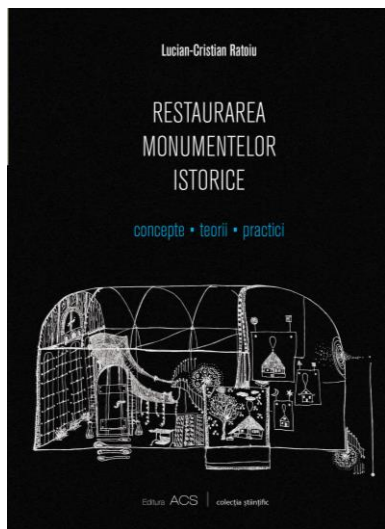




Lucian-Cristian Ratoiu, *Restaurarea monumentelor istorice: Concepte, teorii, practici* (Bucharest: Editura ACS. Colecția Științific, 2021), 446 p.

*Plus ça change et plus c'est la même chose*

Ideally, the historical monument is an artefact fixed in time, extracted from temporal existence, kept unchanged at the cost of considerable efforts. In reality, the monument manifests a formidable polymorphism. That's why Alphonse Karr's aphorism can stand on the frontispiece of the historical monument: *the more it changes, the more it stays the same*.

The statement is valid for any historical monument. Reaching modernity and bearing the traces of the passage of time, the monument will be restored, structurally consolidated, functionally reintegrated, equipped, connected to networks, extended, continuously becoming a contemporary edifice, yet always equal to itself. This is also valid for the concept of historical monument. Appearing first in the formidable renewing effervescence of the Italian Quattrocento, it has served, in turn or simultaneously, the function of a model of artistic perfection and material testimony of a revered past, object of study and then of profane worship, curiosity, tourist attraction and lucrative cultural asset. At first, its domain encompassed only the remnants of Roman and Greek Antiquity, to progressively include the edifices of the Middle Ages, the Renaissance itself, the Baroque, the Modern Movement, popular and industrial architecture, historic gardens, entire urban ensembles and edifices of extra-European cultures – any immovable artefact that carries values specific to the historical monument. Relatively recently, the preservation concerns once reserved for the artificial world have also spread to the natural environment.

Today, the historical monument has become a preferred architectural representation of post-industrial culture, on par with the most daring contemporary structures erected. With all the setbacks and drifts of the behaviour related to its preservation – now universal – and despite the fading away of many features of the concept of the historical monument, since it has been assimilated to the even more heterogeneous concept of cultural heritage, the smaller or larger pieces of this built corpus, oversaturated with meanings, constitute the identity landmark of our inhabited world.

Meant to support the illusion of durability of human things, the historical monument materialises – within a special artistic convention – in a synthesis of our endeavours to conjure time.

The keystone of the vast spectrum of concerns and pursuits that make up the contemporary patrimonial phenomenon is restoration. The term, although in the strict sense it designates a complex of pursuits aimed at concrete intervention on historical monuments, therefore with a solid technical component, also implies the set of concerns of contemporary societies, aiming at preserving the vast universal cultural heritage.

The book of Lucian Cristian Ratoiu is not a restoration manual or a compendium of the diversity of techniques that a correct intervention on historical monuments can imply. It is a critical look at the concepts, theories and practices that have shaped the patrimonial phenomenon over time and determine it today. It is a consistent contribution to the theory of preservation and restoration of historical monuments. As the domain is constantly changing, its regular revisiting is not only opportune, but also necessary in the attempt to always identify, understand and rationalise the new sequences of its evolution. Combining the critical perusal of the reference works with the thorough research of the state of affairs in the territory, the book succeeds in capturing defining aspects of the patrimonial phenomenon in the present. The argumentation is rigorously structured but is still left open at both ends: the interpretation of the writings of the forerunners is formulated from the perspective of the present, yet put in a historical, political and socio-economic context. And the author's theses and hypotheses are stated as an invitation to dialogue, to reply, to continuation.

The ideas of John Ruskin, Camillo Boito, Alois Riegl and Gustavo Giovannoni are thus gaining new freshness, after they had been dimmed by their repeated and inescapable evocation in any work of historical monument theory. Alongside them, there are circumstantial references to a gallery of lesser-known authors, whose writings have influenced or even inspired the thinking of those who, like Cesare Brandi, are landmarks in the history of the general theory of restoration.

The original note in which the author discusses Riegl's work should be noted. Of course, the virtues of the Viennese art historian are undisputed, but the connection of his position as head of monument preservation in the Austrian Empire and as the author of a leading book in the field – with the ensemble of his activities as an art historian and a man of culture – represents a significant contribution in the Romanian specialised literature, not only by the sharpness of the critical commentary, but also as a methodological example.

Placing face to face the two Athens Charters – the least known one since 1931 dedicated to the preservation of historical monuments, and the other one, notorious, resulting from the fourth C.I.A.M. (1933), published by Le Corbusier only in 1941 – Ratoiu relates the patrimonial phenomenon with the Modern Movement as two complementary and interdependent facets of the art of building. In this way, he nuances and tones down the long-standing quarrel between “preservers” and “demolitionists,” which gained notoriety through the much-exaggerated opposition between Ruskin and Viollet-le-Duc.

The twentieth century is under close scrutiny. The damage done during the two world wars and the reconstructions that followed are evoked, many of which were undertaken even before the end of the conflagrations. The debates of the time are connected and analysed, but especially the diversity of interventions and their consequences on a theoretical, doctrinal, legal and projective level. A good part of the conclusions of this sequence can make up the theoretical basis of any endeavour to intervene in a protected site, especially regarding the problem of reconstruction.

A thorough analysis is devoted to the period of universalisation of patrimonial values, when the foundations of the long series of international regulations aimed at preserving historical monuments were laid. It is a process that has led to the diversification of the perception, assessment and treatment of the components of

historical monuments and sites or natural territories of exceptional universal value, as well as the efforts to define and legislate what is now accepted in common use as “cultural heritage.” Diverse and intricate, this becoming-metamorphosis of a complex cultural phenomenon acquires meaning and coherence in the book.

Last but not least, Lucian Ratoiu goes through and interprets prehistory, history and older and newer errancy, but also the Romanian successes in the field of the preservation and restoration of historical monuments, as well as the movement to align local theory and practice with global trends in the field. The evocation *sine ira et studio* of the figure and activity of the architect Lecomte du Noüy is exemplary as an analytical exercise; the bleak fresco of Ceaușescu’s destructions and the thoroughly documented account of the post-December efforts of institutional, professional, educational and legislative reconstruction of the preservation system in Romania are suggestive even for those who did not live those times.

This book has the merit – a natural derivative of its many qualities – of bringing up to date the debate on major themes of the cultural heritage issue. The issue of authenticity, for example, is inevitable; but what transpires everywhere in the book is the importance of reconsidering the whole field again and again. The critical research proposed by the author pays attention to a multitude of details, while at the same time preserving the overall vision; it highlights the implicit, contradictory topicality of the patrimonial phenomenon as a material manifestation of a fluid and eternal present.

The book is completed with two annexes that support the topicality of the spectrum of the patrimonial debate and prove, once again, the topicality of the subject in our cultural space. An “alternative bibliography” – collected from the press and the Internet – and “a typology of recent forms of degradation of historical monuments in Romania” adds a welcome and useful polemical dimension to the work.

The correct restoration of historical monuments, a guarantee of their preservation, is inconceivable without an effort committed to maintaining control over the incessant change of the monuments’ physical existence, so that their essence remains unchanged. This book is a valuable theoretical instrument for understanding the procedural character of the patrimonial phenomenon and a guide for the rightful application of the principles of good practice in the preservation and restoration of historical monuments.

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