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A review of the theoretical contributions of Alois Riegl

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Traducción de Valerie Magar

Abstract

After two World Wars the United Nations Organization (UN), through the Organization of the United Nations for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO), promoted the conservation and care of heritage in order to unite people and avoid confrontations. One of the strategies for carrying it out was the Convention on the Protection of World Heritage of 1972. It argued that cultural heritage is an element of contact between peoples and cultures, which allows dialogue, understanding, tolerance and mutual recognition through international collaboration. Such advances owe much to the thinking of Alois Riegl, who laid the foundations for these concepts. This text aims at exploring the contributions of this author in the field of conservation theory and the circumstances in which they were developed in order to highlight the importance and validity they currently maintain, and how their ideas gave rise to more plural and cultural concepts.

Keywords: Alois Riegl, Kunstwollen, monuments, theory of conservation, valuation, values, universal heritage, value of antiquity.

In Alois Riegl's ideas on the conservation of the monuments, the concepts that during the 20th century allowed the valuation and proliferation of new types of heritage are prefigured, as well as the conception of the universal heritage of mankind and its association with natural heritage; also, the work of Riegl on monuments and their care inaugurated a cultural relativism that was translated into an opening to multiculturalism that allowed giving conservation an anthropological perspective. The rieglan concepts that led to this is the concept of monument, which is crossed by the concept of *Kunstwollen* (will of art), as well as the definition of *Alterswert* (age or antiquity value). The present text tries to explore the contributions of the author in the field of conservation and restoration, while attempting to keep the focus in relation with the concepts mentioned previously.

Riegl wrote his works at the beginning of the 20th century, which was extremely rich in the birth of ideals that put in crisis the conventional doctrines of the previous period; several concepts determined the intellectual development throughout the century and its echo still has resonance today due to the validity of its proposals since they glimpsed a panorama that portrays many of the circumstances that happen at the moment.

The germination of novel positions and perspectives occurred in most disciplines and in multiple geographic regions. The contributions that were gestated within the intellectual wealth of Vienna at the end of the Austro-Hungarian Empire are particularly significant. In that matrix, thoughts and schools were combined that inaugurated original stages in several areas. The Secession art movement headed by Gustav Klimt, the new form of musical composition led by Arnold Schönberg or the birth of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis are examples of this phenomenon. Within the sphere of criticism and art studies, these changes were manifested



MAXIMILIAN SQUARE, VIENNA 1900. *Image: Public domain.*



PORTRAIT OF GERTIE SCHIELE
Egon Schiele, oil, silver, gold-bronze,
paint and pencil on canvas, 1909.
Image: Public domain.

in the First School of Art History of Vienna. There multiple authors came together to oppose the conception in the research of art from a scientific and mechanistic paradigm, represented by the doctrines of Gottfried Semper. These only addressed aspects such as the function and usefulness of the work, the execution technique and the materials used in its making, as well as how successful the imitation of reality in it was.

Distancing themselves from these premises, Viennese art historians condemned the classical aesthetic ideal as a universal criterion for judging the quality of artistic works, which led to criticism about the existence of decadent periods in the production of works of art; it also included the eradication of the criterion of beauty as the only element to evaluate art creations. Likewise, they rejected the idea of the artist as a genius and the distinction between minor and major arts, which allowed for the study and evaluation of other types of plastic manifestations.

It was thanks to these proposals and a new methodology based on the study of the formal qualities of the works that the history of art ceased to be an auxiliary branch of history and obtained a new status as an independent discipline.

Since many of these advances are the result of his thinking and intellectual work, the participation of Alois Riegl in this movement was fundamental for the generation of this change of perspective. It is for these reasons that Riegl is recognized in the field of art history as a highly recognized author of the construction of this discipline. His concept of *kunstwollen* (will of art) is outstanding because it became the cornerstone on which the arguments that renewed the study of art were built and which opened new perspectives in multiple disciplines, among which is are conservation and restoration.

The nature of the research on art in Riegl is portrayed in the following quote:

His contributions can be defined most readily in terms of the various approaches he opposed: factual positivistic history which archaeologists practice and which represented his own training; an iconographic point of view that stresses the subject matter of a work of art; biographical criticism, which interprets the work in the light of the artist's life; the primacy of the individual artist's consciousness and will; the "materialistic" or mechanistic explanation of stylistic evolution; any aesthetic theory that separates art from history; any normative system that attempts to reach a definitive interpretation or judgment; the hierarchical distinction between the applied or decorative arts, on the one hand, and the higher arts (painting, sculpture, architecture), on the other, where the latter alone are considered to be art in the strict sense of the Word. In brief, Riegl attacked all the fundamental convictions of traditional art history (Zerner, 1976: 179).

Beyond his studies on art, Riegl had a deep interest in the care and conservation of monuments; his reflections on this subject are brilliant contributions to the conservation theory. His text: *Der Moderne Denkmalkultus. Sein Wesen und seine Entstehung* (*The modern cult of monuments, their character and their origins*) published in 1903 is considered the first systematic treatise on the subject (Jokilehto, 2002: 215). Scarrocchia affirms that "in the modern cult of monuments, Riegl provides the first disciplinary statute for the field of the conservation as an independent discipline"¹ (Scarrocchia, 2007: 14). And Rampley states: "Riegl's essay constituted his most sophisticated analysis of the subject and offered perhaps the most intellectually ambitious account of monument protection and its task by any author before 1918" (Rampley, 2013: 359).

¹ Original quotation: *El culto moderno de los monumentos es el texto/manifiesto con el que Riegl funda la conservación como disciplina autónoma.*



VIENNA PARLIAMENT, 1900. Image: Public domain.

However, his intellectual contributions were not free from controversy and opposition. With respect to his studies on art history, Margaret Iversen points out that the speculative positions far removed from the physicalist and scientific explanations of the phenomenon of art in Riegl earned the animosity of later authors in the field, such as Ernst Gombrich. The latter, influenced by the logical positivism of Karl Popper and his critique of historicism in the postwar period, was suspicious of the terms or concepts related to a collectivity or age, which are linked to the concept of *Kunstwollen*, since they could give rise to totalitarian ideas (Iversen, 2015: 157).

Gombrich's prejudices were possibly fueled by cases such as the one of Hans Sedlmayr, an art historian of the second Vienna School who embraced the Nazi ideology and who claimed that Riegl was ahead of the ideas of Oswald Spengler (Iversen, 2015: 163).

This opposition caused Riegl's work to be questioned and the reception of his ideas to be delayed. The work related to the preservation and restoration of monuments suffered a situation of indifference that is more palpable and manifest than his studies in art history. Possibly this situation was due to the fact that the reflections on this topic were developed in the last years of the author's life and they were therefore perceived as a peripheral issue in his work.

Sandro Scarrocchia underlined the limited knowledge of Alois Riegl in the professional field of restoration, and he notes that the defeat of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in World War I caused that much of the contributions of Austro-Hungarian intellectuals in conservation matters were poorly analyzed or forgotten. Their impact and dissemination was limited to the territories that belonged to the Empire, of which a good part were left within the Soviet territory after the World War II (Scarrocchia, 2007: 15).

Another situation that also influenced the slow impact and adoption of his texts is the fact that the language used by Riegl is complex and difficult to elucidate; many of his neologisms open the possibility of radically divergent interpretations, as would be the case of the term *kunstwollen* (Gubser, 2010: 4), which implied that the translation processes to different languages were arduous, and therefore its dissemination was limited and slow.



GROUP OF BOSNIANS, 1890-1899. Image: Public domain.

Riegl and his historical circumstances

The Austro-Hungarian Empire was born in 1867 when the Austrian Empire merged with the Kingdom of Hungary. Geographically, it spread over a vast territory that embraced various cultural groups, such as Italian, German, Croatian, Slovenian, Serbo-Croatian, Bosnian, Romanian, Ukrainian, Polish, Czech and Hungarian populations, which gave it a multinational and multicultural nature not exempt from tensions and struggles.

It is for this reason that the Imperial State needed to create a national identity able to agglomerate the different peoples, thus securing their legitimacy and integrity. This phenomenon was not exclusive to Austro-Hungary, but was developed throughout Europe during the 19th century, when the nascent Nation-states, inspired and influenced by the currents of Romanticism, Idealism and Positivism, started building a national identity that would define them and provide them with union and social coherence. In order to carry out this task, discourses and narratives based on their own cultural traditions were built, as well as through the creation of collections, museums and monuments that represented the national spirit. Likewise, numerous institutions were created with the task of selecting, collecting, cataloging and conserving both traditional and past objects that best represented the roots and origin of these nations. In addition to this, a series of laws and norms were issued for the protection and safeguard of these monuments, and what we now conceive as cultural heritage was developed, both in physical terms, and conceptually.

The formulation of the concept of nation, as well as the constitution of modern nation-states, is parallel and coincides with the very definition of the concept of cultural heritage, to the extent that the concept of heritage has been historically mediated by the institution of the State-nation² (González-Varas, 2014: 92).

It was during this time that the national states had a prominent and leading role, given that they took it upon themselves to define the identity of the nation, as well as the objects that fully represented it.

In short, multiple resources were invested to build a narrative that would give meaning and crystallize the longing to generate a nation that would grant an identity that was common to the set of individuals that constituted it and that would legitimize the territorial rights of the inhabited spaces.

As a result, during this period restoration flourished greatly; along with the appropriation of newly constituted cultural objects and collections that needed to be kept in good condition, it was necessary to treat of those elements whose condition placed at risk both their physical and discursive integrity.

Within this framework of cultural policies designed for the state use of monuments, the Austrian Emperor Franz Josef created, in 1850, the *Central-Commission zur Erforschung und Erhaltung der Baudenkmale* (Imperial and Royal Central Commission for the research and Conservation of Architectural Monuments) upon the request of historian Edward Melly, who, inspired by the institutions for the protection of monuments in France and Prussia, expressed the benefits such an institution could bring to the Empire. The revolutions of 1848 probably gave the historian elements to convince the governmental apparatus and to encourage the creation of the institution: "In the post-1848 era, governments were much more alert to the political and ideological uses of heritage as an instrument of legitimation" (Rampley, 2013: 188).

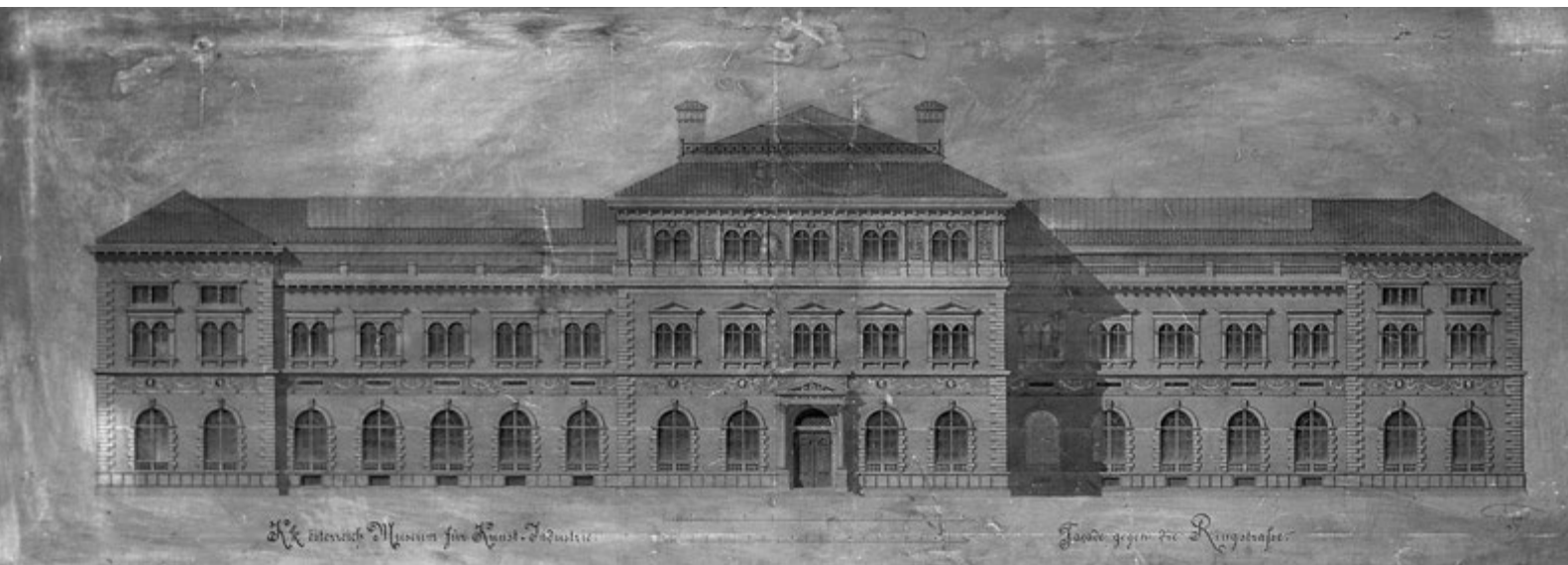
Once the merger of the Austrian and Hungarian crowns was finalized, the former commission became the *Central-Commission zur Erforschung und Erhaltung der Kunst und Historischen Denkmale* (Central Imperial and Royal Commission of Historical and Artistic Monuments of Austria) under the direction of Joseph Helfert. This institution would be presided in 1902 by Riegl, and in this capacity *The modern cult to the monuments* was published.

Riegl and the Austro-Hungarian cultural institutions lived a kind of symbiotic relationship that managed to produce studies and ideas that benefited both sides. Much of the work developed by the author is a result of his intimate participation in state cultural policies, where there is a notorious overlap between the postulates by Riegl and the context in which he developed his ideas. A brief biographical review of Riegl proves it. Riegl was born in 1858. In 1881, he began his studies at the Institute for Historical Research in Vienna. Previously, Rudolph von Eitelberger had founded the Museum of Arts and Industries in Vienna in 1864, where Riegl, after graduating from his studies, began his professional career holding the position of conservator of textiles in 1886. This experience surely inspired him in the writing

² Original quotation: *La formulación del concepto de nación, así como la constitución de los Estados-nacionales modernos es paralela y coincidente con la definición misma de la noción de patrimonio cultural, hasta el punto de que el concepto de patrimonio se ha visto históricamente mediatizado por la institución del Estado-nación.*

of his first two works: *Altorientalische Teppiche*³ and *Stilfragen*⁴ published in 1891 and 1893, respectively. In *Problems of Style*, he studied the phenomenon of ornamentation and, among other things, dissolved the distinction between major and minor arts and began to configure his concept of *Kunstwollen*.

*According to Riegl, the applied and decorative arts had to be studied together with painting, sculpture and architecture, as equally valid expressions of the Kunstwollen. He rigorously considered that architecture and the so called minor arts were particularly revealing, given that one was not distracted with the iconographic motifs. Riegl's formalism led him to consider in a serious manner ornaments and crafts*⁵ (Iversen 2015: 159).



ARTS AND INDUSTRIES MUSEUM, VIENNA. Image: Public domain.

In 1894, Riegl held a chair at the University of Vienna and he was dedicated to writing his *Historische Grammatik der bildenden Künste*.⁶ Subsequently, the Ministry of Culture and Education of the Empire asked Riegl to submit a text on the monuments of ancient industrial art in Austria and Hungary, which was published in 1901 under the title *Spättrömische Kunstindustrie*.⁷ This, for many specialists, is his principle work and where he refined the concept of the will of art. The text is published by the Austrian Archaeological Institute and printed by the State Printing Office of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

³ Ancient Oriental Carpets.

⁴ Problems of Style.

⁵ Original quotation: *Según Riegl, las artes aplicadas y decorativas debían estudiarse junto a la pintura, escultura y arquitectura como expresiones igualmente válidas para el Kunstwollen. En rigor, consideraba que la arquitectura y las llamadas artes menores eran particularmente reveladoras, dado que uno no se distraía con los motivos iconográficos. El formalismo de Riegl lo llevo a tomar en serio la ornamentación y la artesanía.*

⁶ Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts.

⁷ Late Roman Industrial Art.



VIENNA UNIVERSITY, 1900. Image: Public domain.

Finally, in 1902, Riegl presided over the Imperial and Royal Central Commission of Historical and Artistic Monuments of Austria, where he was requested to propose an act for the administrative reorganization for the care of monuments. As a result of this, the *Modern cult of monuments* was published, which was the prelude to the legislative plan. In this same year, he published *Das holländische Gruppenporträt*.⁸ He died in 1905 at the age of 47.

In the introduction of *Late Roman Industrial Art*, there is a sentence that I consider to be symptomatic of Riegl's perception of the Empire and that possibly was shared by his fellow citizens: Riegl referred to the Mediterranean people as the "people who had until then had leading roles in the historical development,"⁹ while the Germanic peoples were "the peoples newly incorporated into the cultural world" (Riegl, 1992: 15). For his part, Dvořák agreed with this idea in his *Catechism* as follows: "countries and territories (...) that have either not played, or have had a very limited role, in the historical development of art, want to achieve greater cultural significance"¹⁰ (Dvořák, 2018: 106). It is possible that these sentences reveal the ultimate meaning of the Imperial cultural policy, which was intended to go beyond granting a common identity that would link the different cultural groups of which it was composed, but was also designed to obtain a significant place within the human history.

⁸ The Dutch group portrait.

⁹ Cita original: *pueblos hasta entonces protagonistas del desarrollo histórico*; "los pueblos recién incorporados al mundo cultural.

¹⁰ Original quotation: *países y territorios (...) que no han jugado o han tenido un rol muy limitado en el desarrollo histórico del arte quieren procurarse un mayor significado cultural*

Although Riegl intimately participated in the cultural project of the state, he maintained his discourse away from doctrinal nationalist dogmatism or simple political proselytism. His reaction to Georg Dehio's criticism of not establishing a national value in the valuation of monuments is a symptom of the latter. In fact, in the response to this dispute we discovered a Riegl who proposes, against a national value of the monuments, a universal value of elements created by humanity that transcends selfishness and nationalities. The foundation for this universal value is based on the concept of value of antiquity that he developed in *The modern cult of monuments*. Riegl is possibly the first conservation theorist to consider monuments as a heritage that is common to all human beings, getting ahead by seventy years of the world heritage convention, which is not only praiseworthy, but also acquires greater credit for having generated such an idea without having lived the ravages of the two world wars that were the catalysts for the creation of UNESCO. Max Dvořák would support this idea in the *Catechism of the care of the monuments*, where he associated the care of monuments with a universal meaning and with universal rights.

The modern cult of monuments, new trends in the care of monuments and its contributions to the theory of conservation

It was "necessary to wait for the Venice Charter of 1964, a Europe profoundly transformed as a result of the two world wars and a time of great economic instability"¹¹ (Scarrocchia, 2007: 14) to discover and value Alois Riegl as one of the most important conservation theorists in the history of the profession.

His contributions are found mainly in the introductory text to the law of protection of monuments that the Empire had asked him to draft. *The modern cult of monuments* is a work whose ideas matured over several years of work, in the museum of decorative arts, as well as university academic work. However, this was not the only text where the author exposed his theoretical concerns on the care of the monuments; there are numerous documents that have not been translated into Spanish, or that have not reached the Mexican professional sphere and that we hope we will soon get to know in our country.

The cult

The most well-known work of Riegl regarding conservation is *The modern cult of monuments* whose title is clearly a declaration of intentions. In the first place, the author proposed the term cult to illustrate what had been happening in the last hundred years in Europe.

Although restoration in Europe already had a long history that went back at least until the Renaissance, it was not until the 19th century that the discipline played a role of radical transcendence.

*The 19th century is a period of great importance for historical heritage, when the foundation of "restoration" as a scientific discipline takes place (...). The policies of care and conservation go from being sporadically and accidentally assumed by the public authorities, into being integrated in the 19th century in the usual framework of national states that assume the task of restoration and conservation of historical heritage as a social and institutional responsibility*¹² (González-Varas, 2003: 156).

¹¹ Original quotation: *necesario esperar a la Carta de Venecia de 1964, a una Europa profundamente transformada a consecuencia de las dos guerras mundiales y a un momento de gran inestabilidad económica.*

¹² Original quotation: *El siglo XIX es un periodo de gran importancia para el patrimonio histórico, es entonces cuando tiene lugar la fundación de la 'restauración' como disciplina científica (...). Las políticas de tutela y conservación de ser asumidas con carácter esporádico y accidental por los poderes públicos, logran ser integradas en el siglo XIX en el marco de actuación habitual de los Estados nacionales, que asumen la tarea de la restauración y conservación del patrimonio histórico como una responsabilidad social e institucional.*



ARCH OF TITUS
Image: Valerie Magar.

By 1902, the restorations undertaken by Stern and Valadier in the Colosseum and the Arch of Titus were about to become a century old, and throughout the continent, a great impetus had been given to the restoration of architectural monuments, for example, Meduna in Venice, Viollet-le-Duc in France, Wyatt and Scott in England, Clemens, Mellin and Rosenthal in Germany. As we can see, most of the intervention treatments that were developed at that time in Europe had a strong influence from the school of stylistic restoration. "In the nineteenth century, the favored approach to monuments was restoration, that is, the reconstruction of the monument in its presumed original condition" (Lamprakos, 2014: 421).

Along with these treatments there was a severe criticism of many of these works. From the calls made by Ruskin, Morris and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB), the discussion of the scope of the discipline and its principles acquired a leading role never before seen, given that those debates no longer took place in a closed environment, but they became public, which directed people's attention toward the tasks of conservation.

As already noted above, not only had intervention treatments proliferated, but there was also a boom in the creation of national institutions responsible for safeguarding, cataloging and restoring heritage, as well as laws that protected and embraced historical and artistic heritage. This fervor of the time is portrayed by Riegl as a true cult of history and monuments.

Modernity and the condemnation of stylistic restorations

The modern era began with the Renaissance and was characterized by having a strong emphasis on the use of reason, the idea of progress and humanism. That is why Riegl established the Renaissance as the cradle of restoration.

*It can be said in all justice that the true conservation of monuments in the modern sense began during the Italian Renaissance with the awakening of a conscious estimation for the Classical monuments, as well as with the establishment of legal provisions for their protection*¹³ (Riegl, 1987: 35).

This “conscious estimation” to which Riegl refers is of radical importance, since it is the fracture that separates medieval man and man from the Renaissance, and ultimately modern man.

*Unlike men of the Middle Ages, humanists view Antiquity as a concluded period, but, precisely as such, finally susceptible to objectification; the attempt to confer new meanings to a tradition that the interpreter considers uninterrupted is replaced by the will to understand the classics and situate them in their own time and culture*¹⁴ (Ferraris, 2000: 10).

On restoration and its relation to modernity, Viollet-le-Duc affirmed the following: “We have said that the word and the thing are modern, and in effect no civilization, no people, in the past have conceived restorations as we understand them today”¹⁵ (Viollet-le-Duc, 2017: 52). He later stated: “Our time, and only our time since the beginning of the historical centuries, adopted an unusual attitude towards the past. I seek to analyze it, compare it, classify it, and form its true history, following step by step the progress, the progresses, the transformations of humanity”¹⁶ (Viollet-le-Duc, 2017: 53).

In this sense, Riegl agreed with the French restorer that restoration is a modern phenomenon.

Nobody would doubt that both scholars, when they speak about modernity are referring to their own present with the definition indicated by Ferrater Mora in his dictionary of philosophy: “in a broad sense ‘modernism’ designates any trend to embrace and even to exalt the modern, whether this corresponds to the historical period called ‘modern’, or everything new and recent of any period”¹⁷ (Ferrater, 1984: 2248). However, although both authors established modernity as a characteristic of restoration, there is a conceptual distance between Viollet-le-Duc and Riegl.

In Viollet-le-Duc, there is a scientific conception of history based on a rational, objective and scientific discourse that seeks to be proven by documentary evidence. In this sense, we could say that this scholar fully embraced historicist ideas. This gave Viollet-le-Duc confidence in being able to know the past in an objective and scientific manner through the study of history. In the practice of restoration Viollet-le-Duc was confident that through to the historical-scientific study of style it was possible to understand monuments in a better and even more complete manner than the one the artists themselves had at the time of creation.

¹³ Original quotation: *Se puede decir con toda justicia que la verdadera conservación de monumentos en sentido moderno comenzó en el Renacimiento italiano con el despertar de una estimación consciente por los monumentos clásicos, así como con el establecimiento de disposiciones legales para su protección.*

¹⁴ Original quotation: *A diferencia de los hombres de la Edad Media, los humanistas miran la antigüedad como una época concluida, pero, precisamente en cuanto tal, finalmente susceptible de objetivarse; la tentativa de conferir sentidos siempre nuevos a una tradición que el intérprete considera ininterrumpida es sustituida por la voluntad de entender a los clásicos y situarlos en la época y en la cultura que les son propias.*

¹⁵ Original quotation: *Nous avons dit que le mot et la chose sont modernes, et en effet aucune civilisation, aucun peuple, dans les temps écoulés, n’a entendu faire des restaurations comme nous les comprenons aujourd’hui.*

¹⁶ Original quotation: *Notre temps, et notre temps seulement depuis le commencement des siècles historiques, a pris en face du passé une attitude inusitée. Il a voulu l’analyser, le comparer, le classer et former sa véritable histoire, en suivant pas à pas la marche, les progrès, les transformations de l’humanité.*

¹⁷ Original quotation: *en un sentido amplio ‘modernismo’ designa toda tendencia a acoger y aun a exaltar lo moderno, sea éste lo que corresponde al periodo histórico llamado “moderno”, o bien todo lo más nuevo y reciente de cualquier época.*

Thus, scientific reasoning, the use of deduction and the deep knowledge of the style of a building allowed the reproduction of the lost elements and areas and, as Viollet-le-Duc did, reconstruct the buildings from their ruins.

At the time when Riegl was writing, the objectivity of science and reason began presenting their first criticisms, the ideas of Freud, Marx and Nietzsche managed to crack and undermine the idea of consciousness as well as that of truth and rationality. In that sense, Riegl did not profess the same confidence toward the objectivity of the historical science as Viollet-le-Duc had, since he is conscious of the historical distance of the present with the past.

"The undeniable fact, in the end, is that the prevailing trends in every moment mark the direction of science despite its independent and objective appearance, and the art historian cannot be detached from the specific artistic demands of his contemporaries"¹⁸ (Riegl, 2007: 16).

In this way, there is a difference in the historical conception that distances him from Viollet-le-Duc and his interventions, since for Riegl historical continuity had been broken and, not even through historical study, could the past be linked with such a fidelity and objectivity as to allow reproducing and reconstructing damaged monuments. "At the beginning of the 20th century many of us have come to the conclusion that there are no absolute values in art and that it is a pure fiction to consider ourselves to be wiser arbiters than those who were contemporary with the misunderstood masters of the past"¹⁹ (cited by Iversen, 2015: 159).

In *The modern cult of monuments*, Riegl does not reach the level of condemning Viollet-le-Duc or the interventions that were being made under the precepts of the stylistic restorations; in fact, he shows a certain tolerance with the monuments that are treated under the criterion of the value of novelty and historical value, which are the values González Varas relates with Viollet-le-Duc (González Varas, 2003: 159). However, in his text *New trends in the care of the monuments*, Riegl shows that his attitude is similar to that of Dvořák and Dehio, disapproving *ripristino*²⁰ or stylistic interventions. As an example of this, Riegl mentioned the interventions of Bodo Ebhardt, a German architect who dedicated himself to the restoration of medieval castles.

"What is recently invented cannot be considered as historical and therefore it cannot pretend to evoke in us a faithful image of the past. And in fact, the modern, intellectual and emotional individual will view with an invincible distrust every reconstruction of a Medieval castle"²¹ (Riegl, 2018: 74). He added: "but neither can we pretend that the viewer understands that reconstruction as a faithful historical-cultural image of the past"²² (Riegl, 2018: 74).

¹⁸ Original quotation: *El hecho ya innegable de que, en último término, las tendencias imperantes en cada momento marcan la dirección de la ciencia a pesar de la apariencia independiente y objetiva de ésta, y tampoco al historiador del arte puede desvincularse sensiblemente de las exigencias artísticas específicas de sus contemporáneos.*

¹⁹ Original quotation: *[A] principios del siglo XX muchos de nosotros hemos llegado a la conclusión de que no existen valores absolutos en el arte y que es una pura ficción el considerarnos árbitros más sabios que los contemporáneos de los incomprensidos maestros del pasado.*

²⁰ *Ripristino*: reconstitution of the original aspect or shape of a monument, through the removal of added or superimposed elements. Note from the translator.

²¹ Original quotation: *Lo que es inventado recientemente no puede ser considerado como histórico, y por eso tampoco puede pretender evocar en nosotros una imagen fiel del pasado. Y de hecho el individuo moderno, intelectual y emocional, mirará con un resto de invencible desconfianza cada reconstrucción de un castillo medieval.*

²² Original quotation: *pero tampoco se puede pretender que el espectador entienda aquella reconstrucción como una imagen histórico-cultural fiel del pasado.*



HOHKÖNISBURG. Bodo Ebhardt, 1900. *Image: Public domain.*

The concept of monument, the theory of values and the value of antiquity

The monument is the last term present in the title. In Riegl this concept has a radical importance: "The historical monument is treated as a social and philosophical object. Only through the research of the meaning or meaning that society attributes to the historical monument can a practice be founded. Hence, a double way of acting, historical and interpretative"²³ (Choay, 1999: 124).

The word monument comes from the Latin *monere* which means "to remember"; for Riegl it is any product of human activity carried out in past times that has managed to survive until the present. This object can be of any dimension or nature; all that is required of it is that it has the power to evoke and bring into our consciousness the memory of the past. "Every human activity and every human destiny of which we have a preserved testimony or news has the right, without exception, to claim a historical value for itself"²⁴ (Riegl, 2007: 46).

For Françoise Choay, Riegl proposes a "non-dogmatic and relativist conception of the historical monument, in harmony with the relativism that he has introduced in art studies"²⁵ (Choay 2016: 144). Its definition is so plural that it allows the inclusion of objects that, under the previous perspectives, could not have been cataloged under this concept. Thus, Riegl moves away from conventions that pointed only to large buildings or large works of art as worthy of attention and care. "Riegl makes a brutal expansion in the definition of a monument to incorporate every artifact without regard to its original significance and purpose as long as it reveals the passage of a considerable period of time. Age becomes the sing that defines the object as a monument" (Arrhenius, 2003: 52).

²³ Original quotation: *Il est traité comme un objet social et philosophique. L'investigation du ou des sens attribués para la société au monument historique permet seule de fonder une pratique. D'où une doublé démarche historique et interprétative.*

²⁴ Original quotation: *Toda actividad humana y todo destino humano del que nos haya conservado testimonio o noticia tiene derecho, sin excepción alguna, a reclamar para sí un valor histórico.*

²⁵ Original quotation: *une conception non dogmatique et relativiste du monument historique, en harmonie avec le relativisme qu'il a introduit dans les études d'histoire de l'art.*

Possibly this idea was conceived as he passed through the Museum of Arts and Industries and was exploited in his research on ornamentation; and it is a clear consequence of the concept of *Kunstwollen*. On the other hand, Riegl had a complete fascination for the plastic works that had been ignored or pushed aside by the history of art; Iversen associated it with the personality of Riegl:

*I am convinced that his humble origin and his social awkwardness are linked to his artistic sympathies: the so-called minor arts, the ornament, the late Roman and Dutch art. Riegl departed from the traditional pinnacles of artistic achievement, the art of classical antiquity and the Renaissance, to advocate for these "others" in the history of art*²⁶ (Iversen, 2015: 164).

Therefore, it is not strange to include these as objects of interest to conservation and to other disciplines related to culture.

Even though the development of this concept was a great advance both for the theory of conservation, as well as for multiple disciplines related to cultural studies because it meant an extension of research horizons, later conservation theorists circumscribed again the focus of restoration only to works of art.

It was not until *The Hague Convention* of 1954 where the concept of cultural heritage was developed, giving way to multiple expressions that had only managed to have a statute as monuments under the rieglan concept; in the same way it was in the 1960s when the typology of different types of heritage began proliferating based on the creation of new agents. This shows how revolutionary Riegl's contribution was.

The rieglan approach to the problem of modern conservation based on the historical, aesthetic, evaluative and critical assessment of monuments, as well as the definition of the monument and its conceptual study as the object of restoration, made this author the first of the theorists of the current of critical restoration which was developed during the 20th century.

"The work of Boito and, more broadly, that of Riegl show that – in the articulation of the 19th and 20th centuries – the conservation of historical monuments had conquered the disciplinary status that only the interrogation of its concepts and procedures could confer to it"²⁷ (Choay, 1999: 127).

From the definition of a monument, Riegl created a classification system for the different types of monuments based on the values that are granted to them by a community or society (Riegl, 2007). Thus, the author becomes "the first historian who interprets the conservation of ancient monuments with a theory of values"²⁸ (Choay, 2016: 99) and "also, the first to define the historical monument for the values that have been invested to it during the course of history, of which he made an inventory and established a terminology"²⁹ (Choay, 1999: 125).

²⁶ Original quotation: *Estoy convencida de que su origen humilde y su torpeza social se vinculan con sus simpatías artísticas: las llamadas artes menores, el ornamento, el arte tardorromano y el holandés. Riegl se apartó de los tradicionales pináculos del logro artístico, el arte de la antigüedad clásica y del Renacimiento, para abogar por estos "otros" de la historia del arte.*

²⁷ Original quotation: *L'œuvre de Boito et, plus amplement celle de Riegl montrent qu'à la charnière du XIXe et du XXe siècle la conservation des monuments historiques avait conquis le statut disciplinaire que seule une interrogation sur ses concepts et ses procédures pouvait lui conférer.*

²⁸ Original quotation: *le premier historien à interpréter la conservation des monuments anciens par une théorie des valeurs.*

²⁹ Original quotation: *Le premier aussi, il définit le monument historique par les valeurs dont celui-ci a été investi au cours de l'histoire, il en dresse l'inventaire et en établit la nomenclature.*

Although the reference to values in relation to heritage occurred during the French Revolution, it was only at this time when value was exploited within a systematic discourse to historically and critically assess the monument as an object of study of conservation, thus obtaining an autonomous disciplinary statute. By basing his discourse on the values of objects, Riegl proposed a relativistic definition of the monument with an emphasis on the communities that give this value: “He argues that the monument is defined not by fixed objective criteria, but rather by the perceptions of the viewing subject” (Lamprakos, 2014: 420).

The distinction between historical monuments and artistic monuments, which has remained present in the theoretical discourse from the French Revolution to the present day, is explained by Riegl based on the different values conferred on works; in the same way that to the elements that have the capacity to remember are given a remembrance value, they are therefore historical monuments. While the artistic monuments, although they belong to the past, are granted a value only when they coincide with the *Kunstwollen* of our present time, in other words, the value of contemporaneity.

The monument aims at reviving, in the present, a past submerged in time. The historical monument maintains another relationship with living memory and with duration. Or it can be instituted simply as an object of knowledge and integrated into a conception of time: in that case, its cognitive value relegates it without remedy to the past or, rather, to history in general or to art history in particular; or, in addition, it can — a work of art — address our artistic sensibility, our “desire for art” (Kunstwollen): in that case, it is a constituent part of the experience of the present, without the mediation of memory or history³⁰ (Choay, 1999: 21).

The fact that both types of monuments depend on a value that is never absolute opens the door to subjectivity. “Because the character and meaning of the monuments does not correspond to these works by virtue of their original destiny, but it is we, as modern subjects, who give it to them”³¹ (Riegl, 2007: 54).

This distinction between the objects imbued with commemorative values and the objects characterized by values of contemporaneity could induce us to think that they are polar opposites, i.e. that an object can only be classified as a monument or as a work of art, and that these categories cancel each other out. However, in reality they have an intimate and integral relationship because both values can be superimposed on the same object. Therefore, we could interpret the words of Hans Sedlmayr, who stated: “With Riegl, there are generally two polar possibilities — conceptual pairs — but they must not be dichotomized” (cited by Gubser, 2006: 5). The quote refers to the argumentative style that Riegl developed throughout his work, for example, regarding the treatment of the objective and the subjective, as well as the haptic and the optical. We could apply it to this case, because Riegl affirmed: “it is truly important to keep in mind that every artistic monument, without exception, is at the same time a historical monument (...) and conversely, every historical monument is also an artistic

³⁰ Original quotation: *Le monument a pour fin de faire revivre au présent un passé englouti dans le temps. Le monument historique entretient un rapport autre avec la mémoire vivante et avec la durée. Ou bien il est simplement constitué en objet de savoir et intégré dans une conception linéaire du temps: dans ce cas, sa valeur cognitive le relègue sans appel dans le passé, ou plutôt dans l'histoire en général, ou dans l'histoire de l'art en particulier; ou bien il peut, de surcroît, en tant qu'œuvre d'art, s'adresser à notre sensibilité artistique, à notre « vouloir d'art » (kunstwollen): dans ce cas, il devient partie constitutive du présent vécu, mais sans la médiation de la mémoire ou de l'histoire.*

³¹ Original quotation: *Pues el carácter y significado de los monumentos no corresponde a estas obras en virtud de su destino originario, sino que somos nosotros, sujetos modernos, quienes se los concedemos.*

monument”³² (Riegl, 2007: 52). Thus, the idea of a historical-artistic monument in Riegl is an integral whole, and the treatment of its values is the antecedent of Brandian polarities; although, in my opinion, the analysis that Riegl makes of each value confronting it to the others in an assessment exercise throughout the text is richer, more explicit and has clearer consequences than the ambiguity of the concept of instance in Brandi.

From the remembrance value, Riegl developed three more values, the first is the intentional value, which is given to monuments created in the past, specifically made to perpetuate the memory of a specific fact or person in time. In order to maintain the original intention, the existence of damages to these works is not permitted.

On another hand, there are objects from the past that have survived to date, but that were not conceived with the intention of commemorating an event like the previous ones. This type of objects is of interest to historians since these are the object of their study. Therefore, their fidelity must be respected, as well as everything that has happened to them throughout their history, since each event is a document or testimony worthy of study. They are appreciated for the information they contain on past societies, which implies that they can only be identified experts with specific training. These objects are given historical value.

Finally, there is the value of age or antiquity, which Riegl says will be the value that will predominate in the 20th century and is what allows you to establish a universal value of human works (Riegl, 2018). This is granted to all objects that simply belong to the past and whose characteristic is that the works have acquired age. In their conservation treatment, respect is demanded for all the marks that time has deposited on the element, therefore, they are not restored, but only preserved; in this sense, in Riegl’s eyes this is the most respectful value towards human works and their authenticity.

Although Riegl does not state it, there is a difference between the value of antiquity and the other values developed in the *Modern cult of monuments*: while the other values are transitory because they are granted by a human community, the age value is only granted by time; therefore, it has an intrinsic character since age is part of the nature of the work. On another hand, this value is perennial because the mere continuity of the object over time adds to its existence.

The perception of this value is a result of observing the passage of time on the object, but it only manifests through a feeling. It is objective inasmuch as objects materially reveal this passage of time in their physical condition, but it is subjective insofar as their perception is emotive, not rational. This evocation of the passage of time is connected with the ideas of the transience of things, of human life itself, as well as the end of all things. Thus Riegl associated the age value with scatological ideas, i.e. the ultimate destiny of human beings and the universe; therefore, he achieved an empathic connection with people of the past who created that element, and he created a kind of communion that allows transcending selfishness and divisions (Riegl, 2018). “The appeal and inclusiveness of age value is based on emotion rather than intellect: the viewer sees in the decaying monument evidence of his own mortality”³³ (Lamprakos, 2014: 423). Ruskin’s inspiration and influence on this value is

³² Original quotation: *es verdaderamente importante tener presente que todo monumento artístico, sin excepción, es al mismo tiempo un monumento histórico [...]. Y a la inversa, todo monumento histórico es también un monumento artístico.*

³³ Original quotation: *The appeal and inclusiveness of age value is based on emotion rather than intellect: the viewer sees in the decaying monument evidence of his own mortality.*

evident, since he not only emphasized the authenticity of monuments as material decay of objects over time, but also because of the scatological character and the consequences that derive from the intervention treatments. “Riegl does not mention Ruskin’s name, however, it is clear that his age value elicits a “respectful consideration” close to the Ruskinian feeling of piety”³⁴ (Choay, 1999: 125). It is important to note that Riegl conferred outstanding importance on the role of feelings and emotions, while moving away from scientific objectivity. In that sense, Dvořák and Dehio also give special attention to emotions as catalysts and engines of ideas and desires. Riegl manifested this in his text *New trends in the care of monuments*:

*The motivation of a law for the protection of monuments must be based solely on the existence and on the universal dissemination of a feeling which, similar to religious feeling, differs from any aesthetic or historical erudition, is impenetrable to rational considerations and, if it is not mitigated, generates an unsustainable mood*³⁵ (Riegl, 2018: 70).

The age value “thus returns to memory – through a vaguely aesthetic feeling – the transitory character of human creations whose term is the ineluctable degradation that constitutes, nevertheless, this only certainty”³⁶ (Choay, 1999: 125). Riegl founded his concept of monument on memory, i.e. in the ability of objects to remind us of past events or of the existence of ancestors through the value of antiquity, hence giving greater relevance to this value. This is the most inclusive because, accordingly, all human work is valued only because it belongs to a bygone era. This is common to all men and cultures since it is perceived through a feeling and, therefore, is profoundly democratic because it requires no instruction or professional training to identify it and to be sensitive to it and, in this way, breaks with national limitations. It is also the most respectful value of the authenticity of the work, since it only demands its conservation. Finally, the value of antiquity encompasses the objects estimated as intentional monuments and historical objects due to the fact that both belong to another era and that allows them to evoke the past.

In the text *New trends in the care of monuments*, Riegl uses the value of antiquity to settle his differences with Dehio and defend himself against the criticism of not having considered a national value in *The modern cult of monuments*.

For Riegl the national value is arbitrary and ephemeral because nations have mutated over time and have disappeared; likewise, the national value is exclusive and it can only be valued by the population of the country in question, unlike the value of antiquity that can be experienced by every human being and, as we already mentioned, it is imperishable. In this way, Riegl proposed, against national values, a universal human value based on the age value, which can be grasped by all subjects through an emotional experience. As noted above, the age value has a strong scatological meaning; to which Riegl adds an ontological dimension in as much as the monuments “will appear to us as a part of our existence, but not of national existence, but that of human existence”³⁷ (Riegl, 2018: 65).

³⁴ Original quotation: *Riegl ne mentionne pas le nom de Ruskin. Il est clair cependant que sa valeur d’ancienneté, qui suscite à l’égard des monuments historiques une « pieuse attention », est proche de la valeur ruskinienne de piété.*

³⁵ Original quotation: *La motivación de una ley de protección a los monumentos se tiene que basar únicamente en la existencia y en la difusión universal de un sentimiento que, parecido al sentimiento religioso, se diferencia de cualquier erudición estética o histórica, es impenetrable a consideraciones racionales y, si no es apagado, genera un estado de ánimo insostenible.*

³⁶ Original quotation: *ainsi se trouve rappelé à la mémoire, par un sentiment « vaguement esthétique », la transitivité des créations humaines dont le terme est l’inéluctable dégradation qui demeure néanmoins notre seule certitude.*

³⁷ Original quotation: *nos aparecerán como una parte de nuestra existencia, pero no de la existencia nacional, sino aquella humana.*



VIENNA 1905. Image: Public domain.

Riegl does not stop there; he gave a new dimension to this value and to monuments by associating them with the monuments of nature: “The final aims of the modern cult of monuments will be completely clarified only if one also takes into account the growing awareness in the care of natural monuments”³⁸ (Riegl, 2018: 67) and he added:

*After our previous statements, we should – if we want to name the ultimate goals of the modern care of monuments – at least replace the national feeling of Dehio with the feeling of humanity, or (the cult of the monuments of nature already compels us to do it) with the feeling of existence in general. The monuments enchant us because they are witnesses of the universal context, of which we are a part, and which already existed and had evolved long before us*³⁹ (Riegl, 2018: 69).

³⁸ Original quotation: *Los objetivos finales del culto moderno a los monumentos se aclararán completamente sólo si se tiene en cuenta también la sensibilización creciente por el cuidado de los monumentos naturales.*

³⁹ Original quotation: *Después de nuestras afirmaciones precedentes, deberíamos –si queremos denominar los objetivos finales del cuidado moderno de los monumentos- por lo menos substituir el sentimiento nacional de Dehio por el sentimiento de humanidad, o (el culto de los monumentos de la naturaleza ya nos obliga a hacerlo) con el sentimiento de la existencia en general. Los monumentos nos encantan en cuanto son testigos del contexto universal, del cual nosotros somos una parte, y que ya existía y había evolucionado mucho tiempo antes que nosotros.*

The monuments thus described and characterized are proof of the passage of humanity. In other words, they are the testimony of the existence of humans, hence Riegl established these roots and common heritage against nationalisms. In that sense, he placed the human species as an integral part of the universal existence, as a consequence of the natural development of the universe and of existing.

Riegl sought to challenge such “egoistic nationalism” in the name of a universal humanity and ultimately a generalized altruism that even involved the erasure of the perceiving subject. This he saw affected in the encounter with natural monuments, which transcended the historical and the merely human. Riegl was trying to construct a theoretical argument, and he suggested that historical monuments should be treated as if they were things of nature (Rampley, 2013: 199).

These ideas anticipated the declarations of world heritage of humankind, demonstrating that Riegl's ideas were revolutionary, which guaranteed their validity.

With respect to contemporaneity values, Riegl classified them in the following way: on one hand, there are the instrumental values, which are granted to all objects that have a use in the present, that is why they need to be in optimal conditions to fulfill their functions; on the other hand, there are the artistic values that are granted, as already stated, because they coincide with the current will for art, and the values of novelty granted to the objects for which a perfect and finished aspect is required, in other words the eradication of the decay that compromises their aesthetic qualities (Riegl, 2007).

Once the different values had been established, Riegl made a valuation exercise in his writing, pondering and confronting them in different scenarios, exposing the different demands and needs that each value requires. Likewise, the author shows that the conservation exercise is a critical process that considers the negotiation between several factors where it is essential to mediate the positions, resolve the disputes and make a decision, based on the circumstances that will mark the restoration of the element. Thus, Riegl moved away from the conception of restoration and conservation as a merely technical task, given that only a professional can elucidate and solve problems in a serious and responsible way. In this way, conservation becomes a dynamic profession in which each case has to contemplate the circumstances and particular situation in which the object is located, and for which a deep research is necessary in order to unravel the values at stake. On the assessment in Riegl, Françoise Choay expressed: “These conflicts are not irresolvable and, in reality, they depend on compromises, negotiations in each particular case depending on the condition of the monument and of the social and cultural context in which it is located”⁴⁰ (Choay, 1999: 126).

In this exercise of conciliation, Riegl, like Boito, settled and resolved the conflict between the theoretical positions of Viollet-le-Duc and Ruskin.

Riegl established valuation as a system of characterization of works based on the values that are detected and this generates consequences for their intervention treatment. Thus, a value assessment becomes a critical tool in decision making in conservation. The validity of this methodology is such that the work of Riegl has been used for the intervention treatments on all types of works, including contemporary works (Goltz, 2010).

⁴⁰ Original quotation: *Riegl montre qu'ils ne sont cependant pas insolubles et relèvent en fait de compromis, négociables dans chaque cas particulier, en fonction de l'état du monument et du contexte social et culturel dans lequel il se présente.*

The subject of the reception of the treated or restored work by different users or fields of study of the works is something that Riegl also took into consideration. When we talk about values, we do not only compare them with each other, but we also imply the subject who gives that value. For Riegl, this is extremely important because, when we speak of historical value, he is taking into consideration the opinion of the community of historians who give it this value and, therefore, their needs are considered. The same occurs when speaking of the value of novelty and the value of antiquity; in both cases there are expectations of a community who grants a meaning and finds a function in the work. For Margaret Iversen, Riegl “developed, in the role of a pioneer, a theory of the role of the viewer, which was asked through the ways in which works of art discard or appeal to the spectator’s imaginative participation”⁴¹ (Iversen, 2015: 160), which implies a subjective and relativistic approach in conservation.

The value aspect that is granted by a community, also imposes that it be considered above private interest, hence Riegl, like Dehio and Dvořák, underlined the public interest of the conservation of monuments as well as the social use of this heritage. “Echoing Ruskin and William Morris, Riegl called his preservation legislation “socialistic” based on the rule of mass feelings over the intellect and individual interest. For Riegl’s *Modern cult of monuments* challenged the notion of private property as it had for Ruskin and Morris” (Lamprkos, 2014: 423).

In this sense, it would be interesting to address the phenomenon of heritage protection in England, which is generally carried out by professionals in the private sector, in light of the concept of private property.

Conclusions

The theory of our profession allows us to build a personality and identity, which results in the knowledge of our deepest reaches and awareness of the meaning of our discipline within society.

The knowledge of the history of our profession is one of the cornerstones to build a social conscience. Understanding the situation in which we find ourselves empowers us to solve current problems and to reflect on what we might find in the future. Knowledge of the issues that restorers of the past faced and on which conservation and restoration were focused, allows us to understand how these difficulties have changed over time, if we have been able to resolve them or if the remedies given at some point, are no longer appropriate to the current context and therefore we need to design new solutions.

Likewise, it is important to know the context in which Riegl lived because many of the situations on which he reflects are still valid today or remain in wait, pending a new resolution.

Riegl was a man of his time who had an exceptional vision that allowed him to glimpse the present in which we live. His ideas were the seed of what has given us form and identity as a discipline. The indisputable validity of his concepts, the revolutionary nature of his proposals and the richness of his reflections make him a pioneer in the reflection on conservation and restoration.

⁴¹ Original quotation: *desarrolló de modo pionero una teoría del rol del espectador, la cual indagó por los modos en los que las obras de arte descartan o apelan a la participación imaginativa del espectador.*

Although the author has been unknown in the professional field and scarcely mentioned in the discussions of the discipline, his ideas have managed to filter, reproduce and inspire new reflections in the discourses of later theorists.

In our context, retrieving Riegl's ideas, as well as the tolerant and multicultural spirit, is essential to counteract the exacerbation of identities and polarization between the different communities that have achieved a resurgence of nationalisms.

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