannot appreciate a work of art simply for the sake of its appearance or for the feelings it induces: "one must appreciate the work itself" (Sagoff 1978, p. 453), since the identity of the object is crucial to its aesthetic value. An artwork's being authentic is thus *necessary* to its appraisal, for only insofar as authenticity is established can an artwork be aesthetically evaluated.

A second influential view defending the value of material authenticity is supported by Denis Dutton (1979; 2003). Dutton holds that we value authentic artworks as the result of unique creative human acts. Our assessment of an artwork, according to Dutton, is related to the intuitions we have about the actions that gave rise to its existence. In this regard, all types of artworks, including visual works such as paintings, represent the end point of special types of performances (Dutton, 2003). From Dutton's point of view, thus, art may be conceived of in line with any other sort of performing activity, including sport. In all these domains, we care how the obtained results have been achieved – whether they have come out from natural vs artificial skill, for instance. This is because, according to Dutton, how an artistic achievement is produced is key to its aesthetic evaluation (Dutton, 1979). This information is critical to assessing the final achievement, which in turn bears upon aesthetic value. From Dutton's point of view, thus, the authentic frescos in Assisi (fragmented as they might now be) are different from any possible reproduction because they represent the end-point of a unique type of performance. Our appreciation would be harshly affected if we were to discover that those frescos are in fact just a

replica produced through sophisticated modern copying techniques.

Jerrold Levinson (1987; 2004) also famously supports the role that authenticity plays in our experience of art. The reason why most of us feel that there is virtue in an authentic object that a copy cannot possess, Levinson argues, is not because of any intrinsic property the original displays, but because of its particular history and its relation to the creative activity of a certain artist: "Creativity and originality, thought and work, process and history, all of which reside in – are embodied in – the unique painted canvas" (Levinson 1987, p. 282). We value Cimabue's original frescos as the *embodiment* of his creative activity and his expressive invention – that is to say, as the actual site of his artistic accomplishment. In this sense, the authentic material artwork gives us direct access to the artist's achievement: "Interacting with the original 'puts us in touch' with the artist in the way the duplicate cannot, because of the different causal/historical properties of the two, those non-observable, extrinsic, relational properties […]" (Levinson 2004, p. 16). Of course, reproductions and replicas can perform useful service in allowing us "to renew or deepen our acquaintance with them" (Levinson 1987, p. 281), but this is no reason to think that such copies could ever *displace* the authentic objects. After all none considers a visit to the Grand Canal in Little Venice, Las Vegas, the same as a visit to the true, historical Venice!

2.2. Authenticity as Fetishism

Taking a rather opposite view, other philosophers (Lessing 1965; Zemach

1989; Jaworski 2013) have argued against the aesthetic relevance of material authenticity. Although their arguments vary somewhat, they all contend that the great store we set by material authenticity is unjustified when it comes to assessing the aesthetic merits of an art object. The allegedly 'special value' we attribute to authentic material artworks, they argue, has nothing to do with *aesthetics* per se. Indeed, a work's being authentic or not doesn't make any difference to its aesthetic value (Lessing, 1965). If what we admire in an artwork are its aesthetic properties, and aesthetic properties, whatever else is true of them, are perceptible – they can be seen or listened or otherwise perceived by reading off the surface features of the object – then who cares by whom and how the object was produced? The discovery that a work is a copy, so the argument goes, does not alter its perceivable qualities, and hence shouldn't make any aesthetic difference to us. Knowing that an object is materially authentic is only a piece of extrinsic information[7]. The fact that most of us would be willing to pay an enormous amount of money for an authentic artwork, and instead would have no interest in a reproduction which we could not even tell from the original, only demonstrates that we are fetishists, sentimentalists or simply snob: "Considering a work of art aesthetically superior because it is genuine, or inferior because itis forged, has little or nothing to do with aesthetic judgment or criticism. It is rather a piece of snobbery". (Lessing 1965, p. 461) We cherish the original object for no other relevant reason than

[7] This stance has been famously termed by Gregory Currie (1989) 'aesthetic empiricism'.

because it is *that* object (Zemach 1989, p. 67). Especially when the authentic artwork is badly damaged, as in the Assisi case, "the only reason to cherish the original is sentimental; it is a veneration of the kind that moves us to visit tombs of great men." (Zemach 1989, p. 70) Indeed, "there simply is no art-relevant feature that *all* originals have in common, that make *every* original better than a duplicate, a copy." (Jaworski 2013, p. 13) Of course, there are cases in which viewing originals may result in a more valuable experience, but that is because reproductions generally fail to capture significant nuances of the authentic work. This, however, doesn't imply that authentic artworks are always preferable *per se*. To use a musical example, there can be very bad live performances that do not allow us to enjoy the work, and very good recordings that do the job excellently (Zemach 1989, p. 70).

If it seems hard to discard the thought that something about authentic material artworks makes them more valuable than any copy, however, it is because we consider them blessed with "the Midas Touch" of the artist (Jaworski 2013, p.14). In other words, what binds us to material authenticity is a bias rooted in what anthropologists call the *law of contagion* (Newman &Bloom 2012), the belief that through physical contact materials can take on special qualities. An original fresco by Giotto is particularly valuable to us because Giotto actually touched it, and Giotto is an important artist. In contrast, a duplicate does not 'contain' anything of his special essence.

The very idea that the authentic material object is valuable because it somehow 'embodies' the creative achievement of the artist is troublesome in many respects (Pouivet 2004, pp. 17-19). What does this notion of

embodiment mean? Taken literally, it seems to appeal to a serious question of faith: the creed that there is some magical energy lurking, so to speak, in authentic works of art, granting us the possibility of entering into direct relationship with their artists (Réhault 2004, p. 17). Less dramatically, it may imply that the work involves physical signs of the artist's intentional activity, insofar as it *exemplifies* this activity – just as, according to Goodman (1968), artworks appear to exemplify features they do not actually possess (feelings and emotions, for instance). Nevertheless, even if one interprets embodiment in this sense, there is still a problem involving viewers of works of art: how can they perceive an artist's activity as embodied or exemplified in the authentic material if it is not discernible to their eye?

However one tries to justify it, it seems that our interest in authenticity has little to do with aesthetics and much to do with cultural, anthropological, social values. It is because of these values, not because of any purely aesthetic consideration – that we choose to preserve the original material of art objects, even when, as in the Assisi frescoes, the results are physically undiscernible. But the fact that "the realm of art should be so infested with non-aesthetic standards of judgment that it is often impossible to distinguish artistic from economic value, taste or fashion from true artistic excellence, and good artists from clever businessmen" is, according to these philosophers, both "serious and regrettable" (Lessing 1965, pp. 463-464).

3. Culture and Material Authenticity

To be sure, that our aesthetic responses are culturally affected is a matter of fact. Different cultures shape what people believe about art, and their attitude toward it, in ways that can be strikingly different from one another. The Western-European demand for material authenticity, for example, seems largely a heritage of a Christian-informed tradition in which physical matter is interpreted as the receptacle of God's creative efforts and the substratum through which he reveals himself to the world (Pergoli Campanelli 2015).[8] Relevantly, we tend to treat authentic material art objects the way we treat relics: as the tangible repository of an intangible value. When a work of art is revealed as a forgery its appearance doesn't change, but it lacks its sacral value (we may call it 'aura', to use Walter Benjamin's term), and consequently we lose our interest[9]. Philosophical echoes of this approach can be found in Hegel's aesthetics. One way the spirit has of understanding itself, Hegel claims, is *in* and *through* objects that have been made for the purpose by human beings. Through the creation of these material objects – stone, wood, metal or paint – the spirit is given

[8] An axiom by Tertullian is eloquent in this regard: *caro cardo salutis*, flesh is the pivot of salvation. Without embodiment there is no eternal salvation, since Christians believe that at the end of time they will be revived in their actual bodies.

[9] The idea that our attitude to art is shaped by a relic model also makes sense makes sense of a certain way we have of thinking of the art connoisseur, as someone whose main job is to pursue traces left on a canvas back to its historical origin, just as a detective follows up on fingerprints.

embodied expression: such objects make the freedom of spirit visible. But once inorganic matter is transformed into an expression of spirit via a process that Hegel calls "the forming of the inorganic" (Hegel 2014, p. 209) it becomes a sort of relic – a material witness to our process of self-expression and self-understanding, and, as such, something to be cherished and preserved.

Contrariwise, it is renown that material authenticity is not a priority for a large part of world cultures. In less 'materialistic' social contexts, ritual experiences and ceremonial practices connected to art are more important than the preservation of physical objects over time. Most Asian countries, for instance, interpret what is to be aesthetically valued in terms that are not reconcilable with our cult of originals. "The Chinese", claims historian David Lowenthal "endorse tradition in language and ideas, but discard material remains or let them decay. Revering ancestral memory, they disdain the past's purely physical traces; old works must perish for new ones to take their place." (Lowenthal 1994, p. 63) This explains why many sanctuaries in the Far East are cyclically rebuilt, reconstructed, replicated, and relocated: in the context of local religiosity it is the *aspect* of the temple not its material configuration that hosts the divine force. The most famous example is the sanctuary of Ise, in Japan, whose two main shrines, *Naikū* and *Gekū*, mostly wooden, are completely rebuilt every twenty years on an adjoining site, in a long-standing renewal process called the *Sengu*[10].

[10] For an interesting cultural analysis of the Ise Shrine, see Nitschke (1993). "Natural time (time perceived as the eternal return of the seasons) is renewed by the cyclic

Referring to the case of Ise, the Korean-born philosopher Byung-Chul Han points out "a total inversion of the relationship between original and copy […] The copy is more original than the original, because the older a building is, the more it distances itself from the original state" (Han 2017, p. 64). This is because the Far East, Han explains:

> does not know the cult of the original. There, quite a different technique of preservation developed, which should be more effective than conservation or restoration. It is achieved by continuous replication. This technique totally overrides the difference between the original and the replica. One could also say that originals are preserved through copies (Han 2017, p. 67).

This discrepancy in cultural values has also led to a number of misunderstandings between China and Western museums. The Chinese, Han refers, often send copies abroad instead of originals, in the belief that they are not essentially different from the authentic artworks. The rejection that then comes from the Western museums is perceived by the Chinese as an insult (Han 2017, p. 64).

In fact, different approaches to art authenticity existed in our Western culture as well. Until the Renaissance, it was commonly assumed that

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reconstruction of Japan's supreme sacred space, the shrine grounds of the imperial ancestors". This process "resolve(s) the ultimate 'disease' of time, both historical and natural: the yearning for sacred authority and sacred architecture to be extremely ancient, yet always pristinely fresh." (Nitschke 1993, 10)

excellent copies preserved the quality of the originals. Art historian Alexander Nagel reports a revealing anecdote in this regard. When asked by the art collector Vittoria Colonna for a painting in her possession, the noblewoman Isabella d'Este replied that she would be happy to send it once she had found enough time to get a copy made for herself (Nagel 2014, p. 27). This suggests that in 16th century even the most sophisticated art collectors still dealt quite naturally with the idea that great works could exist in copies. In that setting, copying was not a crime and forgery not even possible.

4. Ontology, Authenticity and Conservation

Though intercultural comparison can help shed light on the complex and stratified nature of aesthetic appreciation, I think that the social-constructionist way of setting the question of authenticity only thinks through half the issue. Our preference for authentic material art objects cannot be merely explained by reference to cultural, religious or sentimental values, as some contend. Of course, if we didn't have the values we have, restorers in Assisi would have never wasted their time reconstructing the puzzle of Cimabue's frescos, since conservation science – as *we* understand it – wouldn't exist as a practice in the first place. Rather, what renders the problem of material authenticity particularly relevant from a philosophical point of view, is that it is not only a contingent matter of beliefs or tastes, ancestral attitudes, fetishism or spiritual creeds – it has to do with our idea of what an artwork is in itself**.**

Here ontology comes into play. It seems that a strong connection exists between our demand for material authenticity and some deeply entrenched ideas we have about what artworks are ontologically. These received ideas can be seen as forming a 'standard ontological view' of artworks: a widespread set of notions which provide us with general answers to questions like: What is the mode of existence of works of art? What is their identity? – thus helping us find our way when it comes to appreciating art[11]. We can identify three concepts that figure as basic creeds in this standard view: the notion of the 'artwork as a material object' (1), the concept of the 'original state' of the artwork (2), and the notion of 'change as damage' (3).

Let us consider an example: take Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*. This painting is a very traditional instance of what we think a work of art is, i.e., in the first place, a *material object* – a singular, distinct, enduring artefact able to persist over time (1). We think that its existence as an object –a painted canvas – enables its existence as the corresponding work of art – *Mona Lisa*. As a consequence, we assume that the artwork can only remain consistent to itself, thus preserving its identity, as long as the object's material components (the canvas, the oil paint) in their arrangement (the form and design) are preserved intact. 'Intact' means here as closest as possible to the alleged *original state*, the initial conditions the object had once the creative

[11] What I am interested in are the presuppositions behind the way we think and act and that ground our experience with traditional art. This repertoire of intuitions embedded in our everyday artistic practices is what I mean by 'common sense'.

act of its author, Leonardo, was completed (2), while the term 'state' refers to a description of the intrinsic, objective, measurable qualities of a work – primary qualities in John Locke's sense. These qualities determine the identity of the artwork understood as the object's material conformation. With reference to this original material conformation or state, all changes and material alterations the object is subjected to in time (pigments that tend to yellow by exposure to light and air, formation of the patina and so on) are considered a potential damage, a threat to the identity of the artwork that preservation science has the duty to fight against (3).

Clearly, the standard view puts much focus on the physical state of the artwork as an object and, therefore, on its material conformation. The original material of the artwork is indeed interpreted as that which contains evidence that enables the artwork's authentication by providing us with a tangible trace left by a particular past. The relation between the artwork's authenticity and its material depends on the following equation: that the better the materials are preserved with regard to the original state of the object, the more authentic the object will be, since authenticity *resides* within the work's original material. Minimizing change to the material object means therefore minimizing loss of authenticity to the artwork. Alteration is tantamount to falsification.[12]

[12] This approach has found theoretical justification in the works of the Italians Camillo Boito and Giovanni Giovannoni, initiators of the so-called 'scientific theory' of conservation (Muñoz Viñas 2005). Boito and Giovannoni considered the safeguarding of the material integrity of an object the central principle of restoration – integrity understood as the physical features and material components of an object.

As a result, conservation is interpreted in the standard view as an intervention primarily aimed at retarding or preventing material deterioration, with a view to conserving the artwork's authenticity by means of preserving its original state as far as possible. Leaving aside all the possible concerns that this conception raises for conservation theory[13], what is especially worth noting is that there is a clear connection between the underlying ontological framework we use to classify and describe an art object, how we view authenticity and the conservation theory we espouse (Laurenson 2006). If the ontological framework is focused on the material, so will the notion of authenticity. But if the ontological framework shifts, so will our concepts of authenticity. Accordingly, our notion of conservation will shift too.

4.1. A Different Conceptual Framework

A conceptual shift of this sort is not impossible in the future. In the next decades we might experience increasing confusion even in traditional arts over what counts as authentic, given that technologies may enable a proliferation of perfect replicas and copies. If the copying and reproducing tools for visual arts will ever approach the level of digital sound-transformation techniques, for instance, our interest in material authenticity may thereby be altered. If, for example, a molecule-by molecule 3d-print

[13] For a discussion on the problems engendered by this way of interpreting the role of conservation, see Muñoz Viñas (2005).

could ever be invented, anyone might end up having a Cimabue decorating the living room, and eventually we would come to accept this as normal. Advances in the arts, happened in the recent past, have already forced us to re-arrange our ontological framework. The standard view, for example, does not sit well with contemporary artforms such as installation, performance or conceptual art, which are both intangible and ephemeral. Moreover, given the increasing internationalization of all world cultures, it can be inferred that the European demand for authenticity will be diluted or compromised by competing cultural values.

From the point of view of conservation theory, these changes in paradigm may lead to an increasing awareness that focusing *only* on material authenticity no more suffices in many respects. This, of course, is not to say that conservators could ever ignore the material entity of an artwork. Indeed, there would be nothing left to contemplate if efforts to ensure the survival of an artwork's material substance were to cease. The point is that if a new conception of artworks emerges, along with a different perception of authenticity, the traditional materialistic notion of conservation may no longer appear effective. Relevantly, a change of this sort is already happening. Though the majority of European conservation policies, beginning with the Venice Charter, are still based on respect for the material authenticity of an object, understood "in terms of the very material present at the object's creation and the unchanged microscopic and macroscopic structure of that material" (Ashley-Smith 2009, p.20), spiritual and non-materialistic ideas on how to care for objects are nowadays increasingly present in codes of practice (Weiler and Gutschow 2017). In

the last two decades attempts have been made to move the focus of conservation away from the original material state of art objects. International conservation guidelines such as the Nara Document on Authenticity (1994), for instance, have been explicitly drafted to shift the focus of conservation away from preserving original material substance to enhancing the more intangible properties of a work of art, "the thoughts and emotions" (Brajer 2009, 85) it evokes. Conservation is increasingly regarded as a social process: an activity "designed to understand cultural heritage, know its history and meaning, ensure its safeguard and, as required, its presentation, restoration and enhancement" (Weiler and Gutschow 2017, p. xxi).

This, however, has created a weird situation in which some monuments are today considered 'authentic' as a result of their reconstruction (Petzet 1994, p. 91). One paradigmatic example of this is the historic Old Town of Warsaw in Poland, which was completely rebuilt after its total destruction in World War II to the way it looked in the 17th century. The thousands of tourists walking every year within the city center *see* the old Warsaw while crossing the late-medieval network of streets, squares, and corners, reminiscent of urban growth from centuries ago (Korsmeyer 2008, p.121). However, whilst wandering around the old city walls, they in fact *look at* an artifact that didn't exist until the 1950s. There is no principled reason to oppose all this, but, interestingly, we still think that people should be warned that the objects they are looking at are the material outcome of modern rebuilding interventions (something that guidebooks are indeed quite clear about). If they aren't, we assume that they would be

mislead in their appreciation of the artistic achievement they are presented with.

5. Conclusion

What a society approves or disapproves in its dealings with art – how it understands art appreciation, evaluation, preservation – is largely determined by the cultural conceptions that have predominated in that society. In this regard, insisting on the fact that it should make no difference to us whether an artwork is authentic or not is just wishful thinking: it asks us to turn our backs on our cultural heritage and on the worth our society places on authenticity and the cult of genius. However, more than just a matter of cultural values and beliefs, our interest in material authenticity seems to depend on some deeply-entrenched ideas we have of what artworks are from an ontological point of view. These ideas, placing great value on the substance of which artworks are physically composed, inform our view of aesthetic appreciation and impinge directly on the way in which we interpret the purpose of conservation. At a time like this, when traditional values and ideals are being increasingly called into question by technological advances and intercultural comparison, I believe that we, philosophers, are urged to re-examine this kind of philosophical assumptions. In the future, we might have to completely redefine why and how we keep the objects of the past.

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