From Restoration to Redemption

I. IS RESTORATION POSSIBLE?

In 1874, a restoration of the abbey at Mont St. Michel was begun by Édouard Corroyer, and was later continued by Victor Petitgrand. Both were pupils of the influential French architect Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, who believed that the goal of restoration should be to restore a structure “…to a state of completeness that may never have existed at any given moment.”¹ Viollet-le-Duc’s strategy was to attempt insight into the intent of the original designers, and then achieve a similar impact through whatever modern styles would more naturally stir the contemporary mind. The restoration therefore included alterations like increasing the height of the main spire “…so that the gilded statue of St. Michael the ‘Archangel’ on top of it is as high above the floor of the church as the floor of the church is above the sea; that is, the spire effectively doubles the original height of the rock.”² The spire was built in the reinterpreted neo-Gothic style championed by Viollet-le-Duc in his restoration of many Gothic works including Notre Dame. At Notre Dame, even according to Viollet-le-Duc’s defenders,

The nave chapels were more decorated than evidence warranted; the crossing spire more complicated than the original; the grotesques on the tower more fanciful than the remaining vestiges could possibly hint.³

The British art critic John Ruskin decried Viollet-le-Duc’s approach as “a destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered: a destruction accompanied with false description of the thing destroyed.”⁴ More pointedly, Ruskin’s contention was that restoration was impossible, and we should admit that in what is called “restoration,” we are actually destroying a previous work of art and creating a new one:

Do not let us deceive ourselves… it is impossible, as impossible as to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture… Another spirit may be given it by another time, and it is then a new building; but the spirit of the dead workman cannot be summoned up…”⁵

Ruskin was taking a strong position on the identity of a work of art. The claim was that once a work (architecture in this case) was completed, any reintroduction of artistic skill into the work would be a change from its completed state and therefore a change in identity from the completed work that it had been. Ruskin appeared content that gradual or unavoidable deterioration did not change a work’s identity, but insistent that any other alterations would so change it.

While it is easy to see some intuitive pull to Ruskin’s concerns, one may wonder whether such a strong position is necessary. Is it really impossible to restore a great work of art? Surely that would be very unfortunate. I will present an account that is potentially as strict as Ruskin’s.⁶ But I will try to make this account more palatable by suggesting that what is really going on in restoration is something like a redemption of the deterioration or damage that made the restoration necessary. I will argue that this account of restoration tracks our intuitions about aesthetic value, and that no great value is lost by such an account, indeed it may reveal greater experienced value that other accounts miss. I will begin by arguing that the identity of certain art works are importantly—even ontologically—dependent on their authors.
II. THE PERFECT FAKE AND IDENTITY

There is a popular account of aesthetic appreciation characterized by the idea of “merely looking.” Roughly, the idea is that if we bring into our experience of an artwork any prior knowledge or evaluations, our experience of that work will be tainted. We should “merely look,” and allow the work to affect us simply as it stands before us, with no additional cognitive input from our side. This is, essentially, the idea that all aesthetic properties are perceptual: the aesthetic properties of a (visual) work of art are just those we see when merely looking. A philosophical framework for this kind of account was defended by Peter Strawson when he claimed that any work of art that affects us in precisely the same way is the same work of art. He even went so far as to argue that if we were better at making perfect copies of paintings, and thus perfect copies were not so rare, we would evaluate them just as we do songs and say that each copy is an instance of the real work. Against this notion David Davies has argued that in order to appreciate a work of art, there are some non-perceptual properties we must have access to: namely that it is a work of art and that it is the work of art that it is. In order to appreciate an artwork, we must appreciate it as an artwork. Nelson Goodman further refined this notion by arguing that aesthetic properties are not just those we see when looking, but those that tell us how to look:

My knowledge of the difference [between a painting and its perfect forgery], just because it affects the relationship of the present to future lookings, informs the very character of my present looking. This knowledge instructs me to look at the two pictures differently now, even if what I see is the same. Beyond testifying that I may someday learn to see a difference, it also indicates to some extent the kind of scrutiny to be applied now, the comparisons and contrasts to be made in imagination, and the relevant associations to be brought to bear. It thereby guides the selection, from my past experience, of items and aspects for use in my present looking. Thus not only later but right now, the unperceived difference between the two pictures is a consideration pertinent to my visual experience with them. In short, although I cannot tell the pictures apart merely by looking at them now, the fact that the left-hand one is the original and the right-hand one a forgery constitutes an aesthetic difference between them for me now…

Clearly, this greatly broadens the scope of what may be considered an aesthetic property. Of particular interest is that it opens up many non-perceptual properties to count as aesthetic, such as facts about history and authorship. This may become more intuitive if we think about an example, such as the van Meegeren forgeries. From 1937 to 1945, Han van Meegeren forged many paintings by several famous artists, most notably Johannes Vermeer. In particular, van Meegeren’s Supper at Emmaus was hailed by some art critics as one of the most exquisite Vermeers in existence. After the forgeries were revealed, significant differences began to be noticed between the real Vermeers and van Meegeren’s fakes. Today, the two groups of paintings are considered easily distinguishable. How could paintings so clearly not in the exact style of Vermeer have fooled the experts and everyone else? One very plausible answer is that authorship is a property of an artwork that tells us, following Goodman, how to look. Without knowledge of the authorial property, certain aesthetic properties were, for all practical purposes, inaccessible to those appreciating van Meegeren’s fakes. Ruskin similarly pointed out how various historical properties of a work may and should affect our appreciation of it:

[T]here are two duties respecting national architecture whose importance it is impossible to overrate: the first, to render the architecture of the day historical; and, the second, to preserve, as the most precious of inheritances, that of past ages...for it is in becoming memorial or monumental that a true perfection is
attained by civil and domestic buildings; and this is partly as they are...animated by a metaphorical or historical meaning.\textsuperscript{12}

In many cases, the authorial property—the identity of the artist—comes to symbolize many of these historical properties as well as specific perceptual properties that characterize the works of that artist. In these cases, we may have something close to an aesthetic experience simply at the mention of the artist, without any accompanying perceptions of the artist's work at all! Consider: at the mention of Viollet-le-Duc, those who know his work have vivid ideas swirl in their minds of Gothic and neo-Gothic architecture; patient and scholarly but often overblown and with grandiose detail. They are affected aesthetically by all of the aesthetic properties associated with “Viollet-le-Duc.” Passing by a Gothic cathedral, one might absentmindedly admire whatever features naturally stand out, but being told that it was restored in the style of Viollet-le-Duc, relevant features suddenly sharpen in the mind; attention is drawn to key aspects of the work; evaluation and appreciation changes. Whether one approves of disapproves of Viollet-le-Duc’s style, a completely new aesthetic experience begins. The authorial property tells us, in Goodman’s words, “how to look,” and in so doing, has already impacted us aesthetically. The authorial property itself comes to evoke the same aesthetic experience as would “merely looking” at various other aesthetic features of the artist’s work. The point here is that there are many non-perceptual aesthetic properties, and the identity of the artist is a particularly powerful one.

III. FROM NAMING TO IDENTITY

Notice that I can now claim that aesthetic properties are sufficient to identify a particular work: even if the same artist managed to create two paintings exactly the same in microscopic detail, completed at the same moment in time, they are not identical with each other since the physical objects still obviously have different properties of location. Clearly this is a very small difference, and this is reflected in our intuition that such a pair of paintings would be, though separate paintings, very closely related in aesthetic quality. I have opened up the resources, though, to show why they are not identical in aesthetic quality: we can recognize even such a property as physical location as playing a role (albeit a small role) in our aesthetic appreciation of the paintings. In recognizing that, due only to their occupying different space, they are two paintings and not one painting, we appreciate them differently than we would if we saw them as one painting.\textsuperscript{13} This makes it sound a bit as if the aesthetic properties of an artwork (construed as including the non-perceptual aesthetic properties that I have argued exist) are necessary and sufficient to identify it—even if, by “merely looking,” it is indistinguishable from some other work. If that were so, then I could argue the following: “restoration” changes the aesthetic properties even if only by changing the authorial property, and thus changes the work’s identity. But I can’t quite argue that.

To see why, consider names (there is likely no difficulty in equating a work’s name with its title\textsuperscript{14}). I might assert that the name of an artwork refers to the work that possesses just such-and-such aesthetic (where aesthetic is taken to include the kinds of non-perceptual properties already discussed) properties, and hence serves to identify a particular work. But this wouldn’t be quite right: works of art deteriorate over time and their aesthetic properties thus change (this is a general point about names of many kinds of things\textsuperscript{15}). So names of art works are flexible in a certain way: they apply to physical objects possessing different aesthetic properties over time, so long as those different sets of properties are rightly related to each other. This “right relation” is some sort of gradual change/natural change criterion. As the stone of a building or sculpture is worn down by wind and rain, it remains the same work; as the patina develops on a bronze work, it remains the same work; as the paint fades or yellows, the painting remains the same painting (and, in each case, the work rightly retains the same name). Initially, this also seems to extend to certain non-gradual alterations, especially damage: we would commonly say that Michelangelo’s Pieta remained Michelangelo’s Pieta after four of the fingers of the Virgin Mary’s left hand were broken off during a move prior to 1736. But in a moment, I will argue against this latter addition to this gradual change/natural change criterion.
This short discussion of an artwork’s name provides evidence that change of aesthetic properties does not entail change of identity. It is also clear that some changes can destroy or change the identity of a work of art. The question is how we can distinguish between changes that preserve, and changes that alter, a work’s identity. We have just noticed what I will call the “gradual/natural” criterion as an outside limit on the kinds of changes that can occur while preserving identity. Does work done on the physical object by a new artist fall inside or outside of the gradual/natural criterion? Take again the example of Michelangelo’s Pieta. When Giuseppe Lirioni in 1736 replaced the four broken fingers, would it have been possible for him to restore the work to a state in which it possessed just the aesthetic properties that it had possessed before the damage? I will approach that question in this way: was the authorial property changed? Anyone now looking at the Pieta was looking at a physical object on which work had been done by both Michelangelo and Lirioni. One could abstract away from this physical object and think only of the parts of it that were worked by Michelangelo alone, ignoring the new material constituting the four fingers. But this would seem odd: if the object were to be appreciated in that way, then why do the restoration at all? Further, as mentioned earlier, the authorial property often stands in place of a collection of aesthetic properties, and clearly these may differ between artists. Critics have debated whether Lirioni’s fingers actually changed the Virgin’s gesture to be more rhetorical. Even the possibility that this could have happened indicates that this sculpture is no longer the work of Michelangelo alone. Lirioni, while contributing an obviously minor part to the work, now has a (correspondingly minor) part in its authorship. Thus, work done on an object by a later artist violates the gradual/natural condition on artwork identity. I can now give a revised version of the argument that I said wouldn’t quite work earlier: a work’s aesthetic properties, in concert with a ‘gradual/natural’ criterion, are necessary and sufficient to identify it. Change in aesthetic properties that meets the ‘gradual/natural’ criterion will maintain a work’s identity, and such change that violates the criterion will change the identity. Restorative work by a later artist does not meet the criterion. Therefore, we should not consider the restored work to be the same work of art.

But of course the Pieta continued to be referred to by the same name—could this practice really have been wrong? In response to this concern, I think that we must recognize that names of artworks are (allowably) used quite loosely by the general public and even in the artistic disciplines. Goodman made a similar point when his account had the result that even the slightest failure to follow the score meant that a musician has not performed the piece in question:

Thus while a score may leave unspecified many features of a performance, and allow for considerable variation in others within prescribed limits, full compliance with the specifications given is categorically required. This is not to say that the exigencies that dictate our technical discourse need govern our everyday speech. I am no more recommending that in ordinary discourse we refuse to say that a pianist who misses a note has performed a Chopin Polonaise than that we refuse to call a whale a fish, the earth spherical, or a grayish-pink human white.

In keeping with Goodman’s remark, it is important that the object now called Michelangelo’s Pieta is mostly the same work of art as the sculpture created by Michelangelo, and also important that “mostly the same” does not mean “the same.” We must recognize that we have used ‘Michelangelo’s Pieta’ to refer to several works of art over time, and to call the existing object Michelangelo’s Pieta is to speak loosely. It is perhaps 88% Michelangelo’s Pieta, 2% Lirioni’s, and 10% other restorers’, significantly those who worked on the sculpture after the 1972 hammer attack by Lazlo Toth. Doubtless one may initially feel that this is an unacceptable result that devalues the sculpture and is a strong point against my account. I do not think that this is the case. In any well-written guide to the Pieta, these damages and restorations will be described and I take it as obvious that the knowledge of these parts of the sculpture’s history cause us to look at it differently, feel differently towards it, be affected differently, appreciate it differently. It is now not only a master artist’s beautiful and evocative depiction of a deeply meaningful religious moment; we
now have a sense that this sculpture we are looking at has survived—it has been attacked and handled callously. The pang of sadness that rightly accompanies the comprehension of the scene depicted is reinforced and even perhaps better grounded in the world by our sense of regret at the historical events attached to this object: events much closer to us than the lives of Christ and his mother. I think it is undeniable that knowledge of the damages and restorations of the *Pieta* enhances our aesthetic experience of the sculpture, and enhance it in ways that Michelangelo has nothing to do with.

IV. THE MEANING OF RESTORATION AND THE POSSIBILITY OF REDEMPTION

It might seem that my conclusion will be that restorative work done on an artwork by later artists creates a new work and incorporates that artist as part of the authorial property of the work. But I will go beyond this. It should be clear that, on my account, at least some of these deeper aesthetic properties (those that I claimed are so moving in the case of the damaged and restored *Pieta*, for example) were created by *those who damaged the sculpture*. When Lazlo Toth attacked the *Pieta* with his geologist’s hammer, he intended to harm the statue. And perhaps without the following restoration, our overall experience of the sculpture would have been marred. But I claim that, all things considered, the story we now tell ourselves upon viewing and appreciating the *Pieta* is a better, more evocative, more moving story than it would have been without Toth’s destructive work. Or should I say: his attempt at destructive work. For my claim is that the damage done has been redeemed—something new has risen from the ashes of the marred *Pieta* that goes beyond what the previous sculpture could have achieved.

I do intend to appropriate some of the religious significance of term “redeemed.” In Christianity at least, the concept of *redemption* grew out of various ancient practices by which slaves could be purchased out of slavery. Theologically, part of the significance of redemption is that the pain and evil in the world provides an occasion for God to display his love, self-sacrifice, grace, power, and justice in ways that would otherwise not be possible. Religious redemption includes the idea that the bad things in our lives become appropriated into a story in which their meaning shifts, from regret at our loss, to appreciation of God or of some good that God is doing. This shift in meaning seems attended by a shift in the story in which the bad events are situated. In the same way, I think there are bad events in the histories of artworks (things like intentional damage, or even gradual aging and decay), the meaning of which can shift as those events are appropriated into a story which refocuses our attention in a way that our evaluation of the whole improves.

Of course I must immediately qualify this claim by saying that we can hold this sort of view without justifying vandalism. The richness of the story created by tragedy doesn’t make the event “not a tragedy” —if it did, the richness would be lost. So it is still the case that we shouldn’t vandalize. Additionally, such extreme restoration (or repair) that nothing is left of the original will in some cases reduce the aesthetic quality of the work (if the artist was famous but now there’s nothing left of her work on the object, etc.). My point is that greater value is possible, not that it always follows. There can be poor restorations and poor repairs.

When we appreciate a work of art, it is as if we naturally ask: “What am I looking at”? And the way we answer that question to ourselves vitally impacts our aesthetic experience. If we reply, “A piece of stone carved by some famous person,” we will likely have some level of aesthetic appreciation. If we reply, “A very expressive sculpture by Michelangelo of the Virgin Mary holding her Son’s lifeless body,” doubtless our aesthetic experience is deeper. If we reply with these descriptions, together with a description of the various damages and restorations, our experience is yet deeper. The more of the properties of a work of art, including its historical properties, we are aware of, the more power it has to affect us. When, with knowledge of these historical-aesthetic properties, we now call this sculpture, “The *Pieta*,” there is in fact no way that we can avoid using this as a new name for a new work, for it means something different than what “The *Pieta*” would have meant to someone before the restorations. “The *Pieta*” has signified several different sculptures, each one successively richer in meaning and evocative power—richer because of the additional historical properties.
My goal in this account has been to broaden our notion of aesthetic properties in order to capture our intuitions about what makes a particular work valuable at a time. While largely agreeing with Ruskin's contention that restoration is a misnomer, I want to push back against the negative tone of his rhetoric. I want to re-imagine what is happening in the course of the actions commonly called restorations. I think they are not restorations of the original work, but something more like redemptions of the deterioration of, or damage done to, a previous work. The damage or deterioration is redeemed by being incorporated as aesthetic properties into the production of an even greater work of art. The possibility of this redemption is a hopeful possibility which it seems Ruskin did not envision: we are not bound by the losing game of trying to preserve a decaying material object. We can intervene with tasteful work to create a new work of art with an even richer story and aesthetic impact.

I have partially described how my account would treat the *Pieta*. In conclusion, consider now the *Mona Lisa*. Da Vinci worked on the *Mona Lisa* mainly from 1503 to 1506, taking it with him when he moved to the court of Francois I in 1516. Some experts believe he continued working on the *Mona Lisa* until 1517. If this is the case, then certainly only Da Vinci’s death in 1519 could provide confirmation that the painting was finished. Indeed, for all we know the painting at that time could have been a restoration after Da Vinci spilled ink on it at some point. At the time of Da Vinci’s death, certainly a masterful painting existed: Francois I bought it from Da Vinci’s pupil Salai, and later the “Sun King” Louis XIV had the painting moved to his palace at Versailles. Knowing who these kings were and that the painting was a personal favorite of theirs certainly must add something to the mystique that arrests us upon addressing the *Mona Lisa*. The French Revolution deposed the monarchy but not the *Mona Lisa*: it was moved to the Louvre to join other artifacts representing French artistic pride. The painting, though, had darkened considerably over the course of three hundred years; under Napoleon I, *Mona Lisa* received her first recorded cleaning and touch-up in 1809 (and spent a brief time in Napoleon’s bedroom at the Tuileries). A bit on the aggressive side, this cleaning resulted in the loss of some color in the face of the figure, although other colors were touched-up by Jean-Marie Hooghstoel, restorer at the then-renamed Musée Napoléon. Very possibly similar treatments had occurred before this one, but undeniably at this point the natural/gradual condition was violated and an artist introduced new aesthetic properties to the painting. Is it too strong to say that it was now a new (though only slightly different) work of art? Say that we could allow for minor restorations by new artists so long as they preserve something very close to the original appearance. But then, were we to look at the *Mona Lisa* in 1809 and say, “Ah, it is Da Vinci’s”, we would be ignoring many of the aesthetic properties that the object in front of us actually possesses—the lack of eyebrows (due to overcleaning), the face less colorful than originally, the historical-aesthetic property of thick darkening varnish removed and re-applied countless times. We would be ignoring these evidences of the frailty, the mortality of the work, the miracle and joy of its survival, the sadness of its aging. We would be referring instead to an ideal and imaginary object that exists only in our thoughts.

The *Mona Lisa* did not begin to receive critical acclaim as a masterpiece of the Renaissance until the 1860s—350 years after its completion, though the interest shown in it by the various rulers of France might suggest that they recognized its greatness. By this time two walnut braces had been introduced to stabilize a developing crack in the poplar panel that extended from the top of the painting almost to the figure’s head. In 1906, Louvre restorer Eugene Denizard retouched areas around the crack with watercolor. The infamous theft of the *Mona Lisa* occurred in 1911, when Louvre employee and Italian patriot Vincenzo Peruggia walked out after hours with the painting under his coat, hoping to eventually effect its return to Italy. The painting was believed by many to be lost forever, but after two years Peruggia was caught when he attempted to sell it. Denizard again performed watercolor retouches as the painting was triumphantly returned to the Louvre. In two 1956 attacks, acid and then a rock were thrown at the *Mona Lisa*, causing noticeable damage to the paint. Restorer Jean-Gabriel Goulinat performed the repair, applying watercolor to the figure’s left elbow.

After considering the foregoing story, there can be no doubt that the claim, “The *Mona Lisa* is the same because it still affects us aesthetically the same as it would have in 1517,” is false. The *Mona Lisa* now in the Louvre is a work that has survived many restorations, attacks, repairs, and odd historical adventures. Without acknowledging these, we fail to aesthetically appreciate it for what it is. Yet those
properties make it more than it ever was by Da Vinci’s hand: the work has greater aesthetic value because of actions done on the object by other artists—artists of both destruction and redemption. The interventions by various artists called “restorations,” far from merely restoring value to this work, have added to its intrigue. The emotion that grips our heart upon viewing the Mona Lisa with deeper knowledge of what this object historically and authorially is indicates an aesthetic power that this work has over us, a power that grows with every new twist of her story.

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Bibliography


Endnotes


5 Ruskin, *Seven Lamps*, 209.

6 See endnote 15 for my limited disagreement with Ruskin that goes beyond the purview of this essay.

7 The idea of ontological dependence is just that x is ontologically dependent on a if, were it not that a is what a is, neither would x be what x is. See, for example, Fine (1995).


11 Van Meegeren produced two kinds of paintings: forgeries of existing master works and entirely new works that he attributed to old masters. My comments apply primarily to the latter. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this distinction.

12 Ruskin, *Seven Lamps*, 192.

13 Here, as in numerous points, a question may arise as to whether my arguments apply to all artworks, or only certain kinds. In this paper, I am thinking only of what Goodman calls “autographical” art works—those for which there is no notation which, if followed, results in re-producing the work of art. “Allographical” art works such as songs, literature, and dances (works that are notational – *Languages of Art*, p.121) may or may not fall under the argument I describe in this paper. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer on this point.


15 Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

16 While I don’t have space to discuss the exact kind of identity in play here, it is important, and I refer the interested reader to Davies’s distinction between a “proper epistemic instance” and a “provenential instance” (Davies, “Multiple Instances”). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point.

Davies, “Multiple Instances,” will be helpful to those interested in delving further into the exact nature of this “natural/gradual” criterion and the exact nature of the identity in play here. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for mentioning ‘Davies's paper.


See, for example, William Gentz, editor, *The Dictionary of Bible and Religion* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986). In talking about a shift in the meaning of past evils, I am assuming some kind of theodicy under which past evils are not simply forgotten but *are part of the story* of how a person has come into her relationship with God (for example, the words of Joseph to his brothers in Genesis 50:20— "...you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good").

Though I do not have space here to argue for this, my contention would be that restorative work by the original artist *can* (and can also fail to) maintain the identity of an artwork because the work may then be shown not to have been completed prior to the artist’s restorative work.

“Redemptions” in the general sense discussed earlier and in end notes 20 and 21.

Exactly what constitutes “tasteful” intervention as opposed to intervention that goes too far or goes awry is of course a matter for contentious debate, but I take it as an important result that it is, in many cases, *possible.*