

# The Fragile Monument: On Alois Riegl's Modern Cult of Monuments

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Alois Riegl's essay of 1903 "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin" is unprecedented in its attempt to speculate on the popularisation of heritage in western culture.<sup>1</sup> Riegl identified age as the clue to the extension of heritage into mass-culture. Age, signified through disintegration, manifested itself immediately to the beholder; no scientific or art historical knowledge was needed to appreciate its visual qualities.<sup>2</sup> Riegl saw this visual directness as the future potential of age in a mass-society directed, as he saw it, by moods and feelings, *Stimmung*, rather than rational thinking. Riegl's age-value contains, as will be discussed further, an intriguing criticism of art history and its shortcomings in acknowledging the emotional force of the past in modern society.

## The Monument

Riegl opens his essay with a definition: "A monument", Riegl writes, "in its oldest and most original sense is a human creation, erected for a specific purpose of keeping single human deeds or events alive in the minds

of future generations".<sup>3</sup> Riegl points out that the erection and care of such "intentional" commemorative monuments still exists and can be traced back to the beginning of human culture. And yet, Riegl suggests, these monuments are no longer central:

... when we talk about the modern cult and preservation of monuments, we are thinking not about 'intentional' monuments, but about monuments of art and history.<sup>4</sup>

However Riegl notes that even this definition of the monument is too reductive and does not acknowledge that the concept of an absolute inviolable canon of art has successively given way to a modern relative "art-value".<sup>5</sup> Riegl argues that classification into either art-monuments or historical-monuments gives rise to misunderstandings, and the long and often convoluted text that follows this statement develops into a thorough search for the value of the monument in modern society.

As a foundation for his investigation of the "cult of monuments" Riegl uses his distinction between "intentional" and "unintentional" monuments. Riegl saw the

development of heritage as a phenomenon closely connected to a modern perception of history as caught in the knowledge that what has been can never be again: "Everything that has been and is no longer we call historical".<sup>6</sup> In this notion of the irreplaceability of every event, of the mortality of culture itself, modern man submits to artefacts left from a time that has passed. These cult objects consisted largely of unintentional monuments. Unintentional in so far as they were not erected with the purpose of commemorating any specific event or person but still monuments in their irreplaceable value for modern man.

With his concept of the unintentional monument Riegl makes a brutal expansion in the definition of a monument to incorporate every artefact without regards to its original significance and purpose as long as it reveals the passage of a considerable period of time.<sup>7</sup> Age becomes the sign that defines the object as a monument. In Riegl's proposition the logic of the monument is turned upside down, fragility rather than permanence becomes its mark.

### **Age**

However it is necessary to complicate the notion of age in order to grasp the shift from the cult of the intentional monument to the cult of the unintentional, which Riegl argues, characterises western history from the Renaissance. Age is a complex concept; it talks both of identification and distance. An intentional monument, erected to commemorate a human deed or event always has the purpose of overcoming distance to, in one sense, refuse the passage of time. With its physical presence it aims to create a lapse in time that renders the past present and establishes a transparent connection to the event or the person that the monument commemorates. The intentional monument's primary function according to Riegl, is to maintain memory alive; to arrest, one might say, the soft forgetfulness of history. For the intentional monument, therefore, age is always an obstacle. Indeed the intentional monument is dependent on a non-aged appearance to maintain its function as a memorial; any signs of decay would suggest a diminishing interest in the subject whose presence in memory it governs.

Riegl's concept of the unintentional monument on the other hand suggests a radically different logic in which the enigma of absence is central. Where intentional monuments in some sense always suppress loss through the articulation of triumph or martyrdom, these unintentional monuments leave loss at the centre. Not purposely built as monuments, they are found in the inflated realm of heritage as "historical objects" that reject a transparent presence in preference for an obscured and distant past. Riegl underlines that both the intentional and the unintentional monument are characterised by a commemorative value. Crucially, however, while the value of the intentional monument is always conditioned by its makers – the monument is cared for as long as the person or event it is to commemorate is still remembered – the value of the unintentional monument is relative and, as Riegl points out, left to us to define: "when we call such works of art 'monuments' it is a subjective rather than an objective designation" Riegl notes, continuing further: "we have defined the value of the unintentional ones."<sup>8</sup> This is a crucial observation and points to an important distinction between the intentional and the unintentional monument. While the intentional monument, purposely erected to commemorate, appears as a trans-historical almost ubiquitous phenomena, the unintentional monument is a datable invention of the west whose history and origin Riegl traces back to the Italian Renaissance.<sup>9</sup> Riegl's historical account of the "invention" of the unintentional monument can be questioned but his clear identification of the unintentional monument is, I would argue, crucial to understanding the phenomena of heritage; particularly its explosive development and expansion in western society.

### **Conservation**

Riegl noted that we define the value of the unintentional monument. In his highly visually orientated analysis the onlooker constructs the monument. Riegl abandoned the classification of the monuments themselves to instead identify and distinguish between values applied to them, and these values were almost exclusively based on the visual effect of the monument upon the beholder.

After his summary of the evolution in history from the cult of the intentional monument to the modern cult of unintentional monuments Riegl continues his essay by classifying and identifying the different values attributed to the monument, and speculates how these values determine the conservation of the monument. Should the monument be reconstructed to regain its completeness and coherence of form or should it be allowed to disintegrate, to return to nature? Riegl's answer to this question is that this depends on which value the monument in question has for the beholder. However, Riegl shows that these values often conflict and demand different kinds of conservation strategies for the same object.

Riegl distinguishes three forms of memory-values that effect the care of the monument: intentional commemorative-value (*gewollte Erinnerungswert*), historical-value (*historische Wert*) and age-value (*Alteswert*). The first, intentional commemorative-value relates only to the class of intentional monuments; the two last, historical-value and age-value, relate to the class of unintentional monuments and are therefore part of the "modern cult of monuments". As the scope of memory-value widens the different classes of monuments become contained within each other. The class of intentional monuments included only those works which recalled a specific moment from the past. The monuments to which a historical-value is designated still refer to a specific moment in history but they are unintentional in that the choice of monuments is left to our subjective preference. A monument that was originally "just" an intentional monument can therefore be incorporated into this class if it is defined as being of historical worth. The class of monuments relating to age-value is even more expansive in its scope. As was noted earlier Riegl's radical suggestion was that any artefact without regards to its original significance and purpose could gain an age-value that defined it as a monument as long as it revealed to the onlooker that a considerable period of time had passed since it was new.<sup>10</sup>

The three forms of memory-values, the *Erinnerungswert* identified by Riegl, all suggested different strategies of restoration. To maintain an intentional

commemorative-value in the monument it had to be kept in a pristine state. Historical-value impinged on the monument defining a precise and authentic moment in history. The task of restoration was therefore to reconstruct the building back to its "original" state, which always risked jeopardising the validity of the monument as a historical document; the complication of conservation emerged with the notion of historical-value. To possess an age-value it was required that the monument display "truthfully" the changes and evolutions it had undergone since its construction, communicating primarily the passage of time. Here restoration in itself was fundamentally problematic and was reduced to preventative measures to protect the objects from the corrosive forces of nature or modernisation.

Riegl related the commemorative-values to the evolution of history. He suggested that his classes of monument form three consecutive phases of what the monument had meant, and that these phases could be traced in the history of conservation. In his schema the development evolves from the cult of the intentional monument to the recognition of a historical-value in the monument. Riegl argued, in a lightly disguised criticism of pedantic art historical scholarship, that through the evolution of refined scholarship even the smallest particularity in the developmental chain began to be recognised as irreplaceable. This notion of the irreplaceability of every event would lead to the notion of developmental value in which the particulars were ultimately unimportant. The value of the monument would reside no longer in its historicity but in its capacity of revealing the process of development itself, the cycle of death and life. This appreciation of the process of evolution, of the passage of time, Riegl termed age-value. This value was the result of the recognition of historical-value but at the same time would finally challenge and replace it.

According to Riegl's prophecy age-value was the most modern value and the one that would guide the conservation of the monument in the future.<sup>11</sup> However Riegl emphasised that the all embracing value of age had yet to come, and that the contemporary conflict in conservation was often played out between historical-value and age-value. Through his careful clas-

sification and naming of different values he shows not only how different memorial-values conflict and demand different strategies of conservation, but also how the memorial-values themselves are often antithetical to what Riegl named present-day-values (Gegenwarts-werte).

Riegl acknowledged that the monument fulfilled other purposes relating not to commemoration but to use and aesthetic enjoyment. He noted that these present-day values were strictly speaking not part of the modern cult of monuments, as they deny the memorial function of the monument; and yet they effected the conservation of the monument none the less, and were therefore crucial to identify. He classified these present-day values into two main groups: use-value and art-value. The first group referred to the practical functional performance of the object,<sup>12</sup> the second to its aesthetic value for the beholder. The use-value of a monument tends to stand in conflict with the monument's commemorative-value, both the historical- but especially the more modern age-value.<sup>13</sup> While age-value emerges out of gradual dissolution, the dissolving of form and colour revealing the passage of time, use-value requires the maintenance of the object – the conflict is evident.

Riegl's notion of art-value is more complex and closely related to his concept of *Kunstwollen*, the idea of a relative and changing notion of art specific to every period in history. Riegl claimed that to possess art-value it was necessary that the object was a discrete entity, which revealed no decay of shape and colour; as Kurt W. Forster has noted Riegl had not identified the aesthetic category of the fragment.<sup>14</sup> In Riegl's schema art-value did not then necessarily conflict with historical-value, even if these values were generated from different positions – the first in relation to the present-day value, the other from the commemorative-value of the monument. The identification of a historical-value in the monument had often resulted in the reconstruction of the object as new, and in its completeness and

integrity it could therefore satisfy an art-value.

Age-value on the other hand conflicted strongly with art-value. It was the very aging; the process of dissolution into the general that generated age-value and anything, independent of any previous aesthetic properties could gain it. Indeed, a monument that was appreciated for its age-value was nothing more than a catalyst which triggered in the beholder a sense of the life cycle. Age-value was not then bound up with the object. As Riegl dramatically expressed it: "the object has shrunk to a necessary evil".<sup>15</sup> Indeed independent of either the historical or the aesthetic quality that had originally defined the unintentional monument, age-value would fundamentally question the notion of the monument altogether. Art-value on the other hand was closely bound to the object. To satisfy both art-value and age-value in the same object was unfeasible:

where the monument's conception, shape, and colour satisfy our modern *Kunstwollen*, it follows that this value should not be allowed to diminish in significance in order to conform to the expectations of age-value.<sup>16</sup>

The strongest opposition to age-value, however is what Riegl terms newness-value (*Neuheitswert*). Riegl intriguingly and acutely places newness-value as a subclass to art-value. Riegl's radical proposition is that the new always has an art-value; as he does with age, Riegl suggests that the new has a specific power in modern society. In its integrity and purity the new can be appreciated by anyone – no education is needed to appreciate its smooth and even surfaces, Riegl argues, anticipating Siegfried Giedion's studies of the streamlined in 50s American modernism.<sup>17</sup> In its directness the new is a force in the same way as age in a mass-society. And yet, the masses' love for the new constitutes the largest hindrance to a general recognition of age-value:

The masses have always enjoyed new things [...] What is rooted in thousands of years of perception – namely the priority of youth over age – cannot be eliminated in a few decades.<sup>18</sup>

The dichotomy between the attraction of the shiny new and the feeling for the aged structures Riegl's argument in "The Modern Cult of Monuments"; for Riegl, writing on the brim of modernism, the attraction of the

new appeared stronger than that of the old. A century later the situation appears somewhat reversed; the comfort of the old and familiar dominates popular discourse, specifically perhaps in the realm of housing and urbanism whose rhetoric nearly without exception looks backwards. Riegl's prophecy that the force of the old would conquer the masses seems to have been fulfilled.

Riegl however saw the power of age as a potential for the new; the cult of the old would free the new from its historical burden. With truly modernistic ambition Riegl wanted to break with the historicism of the nineteenth century. He rejected the thought that the new could emerge from art historical studies.<sup>19</sup> The new, he argued, had to gain its quality specifically by differentiating itself from the old: "the truly modern work must, in its concept and detail, recall earlier work as little as possible."<sup>20</sup> As we have seen Riegl's age-value placed the monument firmly in the realm of the old were it was isolated from the functionality and use of the everyday. The old were not to be directly reused but only to return to the present in the form of its otherness, as the cult of the old. The new on the other hand defined its newness by its very coherence with the present, its oneness with the time.

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## Notes

1. Alois Riegl, "Der moderne Denkmalkultus. Sein Wesen und seine Entstehung" (Vienna, 1903) reprinted in George Dehio, A. Riegl, *Konservieren, nicht restaurieren: Streitschriften zur Denkmalpflege um 1900*, Braunschweig-Wiesbaden: Friedr. Vieweg & Sohn, 1988. English translation: "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin", transl. Forster and Ghirardo, *Oppositions* 25 (Fall 1982), pp. 21–56, French translation *Le Culte moderne des monuments. Son essence et sa genèse*, Paris: Seuil, 1984.
2. "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin", op. cit., p. 24.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 1; the same definition of the monument is used in the first paragraph of the law drafted most probably by

- Riegl.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 21–23.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 24–31. See also Françoise Choay, *L'allegorie du patrimoine*, Paris: Seuil, 1992, pp. 128–131.
10. "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin", op. cit., p. 24.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 21–31.
12. This related foremost to architectural buildings but could also include the safety measures taken in relation to other types monument i.e. the monuments should not risk damaging an onlooker (falling stones etc.).
13. "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin", op. cit., pp. 39–42.
14. Kurt W. Forster, "Monument/Memory and the Mortality of Architecture", *Oppositions* 25, (Fall 1982), p. 10.
15. "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin", op. cit., p. 24.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 42. For the reference to Siegfried Giedion see: Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command, a Contribution to Anonymous History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948.
18. "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin", op. cit., pp. 43–44.
19. For Riegl's criticism of historicism see: Diana Graham Reynolds, *Alois Riegl and the Politics of Art History: Intellectual Traditions and Austrian Identity in Fin de Siècle Vienna*, PhD dissertation, University of California at San Diego: Ann Arbor (UMI), 1997.
20. "The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin", op. cit., p. 44.