Authenticity and Alienation

Richard Brilliant

The great, wide-ranging, universalist art museums tend to compartmentalize their varied collections according to established criteria of the times and places of making and use, enclosed within a cultural envelope of programs and style. Historical scholarship coupled with connoisseurship together serve to establish these distinctive criteria; they are not inflexible, given the intrusive effect of new information, new discoveries. However construed, however justified, these chronological and stylistic divisions develop a particularized mode of presentation that suggests their historical validity, as if the past – the "then and there" – were effectively revived, even authenticated by programs of associative display.

Authenticity as a criterion of legitimacy and of aesthetic value enters into the parlance of the art market as the demonstrable connection between an identifiable creator or creators and the work of art thereby attributable. As a term of approbation, "authenticity" transcends its market application to encompass a romantic sensibility. This attitude was strongly asserted in the nineteenth century on the grounds that the connection between the creative artist and the work created was an essential ingredient not just in the work's coming-into-being but, also, in its historical significance and present meaning. Thus, originality was especially prized!

Twentieth-century and contemporary efforts to broaden the definition of art and artworks, the disconnection between artist/author and his/her creation, and the postmodern attitude towards plundering the past have altogether compromised the aesthetic value of "authenticity", if not its continued role in the art market, and with it the effort to validate originality.[1]

Underlying the concept of "authenticity" is a positive attitude toward historical memory, the retention of the past and its projection into the present.

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1   See Foucault, "What is an Author?".

However partial or even fictitious that notion of a particular past may be, its invocation can both offer an instructive gloss on the contemporary present and redefine the constitutive role of tradition in shaping the sense of the past and its life in the present. In the art museum, fragmentary tokens of the memorable past are put on display as talismans of a past not to be forgotten. They are, in effect, culturally restorative, and, despite isolation, no less "original." Their status as worthy of attentive interest is thus preserved.

Asserting intentionally the worthiness of the physical remnants of the past, or of another artistic culture, and projecting them into the present – whether in an art or ethnographic museum, or otherwise – constitutes the very foundation of a live (or living) artistic tradition, made available to the viewer.[2] This transference of the object of interest, together with its imputed meaning, into a new context of sensibility, energizes the act of appropriation, while tending to eradicate the marks of difference or strangeness.

Years ago, in *The Shape of Time*, George Kubler drew attention to the importance of "entrance", the first considerable and influential instantiation of dominant artistic motifs, collectively emerging into prominence and altogether constituting the original expression of an historic style. Although Kubler was interested in identifying effective origins, he did not concern himself with the consideration of the re-emergence of the past (or of the "other") as a distinct subset of the phenomenon of re-entrance. And that, too, could follow a similar evolutionary trajectory tied to diverse antecedents, later exploited for their image-value.

Spolia, which constitute a subset of the broader category of appropriation, involve the physical incorporation of artworks, or fragments thereof, into new artistic contexts; the term includes, as well, the replications of other originals or reproductive images of them, inserted for their iconographic and visual effect into later or "foreign" works of art. In effect, spoliation constitutes a form of identity theft, because the identity of the borrowed original in whatever form taken retains some associative value, even if only in the visual authority of its imagery.

Spoliation reintroduces the past and the "other" into the present; it can assume a variety of explicit or implicit forms or modalities of expression and focuses on things or the shadows of things once and still admired but no longer wholly situated at a distance. Spoliation further involves the removal of artworks from their places of origin and their subsequent display in novel visual environments, often, if not invariably, dedicated to asserting cultural and historical possession for contemporary viewers. In such circumstances, spoliation combines both a retrospective orientation and a proleptic coloration. For *spolia* to succeed as evidence of the swing between two sites, the original source cannot be fully obscured if the newly combined elements

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2   Bosman, *The Power of Tradition.*

are to have meaningful saliency in the present. The Janus-like character of such ambivalent references endows spoliated artworks and monuments with their particular, synthetic historicity.

Spoliation involves shifting "presence" forward and is most effective when memory traces can be perceived or, at least, some awareness of the transgressive act of appropriation can be appreciated. Making something past and/or borrowed present again has a representative thrust because it involves reframing.[3] In effect, reframing the appropriated element challenges the ontological aspect of that element, if knowledge on the part of the viewer is lacking. Some degree of prepared cognition in response to the implicit meaning of the spoliated element seems necessary so that the viewer can look beyond the thing, or image, immediately observed, or is induced to do so.

The ancient Roman world held itself in thrall to the cultural hegemony of Greece, especially after Marcus Claudius Marcellus' conquest of Syracuse in the late third century BCE. He initiated the wholesale asportation of Greek works of art from Magna Graecia and, later, others followed his lead in Greece itself and in the Greek towns of the eastern Mediterranean. These looted works, often bearing the names of great masters, arrived in Rome as booty, tokens of Roman political dominance. The subsequent private and public display of Greek works of art – paintings and sculptures – and their frequent reproduction constitute a well-known aspect of Roman visual culture, for which the term "Greco-Roman" can be invoked. Of course, the transformation of Greek "originals" by copying[4] or miniaturization, or by changes in medium, or by respectful emulation, or by reducing elements to formal dependence on principles of decor, exposes a cavalier Roman attitude about the physical and artistic integrity of the "originals" and their subordination into symbols of contemporary appropriation.

Respect for the sanctity of original works of art had never been Roman practice. The frequent recourse to the displacement and subsequent replacement of portrait heads and the defacing of censored inscriptions, common on public as well as private monuments, prove that even an original Roman work was not to be considered either physically or aesthetically inviolate. A lengthy public inscription, one of the largest surviving from antiquity, is to be found on the attic of the Arch of Septimius Severus in the Roman Forum; even now one can see the partial emendation of the inscription, the mark of politically motivated erasure readily visible as it must have been in the early third century when it was undertaken, thereby giving visual evidence of an Orwellian manipulation of the historical record. The same currency of historical knowledge was available to the ancient Roman viewers of the Arch

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3 On presence see Domańska, "The Material Presence of the Past"; on the touchstone of the real: Ankersmit, "'Presence' and Myth".

4 See Schwartz, *The Culture of the Copy*.
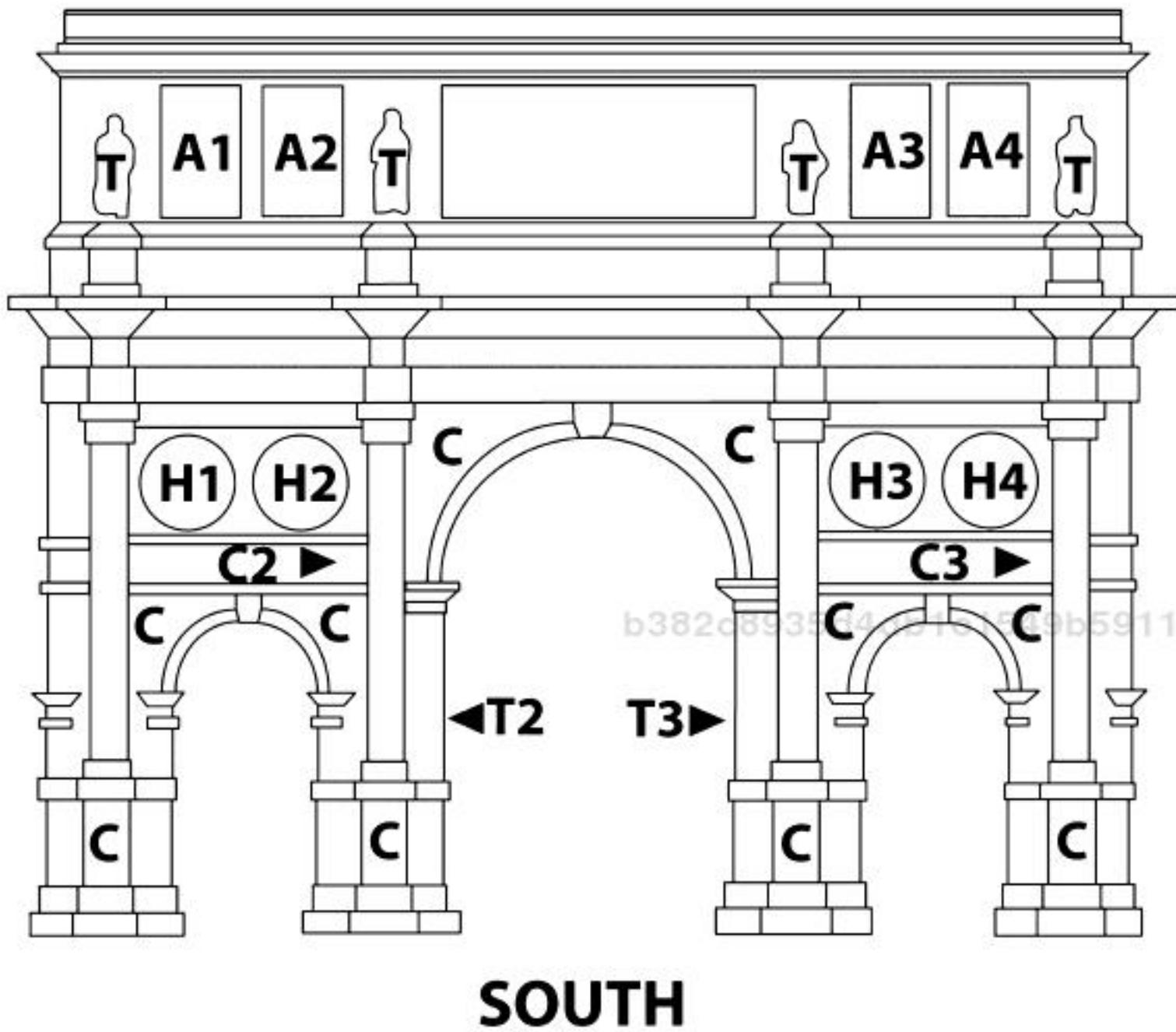
Fig. 8.1   Rome, Arch of Constantine

of Constantine (Figs. 8.1, 8.2) in 315 CE. The recomposition of the façades of the arch from other monuments in Rome must have been observed: fragments of monuments of Trajan, Hadrian, and Marcus Aurelius, possibly even from one of Maxentius, were incorporated into the fabric of the Constantinian arch, and the portraits of the imperial protagonists of an older triumphal art were recut according to the demands of the Constantinian program. Externally as well as internally, the earlier sculptures were brought up to date, reidentified, and recontextualized, thereby becoming fully realized *spolia in se* because the older artworks were used for a new patron, consistent with traditional, well-established Roman patterns of signification.[5]

The so-called Maison Carrée in Nîmes (Fig. 8.3) began its very long life more than 2,000 years ago as a prime example of Roman architecture erected in the provinces, a token of Roman imperial power and Augustan style.[6] Once set within a political and ritual context as a temple of the imperial cult, the building came into being as a product of contemporary design and program,

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5   Elsner, "From the Culture of Spolia to the Cult of Relics"; Barasch, "Visual Syncretism".

6   Balty, *Études sur la Maison Carrée*; Amy, "La Maison Carrée".

T = TRAJANIC SOURCE
H = HADRIANIC SOURCE
A = AURELIAN SOURCE
C = CONSTANTINIAN SCULPTURE

Fig. 8.2   Diagram of the Arch of Constantine, showing origins of figural ornament

adapted to the expression of Roman and especially Augustan policies in the provinces through the medium of noble works of art and architecture. The temple stood in the major public space of the ancient colony as a powerful symbol of Roman authority and as a worthy image of Roman architectural achievement. That achievement is still honored because, whether by good fortune or by the effort of its admirers, the building has survived the centuries as the best-preserved of all Roman temples, with the possible exception of the Pantheon in Rome, a building belonging to a very different architectural order and purpose. Neither the Maison Carrée nor the Pantheon serves the purposes for which it was created; neither has survived the vicissitudes of the centuries without incurring signs of repair and restoration; both owe their present reputation and significance to the fact of their survival in place, relatively intact, and to their iconic presence as prime examples of traditional

Fig. 8.3   Nîmes, the "Maison Carrée"

Roman temple design on the one hand, and on the other of the Roman mastery of concrete vaulting and the architecture of internal space.

The fortune and near-misfortune of the Maison Carrée in Nîmes present an instructive case study in the broad spectrum of appropriation from the absorption of architectural sources to spoliation, whether threatened or implied. The Maison Carrée, although its name is not ancient, is an Augustan monument, dedicated in Provence to the emperor's grandsons, Caius and Lucius Caesar. The temple's design incorporates Greek and Etruscan architectural precedents, as well as contemporary Roman metropolitan models derived from the Forum of Augustus in Rome. (So much for traditional architectural history!) However, the transformation of the peripteral colonnade, typical of classical Greek temples, into a vestigial cipher encased along the side and back walls of the temple's masonry envelope, provides a measurable visual order but also serves as a sign of the complimentary emulation of the normative and prestigious Greek model, expressed here as a form of deliberate, self-enhancing appropriation.[7]

The potential for true spoliation, that is, the displacement and replacement of the temple, almost occurred in the seventeenth century when Colbert, minister to Louis XIV, planned to demolish the Maison Carrée in order to

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7   See Chrościcki and Odinec, "On Directed Graph Models".

reconstruct it in the park at Versailles. Once there it would have become a monumental, "antique" artwork among the collections of artworks gathered for the glory of the king. Although apparently intended to be preserved whole, unlike the fragmentation involved in conventional acts of spoliation, the Maison Carrée would have been completely decontextualized, removed from its porticated Roman precinct in Nîmes and put down in a park-like garden. There it would have stood in a formal landscape, an architectural object on display, no longer the center of imperial cult and urban space. Fortunately for the benefit of historical preservation, Colbert's plan was aborted.

This episode brings to mind the reconstruction of the Romano-Egyptian Temple of Dendur as part of the Egyptian wing in the Metropolitan Museum and its conversion into an exhibit, or the medieval cloisters re-erected in "The Cloisters" in upper Manhattan. Although the "original" fabrics of the temple and of the cloisters were preserved, the deconstructive action of relocation and reassembly not only reduced the monumentality and function of these works of older architecture, but offered the illusion of authenticity, as if their essential character were unchanged in the passage from monument to art object on display. This spoliative state of being seems to be a particularly egregious form of depredation, and thus a morally charged subset of wide-ranging appropriation. The act of removal, relocation, and re-presentation constitutes a specious assertion of authenticity despite the drastic alteration in circumstance, even if the building was rescued from oblivion by being included in the Met's Egyptian Galleries.

Yet the Maison Carrée remains an authentic simulacrum of itself (if that is not a contradiction in terms), although the concept of the simulacrum entertains some illusion of historical veracity. At least this ancient Roman temple survives on its original site, its structure and decor intact, in a space more or less like the ancient precinct, even if its originating purpose and function no longer obtain.

A more tempered act of appropriation, performed as emulative replication, is evident in Thomas Jefferson's adaptation of the Maison Carrée as a model for the new Virginia capitol in Richmond, even if the Corinthian capitals of the original had to be changed to Ionic because of the limited skills of his masons. There is some irony in Jefferson's reliance on a Roman dynastic monument as the proper model for the house of the governmental center of the Virginia Commonwealth in a manner deemed appropriate to a pillar of the emerging American Republic. *O tempora! O mores!*

Copies and imperfect reproductions of older artworks are spin-offs of the collecting impulse, and directly signify modest attempts at assimilating and emulating those works because they are deemed worthy of replication and possession, as if it were possible to bring into the present the best of the past whose aesthetic and image-values may have been underappreciated.[8] In this

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8   See Duro, "Quotational Art".

respect, "Neo-Classical" monuments, especially those produced under the influence of Winckelmann, may be rightfully considered aspects of spoliation *in re*, because Neo-Classical taste usually eschewed direct replication or borrowing in favor of creating new works in the old manner:

> For a dialectal historian, these works incorporate both their pre-history and their after-history, an after-history in virtue of which their pre-history, too, can be seen to undergo constant change. They teach us how their function can outlast their creator, can leave his intentions behind; how its reception by the artist's contemporaries forms part of the effect that the work of art has on us ourselves today, and how this effect derives from our encounter not just with the work, but with the history that has brought the work down to us.[9]

Medieval churches in the Pyrenees and adjacent areas of Spain (or Catalonia), whose wall and vault paintings were subject to decay and depredation, underwent extensive conservation after World War II. The paintings were removed and relocated magnificently in the National Museum of Catalan Art in Barcelona together with reconstitutions of their "original" architecture, in order to recreate the "true" environment of their former appearance for the museum-going viewer. However, where once form was in the service of function, the creation of an environment for religious ritual and experience, in the museum context the new programmatic function of display effectively converted Christian paintings into artworks for aesthetic enjoyment and the establishment of a possibly spurious connection with the medieval past.

Thus, a successful, even legitimate, effort at conservation and preservation led to acts of appropriation whose rationale bears an uncanny resemblance to the removal of medieval and Renaissance altarpieces from their original on-site locations in churches and their subsequent enshrinement in private or public collections as works of art detached forever from originating contexts. Indeed, the relocation of the Egyptian Temple of Dendur into a large well-lighted space in the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the incorporation of medieval cloisters into the museum appropriately named "The Cloisters" represent no less a dislocation of the originals and their subsequent transformation into artworks stemming from an earlier time, now on display as "authentic" relics of that time and culture. Of course, museums are filled with the *disiecta membra* of other cultures, often torn from their original contexts. We have become inured to the acts of appropriation implicit in these displays not only because they are so prevalent, but also because they are justified by the rapacious hunger for the reactivation of connections with the "other" through the medium of the immediate experience of art. The further step, realized at Carcassonne in southern France, a romantic

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9   Walter Benjamin, "Edward Fuchs, Collector and Historian"; quoted in Camille, "Walter Benjamin and Dürer's Melencolia I", p. 58.

nineteenth-century medieval reincarnation due to the vision of Viollet-le-Duc on an ancient/medieval fortress site, is not so very different from the wholly recreated architectural display of Disney World, where notions of "authenticity" are given an entirely new meaning.[10]

Unlike the assemblage of paintings and sculpture taken from earlier or foreign contexts of making and experience and reinstalled in public museums, the transformation of whole bodies of buildings into museum displays poses the question of appropriation precisely because it relates directly to the ravaging of the originating program of existence and function.

The total substitution of extrinsic (new) values for the intrinsic values of the originating circumstance converts the building into an object for viewing, both as an artwork and as an historical/cultural presence. From its prior existence within a tradition, the building on display has been transformed into a representation of that tradition as an historical factum, shaped by a novel situation within the collective environment of the museum, in the end overwhelming the viewer. The token legacy, however admirable, can never be identical with its primary formation; attempts to recreate the illusion of wholeness by reassembling "all" of the parts of an ancient building seem fundamentally counterfeit. The dislocation from time, place, and culture remains absolute in the isolation of the building as an exemplary object, in its departure from the world to which it once belonged, and in its new transformative context:

Every image is a kind of knowledge and wisdom and is a subject of statements, all together in one, and not discourse or deliberation.[11]

Spoliation and appropriation in their most totalizing instantiations, exemplified by the taking of a whole work of architecture and its re-establishment as a museum object, lead to that rupture between the facts of things and their misperception, typical of cognitive dissonance. The originating routes of reference and of function carried with them both implicit and explicit meanings, which were available to contemporaries who could look beyond what was then "obvious" in ways consistent with operative cultural norms. That earlier knowledgeable "look" perished long ago, to be replaced by another, very different in character and largely shaped by both retrospective historical and present aesthetic considerations, motivated by curiosity, that powerful stimulus to obtain knowledge and experience not otherwise preserved. Inevitably, the work of architecture, given the radical change in status brought about by its incorporation into a new environment, changes its significance once it has been transformed into a work of art in

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10 See Sagoff, "The Aesthetic Sense of Forgeries".

11 Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.8.6, trans. A.H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library, 5 (Cambridge, MA, 1984), p. 257.

its new time and viewing circumstance, no less worthy of an interpretive appreciation.[12] Appropriation, then, creates an uncertain connection between the past and the present, shaped by the predominance of one polarity over the other and the mitigating factors of historical knowledge and source recognition, when and if they are present. The retention of the original must fail! Breaking the hermeneutic circle of connection between the work of art, its creator, and its time of making involves compromising its historical origin and formative relations. Spoliation, by contrast, seems to assert claims for truth in representation, at least in the act of representation itself, alienated from claims of authenticity dependent on concepts of the primacy of an originating source. The truth value of visual images is much in question these days.[13] Yet works of art in which spoliated elements and their recontextualization are commingled can offer their own version of truth through the manifestation of respect for the other, for the past, and for the exotic. That respect reflects the intention of any artist and architect, always directed to the creation of the most effective work of art for the present.[14]

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12   See Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?*, p. 184; Hirsch, "Meaning and Significance".
13   See Roskill and Carrier, *Truth and Falsehood in Visual Images*, pp. viii and 77–109.
14   After Stenberg, "Kunstwollen and *Spolia*".

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