

Alois Riegl
The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin
(1903)

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The Meaning of Monuments and Their Historical Development

A monument in its oldest and most original sense is a human creation, erected for the specific purpose of keeping single human deeds or events (or a combination thereof) alive in the minds of future generations. Monuments can be either artistic or literary, depending on whether the event to be remembered is brought to the viewer's consciousness by means of the visual arts or with the help of inscriptions. Most of the time both genres are used simultaneously. The erection and care of such "intentional" monuments, which can be traced back to the beginnings of human culture, have not ceased. But when we talk about the modern cult and preservation of monuments, we are thinking not about "intentional" monuments, but about *Kunst- und historische Denkmale*, monuments of art and history as they are officially designated in Austria. This designation, which proved adequate from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century, today could give rise to misunderstandings as a result of the modern perception of art and its value. For this reason, we will have to examine above all how monuments of art and history have been understood up until now.

A work of art is generally defined as a palpable, Visual, or audible creation by man which possesses an artistic value; a historical monument with the same physical basis will have a historical value. We will eliminate aural creations for our purposes, as they can be classified with written documents. With respect to the visual arts (and in the broadest sense, all artifacts), therefore, the question is, what is artistic value and what is historical value?

Historical value is apparently the broader issue and therefore we will give it priority. Everything that has been and is no longer we call historical, in accordance with the modern notion that what has been can never be again, and that everything that has been constitutes an irreplaceable and irremovable link in a chain of development. In other words: each successive step implies its predecessor and could not have happened as it did without that earlier step. The essence of every modern perception of history is the idea of development. In these terms, every human activity and every human event of which we have knowledge or testimony may claim historical value; in principle, every historical event is irreplaceable. But since it is not possible to consider the vast quantity of occurrences and events of which we have direct or indirect evidence and which multiply to infinity, we have of necessity limited our attention to that testimony which seems to represent a conspicuous phase in the development of a specific branch of human activity. This testimony could be written, activating a series of mental processes, or it could be a work of art whose content can be apprehended directly through the senses. It is important to realize that every work of art is at once and without exception a historical monument because it

represents a specific stage in the development of the visual arts. In the strictest sense, no real equivalent can ever be substituted for it. Conversely, every historical monument is also an art monument, because even a secondary literary monument like a scrap of paper with a brief and insignificant note contains a whole series of artistic elements—the form of the piece of paper, the letters, and their composition—which apart from their historical value are relevant to the development of paper, writing, writing instruments, etc. To be sure, these are such insignificant elements that for the most part we neglect them in many cases because we have enough other monuments which convey much the same thing in a richer and more detailed manner. But were this scrap of paper the only surviving testimony to the art of its time, we would consider it, though trivial in itself, an utterly indispensable artifact. To the extent that it is present, the artistic element of such a document interests us only from a historical point of view: such monuments are indispensable links in the development of art history. The "art monument" in this sense is really an "art-historical monument"; its value from this point of view is not so much artistic as historical. It follows that the differentiation of "artistic" and "historical" monuments is inappropriate because the latter at once contains and suspends the former.

But do we really appreciate only the historical value of a work of art? If this were so, then all the art from all epochs would have the same value in our view and would only increase in value by virtue of rarity or age. In reality, we admire some recent works more than earlier ones, e.g., a Tiepolo of the eighteenth century more than a Mannerist work of the sixteenth century. In addition to historical interest, there is, then, something else which resides in a work's specifically artistic properties, namely conceptual, formal, and coloristic qualities. Apart from the art-historical value, there is also in all earlier art a purely artistic value independent of the particular place a work of art occupies in the chain of historical development. Is this "art-value" equally as present as the historical value in the past, so that it may claim to be an essential and historically independent part of our notion of monument? Or is this "art-value" merely a subjective one invented by and entirely dependent on the changing preferences of the modern viewer? Were this the case, would such art-value have no place in the definition of the monument as a commemorative work?

There are two fundamentally different responses to this question today: an older one which has not entirely disappeared, and a newer one. From the Renaissance—when, as we shall argue later, historical value was first recognized—until the nineteenth century, an inviolable artistic canon prevailed which claimed an absolute and objective validity to which all artists aspired but they never achieved with complete success. Initially, ancient art seemed to conform to this canon most closely, even to the point of representing its very ideal. The nineteenth century definitively abolished this exclusive claim, allowing virtually all other periods of art to assume their own independent significance, but without entirely abandoning the belief in an objective artistic ideal. Only around the beginning of the twentieth century have we come to recognize the necessary consequences of the theory of historical evolution, which declares that all artifacts of the past are irrecoverable and therefore in no way canonically binding. Even if we do not limit ourselves to appreciating modern works of art but also admire the concept, form, and color of older works, and even if we prefer the latter, we must "realize that certain historic works of art correspond, if only in part, to the modern *Kunstwollen*. It is precisely this apparent correspondence of the modern *Kunstwollen* and certain aspects of historical art which, in its conflicting nature, exerts such power over the modern viewer. An entirely modern work, necessarily lacking this background, will never wield comparable power. According to current notions, there can be no absolute but only a relative, modern art-value.

With this in mind, one must define the term art-value in different ways, depending on whether one adopts the earlier or the modern point of view. According to the former, a work of art possesses *art-value* insofar as it corresponds to a supposedly objective but never satisfactorily defined aesthetic. In the modern view, the art-value of a monument is established by the requirements of the modern *Kunstwollen* but these requirements are even less well defined and in the strictest sense can never be defined because they vary from subject to subject and moment to moment.

For our task, it is indispensable to clarify this difference in the perception of art-value because it influences fundamentally all aspects of the preservation of monuments. If there is no such thing as an eternal art-value but only a relative, modern one, then the art-value of a monument ceases to be commemorative and becomes a contemporary value instead. The preservation of monuments has to take this into account, if only because it may have a practical and topical significance quite apart from the historical and commemorative value of a monument. Strictly speaking, contemporary appreciation will have to be excluded from the notion of the monument itself. If one agrees with the understanding of art-value as it has emerged from the entire complex of nineteenth-century art-historical research, then one may no longer speak of "artistic historical monuments," but only of "historical monuments." This is the meaning given to the term in the text.

In contrast to intentional monuments, historical monuments are unintentional, but it is equally clear that all deliberate monuments may also be unintentional ones. Since those who fashioned the works which we have sub-sequently termed "historical monuments" wanted primarily to satisfy their own practical and ideal needs—those of their contemporaries and, at most, those of their immediate progeny—without as a rule intending to leave testimony of their artistic and cultural life to later centuries, when we call such works of art "monuments," it is a subjective rather than an objective designation. It is not their original purpose and significance that turn these works into monuments, but rather our modern perception of them. Both intentional and unintentional monuments are characterized by commemorative value, and in both instances we are interested in their original, uncorrupted appearance as they emerged from the hands of their maker and to which we seek by whatever means to restore them. In the case of the intentional monument, its commemorative value has been determined by the makers, while *we* have defined the value of the unintentional ones.

Historical value does not exhaust the interest and influence that artworks from the past arouse in us. Take, for instance, the ruins of a castle, which betray little of the original form, structure, internal disposition of rooms, and so forth, and with which the visitor has no sentimental association. The castle's historical value alone fails to account for the obvious interest which it excites in the modern observer. When we look at an old belfry we must make a similar distinction between our perception of the localized historical memories it contains and our more general awareness of the passage of time, the belfry's survival over time, and the visible traces of its age. The same distinction may be observed in a written testimony. A piece of parchment from the fifteenth century recording no more than the purchase of a horse evokes in us not only a dual commemorative value, but also, because of its written contents, a historical one established by the nature of the transaction (economic and legal history), by the names mentioned (political history, genealogy, land use) and so forth, and by the unfamiliar language, the uncommon expressions, concepts, and decisions which even someone unschooled in history would immediately recognize as old-fashioned and belonging to the past. Modern interest in such an instance is undoubtedly rooted purely in its value as memory, that is, we

consider the document an involuntary monument; however, its value as memory does not interfere with the work as such, but springs from our appreciation of the time which has elapsed since it was made and which has burdened it with traces of age. We have distinguished historical monuments from intentional ones as a more subjective category which remains nonetheless firmly bound up with objects, and now we recognize a third category of monuments in which the object has shrunk to a necessary evil. These monuments are nothing more than indispensable catalysts which trigger in the beholder a sense of the life cycle, of the emergence of the particular from the general and its gradual but inevitable dissolution back into the general. This immediate emotional effect depends on neither scholarly knowledge nor historical education for its satisfaction, since it is evoked by mere sensory perception. Hence it is not restricted to the educated (to whom the task of caring for monuments necessarily has to be limited) but also touches the masses independent of their education. The general validity, which it shares with religious feelings, gives this new commemorative (monument) value a significance whose ultimate consequences cannot yet be assessed. We will henceforth call this the *age-value*.

From these reflections it is clear that the modern cult of monuments is not restricted to caring for historical monuments; it also requires consideration for monuments of mere age-value. Just as intentional monuments are part and parcel of historical monuments, so all historical ones can be categorized as monuments having an age-value. Outwardly these three classes of monuments can be thought of as contained within one another, while the scope of their memory-value widens. To the class of intentional monuments belong only those works which recall a specific moment or complex of moments from the past. The class of historical monuments is enlarged to include those which still refer to a particular moment, but the choice of that moment is left to our subjective preference. Finally, the category of monuments of age-value embraces every artifact without regard to its original significance and purpose, as long as it reveals the passage of a considerable period of time. These classes form three consecutive phases of the generalization of what a monument means. A cursory glance at the history of preservation up to this time reveals how these three classes have arisen in identical sequence over historical time.