The Dual Meaning of Authenticity (Wim Denslagen)


Writing about architectural restorations the distinguished Dutch architect Mels Crouwel – he was in 2004 to become the Rijksbouwmeester (the architect of our Kingdom) - stated that restorers should abstain from historicisms, from making additions in historic styles to the monuments of the past. In his article, published in the yearbook of the Cuypersgenootschap of 2003, Mels Crouwel wrote that ‘historicising reparations’ may be necessary in some cases, for instance when the monument has remained undamaged, but restoration and reconstructions should never be ‘the leading principle’. Mels Crouwel also explains why he thinks this is true. ‘The monument’, he writes, ‘is an authentic historical object, and therefore every alteration and addition should be of an authentic architectural character too’.

This explanation is very interesting for two reasons. In the first place it contains a fallacy and in the second place this explanation is given by many authors who write about the history of architectural restorations. The mistake is simply this: the notion of authenticity is used in two different meanings. A monument of the past is called ‘authentic’ in the sense that it has come down to us as a document of the past. But to call an addition ‘authentic’ means that the addition should be a piece of artistic creation. In this last sense ‘authentic’ means the opposite of imitation. Crouwel wants to invent new forms, because he looks down upon imitations of historical architecture. To rebuild architecture from the past, Crouwel said, is not authentic and ‘all attempts to reconcile old and new turn out to be dishonest’. As we know this is the general belief of architects who were trained in the ideas of the Modern Movement.

Authenticity and Originality

Authenticity in the first meaning (the historical substance itself) is not the same as originality. To explain this difference we could take as example the Dreikönigenhaus in the Simeonstrasse in Trier. This house had been authentic till its restoration in 1974, when it was transformed into a copy of the original form, of about 1230.

As an example of the second meaning of authenticity, Crouwel showed a picture of the new wing he designed in 1999 at the back of the House of Van der Perre, built in 1763 by Jan Johan Pieter van Burscheit de Jongere in Middelburg, the seat of the provincial archives. This example shows the second meaning of authenticity: to be honest, sincere, which excludes imitating historical models.

As said before Mels Crouwel used the two meanings of authenticity as if they were one and the same. This confusion cannot be attributed to the bias of an individual, because it is found in many other modern texts too. The confusion has a deeper meaning, because it enables modern architects to defend their conviction that it is below their professional standards to make a design which is based on historical models.

The second meaning of authenticity has probably been created by Romanticism and did not exist before the end of the eighteenth century, at least not in the architectural profession. In the architectural schools students were send to Rome to study the architecture of antiquity. During the age of Classicism the architectural profession was convinced of the universal superiority of antiquity. This state of affairs has been transformed by Romanticism and the new romantic attitude has been adopted by the Modern Movement.

Stendhal

One finds this dual meaning already in the work of the French novelist Stendhal. In his Promenades dans Rome (1828) Stendhal explained how shocked he was by the way the architect Giuseppe Valadier had restored the Arc of Titus in Rome shortly before 1821. The arch had been erected in honour of emperor Titus, who had conquered Jerusalem in 71. In the eyes of Stendhal the architect had not restricted himself to reparation work, but had dared to make copies of the ancient stones. Stendhal was not the first to attack the violation of historical documents, but this kind of criticism became more pronounced in the age of Romanticism.

Although Stendhal did not use the word, what he disapproved of was the alteration of the authentic arch, which had been incorporated in a medieval city wall. This was the first meaning of authenticity, but we can also find the second meaning of authenticity in the writings of Stendhal, for instance in his Salon de 1824, where he criticized the paintings in the classicistic style of his days, the style of Jacques-Louis David. Stendal wrote that the paintings of the School of David were cleverly made, but
boring (ils ennuient). I am not touched by these paintings, Stendhal continued, because they are just copies of imitations (je ne vois que la copie d’une imitation).

Be truthful towards the heritage of the past and be truthful in your artistic work, that was the message of Stendhal. Like Mels Crouwel, Stendhal used the same notion for two entirely different things. They both overlooked the fact that being obedient to a style was the generally accepted artistic behaviour before the age of Romanticism. For instance the expansion of the Gothic style or of Classicism would not have been possible without imitation.

The Romantic Movement
What the cultural change could mean in the arts, has been explained by George Eliot in her novel *Adam Bede* (1859). Now and then George Eliot interrupts her stories to commend on philosophical matters. In *Adam Bede* she comments on the new romantic trend in the arts by saying that she only admires the works of the academic art schools, but also the paintings of realists, of artist who paint scenes of everyday life. The function of art is not restricted anymore to the beautifying of the human environment, but should also be directed to open our eyes to the awful realities of human suffering. When Emile Zola presents in 1866 his views on the art of his time he is not only bored by the painting of the classicists of the academies, but he was also irritated by this art which just wants to please and nothing else. In his *Salons* of 1866 he expressed his ‘profond dédain’ for all these cleverly painted theatrical performances.

The romantic search for honesty became a political weapon in the hands of William Morris. In the article ‘The lesser arts’ (1877) he condemned the luxury of the English bourgeoisie and praised the sincerity in the kitchen of the farmhouse: ‘I repeat, this stupidity goes through all classes of society ... the kitchen in a country farmhouse is most commonly a pleasant and homelike place, the parlour dreary and useless. William Morris want the arts to be simple and sincere. He hates pomp and luxury and that is what he saw in the houses of London: ‘tons upon tons of unutterable rubbish’. In these words of William Morris we can detect the birth of the ethical approach in architecture as described by David Watkin in his study *Morality in Architecture* (1977).

Wahrhaftigkeit
In a lecture of 1923 Mies van der Rohe spoke of the need to revert to sincerity (Warhaftigkeit) and to forget the artistic disasters of the past. He reminded his audience of the ‘steingewordenen Irrsinn’, or petrified madness, on the Kurfürstendamm and Dahlem in Berlin and went on to proclaim that the younger generation would put an end to ‘allen formalen Schwindel’ – all kinds of trickery with forms. He proposed to demonstrate how this goal was to be achieved with the aid of some illustrations of ‘Elementare und Zweckvolle’ homes, such as the tents and leaf huts of the Native American Indians and of igloos. One can hear an echo here of Laugier’s nostalgia for primitive huts and the hatred of everything which was contrived and lacked sincerity and was borrowed from other architects or from the art of a bygone age.

A comparable attitude is to be found in the work of the eighteenth century architectural theorist Marc-Antoine Laugier, who wrote in his *Essai sur l’Architecture* (1755) that beauty is to be found in the essentials, licentiousness in those parts which are added out of some necessity and that all the faults can be found in the caprices.

These lines have surely been read by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, who stated a century later that the superiority of the Gothic style is evident by its principle that the construction produces the form: ‘la construction commande la forme’.

So, in a way functionalism in architecture has eighteenth-century roots in architectural theories and is closely linked to the romantic search for essentials. Essentials in art symbolize truth and honesty.

Anticlassicism
The birth of Romanticism announced the death of the classicist taste. We can – in hindsight – detect the beginning of this death in one of the reflections of Louis Sébastien Mercier in his *Tableau de Paris*. In the first volume, which has been published in 1783, Mercier is as bored with classical columns, as Stendhal was with the painting of Jacques-Louis David and his followers. He asks ‘aux gens de l’art’ why there are always columns in architecture: ‘je suis las de voir des colonnes’. Mercier is bored with the eternal view of classicist architecture with the same standard buildings elements. His question is the first sign of a turning away from academism towards a search for less idealistic artistic principles.

One can see the difference between Classicism and Romanticism clearly expressed in comparing for instance the Triumph of Venus by François Boucher, painted in 1740 (Nationalmuseum in Stockholm) with a painting of a century later. The painting of Boucher represents the attitude of Classicism in the
arts: a world of heavenly peace and joy. The romantics rejected this representation of the world as skin deep beauty and a rejectable show of hedonism. They produced paintings of the real world, like La Cribleuse de Blé by Gustave Courbet of 1853 (Musée des Beaux-Arts in Nantes): the real world of hardship, the real life of ordinary human beings in stead of gods playing as children without sorrows, but also without responsability and compassion.

These opposing attitudes find their expression in architecture too. Compare the Kaisersaal in the episcopal palace in Würzburg by Balthasar Neumann (1744) with the Anatomical Theatre of the Ecole de Chirurgie in Paris, built by Jacques Gondoin between 1769 and 1774: a half section of the Pantheon in Rome. In the eyes of the romantics the architecture of antiquity contained all the essentials. Whereas at the end of the nineteenth century the romantic search for essentials kept its position in the world of architecture, its direction changed from antiquity towards modern technology. The new representation of honesty in architecture became the most modern building material: iron. The icon of the modernity was to be the Eiffel tower, built by Gustave Eiffel in 1889. And here we find an architecture in which beauty has been completely replaced by functionalism. Beauty is superficial according to the romantics. It may sound strange, but there is some reason to think that this building is a product of Romanticism, in the sense that architecture is reduced to essentials, in this case the essentials of the technology of construction in iron. Anyway, one may perhaps conclude that the Modern Movement in architecture is partly based on the ideals of Romanticism.

Authenticity in its second meaning (honesty and truthfulness) has resulted in the destruction of beauty as a central theme in modern art. And it has also distorted the way in which modern historians reflect on Classicism.

Frédéric Bastet

In his reflections on the studies of the nineteenth century Dutch classicist Carel Vosmaer, the well-known modern specialist on classical antiquity, Frédéric Bastet showed some aversion to the aesthetic opinions of his colleague. Carel Vosmaer had been rather enthusiastic about the neoclassical architecture in Berlin, when he visited the city in 1876. He praised in particular the work of Karl Friedrich Schinkel (for instance his theatre on the Platz der Akademie, built in 1820 or his Altes Museum of 1830). Bastet could not understand why Vosmaer had been impressed by this architecture, because in the eyes of Bastet an architect who imitated ancient architecture was dishonest, non authentic. So, Bastet concluded, when he wrote his comments in 1967, that Vosmaer was not to be trusted in matters of aesthetics. According to Bastet, this absence of aesthetic sensibility in the mind of Vosmaer must be ascribed to the fact that Vosmaer had never visited Greece and had never seen with his own eyes the authentic temples of antiquity. For, if Vosmaer had seen these temples, he would have acknowledged that every imitation of an authentic work of art is doomed to failure. Bastet did not acknowledge that his own aesthetic opinion had been modelled by the romantic aversion to imitation and he also did not realize that the classicist Vosmaer has always tried to defend Classicism against the attacks of Romanticism. In the eyes of Vosmaer there was nothing wrong with making imitations of ancient models. This example reveals how powerfully Romanticism has influenced the minds of many generations.


Frédéric Bastet, *Met Carel Vosmaer op reis*. Amsterdam, Querido, 1989, 52.