

RECYCLING BEAUTY

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“Recycling Beauty,” curated by Salvatore Settis with Anna Anguissola and Denise La Monica, and presented in Fondazione Prada’s Podium and Cisterna, illustrates the reuse of Greek and Roman sculptures in post-antique contexts from the Middle Ages to the Baroque.

The exhibition is an invitation to consider the past as an unstable phenomenon in constant change, and to understand how context and time have been relevant for artworks, objects, and collections in history. Running through the exhibition’s narrative is a variety of themes: the reuse of works and materials; the coexistence of different temporalities; the historical distance and narrative simultaneity; inspiration and the reworking of ideas; the transition of meanings and dialogue between cultures; but also the historical and contemporary importance of recycling due to a shortage of resources, and the destruction, recovery, and use of materials, architectures, objects, and iconographies for personal or political purposes, which is also common in our own world.

The exhibition design by Rem Koolhaas/OMA develops in the Podium and the Cisterna as a path of historical analysis, discovery, and imagination. Each exhibited artwork is accompanied by a scientific caption, an informative text, and an infographic panel which provide context or clarify the relation between the object and the theme of the show.

THE EXHIBITION

REM KOOLHAAS

The exhibitions curated by Salvatore Settis are based on a thesis; they are also polemics. The “designer” has to create a space in which an intellectual argument can unfold.

Antiquity is used to make arguments about the contemporary condition. “Serial Classic” (Fondazione Prada’s opening exhibition in Spring 2015) gave a timely signal, the potential irrelevance of too much individuality—his new show suggests how antiquity’s “extreme clarity” enables it to return, recycled, in later periods.

For the first show we needed to “equalize” the sculptures, so that they could directly interact with each other and with the public without the dead-weight of their socles; for the new show—the reuse of elements of antiquity by later cultures—we created a more didactic landscape to explore how an exhibition design can slow down, focus attention, and manage expectations, from “spectacle” to a more intimate experience, implied by the greater complexity of Settis’ second thesis.

Apart from slowing down, we needed to also accommodate a huge stretch between the smallest almost microscopic item and the largest, the 11-meter-high reconstruction of the Colossus of Constantine.

The multiplicity of the Foundation’s spaces helped the outcome—on the Podium we could establish an almost laboratory inviting extensive scrutiny, while in the three rooms of the Cisterna we installed unique conditions to accommodate the specific themes that Settis’ arguments required.

The two-level observation that the Cisterna enables, has been exploited more than before: to see the Colossus directly in the face—a unique historical experience.

SHORT CIRCUITS. WHEN (ART) HISTORY COLLAPSES

SALVATORE SETTIS

Reuse of ancient sculptures, which is the subject of “Recycling Beauty,” entails the coexistence of different temporalities, in which historical distance and narrative and emotional simultaneity are continually intertwined. The ancient Roman marbles belong to the same cultural horizon as those who reuse them, therefore appropriating them could be considered to be natural. But the dimension of time evades the sequence of the calendar: it is unstable and can be manipulated and bent by complicating time, by reactivating prestigious forebears, by comparing events across time, by fabricating memories. Thus it is that recycling is able to generate meaning. By aggregating segments of different temporalities and putting them in tension with each other, the act of reuse creates an intertextual or inter-objectual network, which contains its components but does not coincide with any of them. It speaks not to the past, but to the future.

The inexorable sequence of the calendar, which can appear to us as a natural given, is not that at all. In a global history perspective, we can place the end of the Eastern Roman Empire (1453) in synchrony not only with the Ottomans who took its place in Constantinople, but with events of that same year in China, in Mexico, in Ethiopia. But for the greatest part of human history it was difficult to harmonize even the calendars of two nearby cities. In ancient Greece, for instance, the names of the months changed from Athens to Corinth, and the year was indicated with the name of a functionary, which differed from city to city, while calculation based on the Olympics never came into general use. The ‘Julian’ calendar (established by Julius Caesar in 46 BCE), reformed by Gregory XIII in 1582 and thus called ‘Gregorian,’ is dominant today, but it was adopted only slowly, and even the idea of counting the years from the (presumed) birth of Christ emerged late and almost by chance. Even today there survive alternative calculations of time, as in Iran, where three different calendars coexist. The simultaneous presence of disparate temporalities does not deny the linear course of time, but renders it more complex and elusive; it shows that the experience of time is determined not only by individual inclinations, but even more by cultural variables.

No less meaningful is the divide between the *quantitative* measurement of time (as in the uniform rhythm of the calendar) and its *qualitative* perception. This latter can include both the intensification of time and the coexistence of different speeds: an accelerated time and a slow or stagnant time. For the first of these two alternatives, an enlightening book by François Hartog offers an essential conceptual tool, the tension between “time that passes and is measured” (in Greek, *chrónos*) and “time that opens onto the instant and the unexpected, the opportunity to be grasped, the favorable moment, the decisive instant,” which the Greeks called *kairós* (chance). The punctual temporality of *kairós*-time breaks into segments the linearity of *chrónos*-time and focuses a brighter beam of light on a single instant: this is what happens when Alexander

the Great slices through the Gordian knot with a blow of his sword, or when an artist captures movement in a work of special intensity, as Myron did in his *Discus Thrower*.

The second alternative, *qualitative* time, whose velocity varies, opposes to the calendar's uniformity a perception of time guided by the narrator's judgment and the expectations of the public, for example, in accordance with real or presumed rhythms of development of human civilizations. This is what happened after 1492, when the cultures of the newly-discovered Americas—which were chronologically simultaneous with the *conquistadores*—appeared in Europe as not only foreign but 'backward.' The *spatial* distance thus assumed a *temporal* aspect.

A judgment of *quality*, determined by the idea of progress, governs also the history of art, to the point that Leonardo, born in 1452, can appear more 'modern' to us than Cranach the Younger, born in 1515. This is the "non-contemporaneity of the contemporary," on which Wilhelm Pinder insisted almost a hundred years ago. He makes a sharp distinction between *gleichzeitig* (contemporary) and *gleichaltrig* (coeval) and compares a sculpture by Niclaus Gerhaert with one by a 'Master Erhart': the first is 'advanced,' the second is 'antiquated,' and yet the documents date them both to 1464. They are contemporaries according to the calendar, but not 'coeval' in a congruent development of their styles.

Time thus proceeds according to dissonant rhythms: against the *basso continuo* of an unchanging *quantitative* calendar sequence emerge other temporalities, *qualitative* in nature, that can lead to an intensification or slowing down of experience. Among these is the dual speed of civilizations distant from each other or of artists close together in time but different in terms of skill and results; or at the opposite end, the nervous acceleration of some 'fleeting instant,' determined by *kairós*, which—as in Faust's words—condenses beauty without managing to hold onto it.

The coexistence of overlapping temporalities entails a disorder which we are forced to confront. A few examples from this exhibition: the very rare gilded bronze peacock decorated the Mausoleum of Hadrian (thus it is from 130–140 CE), but it held a much more prominent position in Saint Peter's Basilica (in the 8th or perhaps the 9th century) and later came into the Musei Vaticani. The 'Walpertus urn' in Milan started out in the 2nd century CE as the base of a column and was then reused first as a vat for some form of artisan work, later (10th century) as a funerary urn, and finally as a holy water font. The *Saint Iphygenia* in Vicenza admits at least five chronologies: the body is dated to the 1st century CE, the head and inscription to circa 1501; in 1856 the statue, being 'pagan,' was removed from the church, and in 1954 the decision was made to separate the body from the head, relegating the inscription to a storeroom. In 2022, finally, this exhibition has reconstructed the close relationship of the three pieces.

In cases like these, how can we measure the coexistence of diverging temporalities? How can we reconcile the grid of the calendar with a flexible time like that demanded by the experience and expectations of observers in ancient and medieval Rome, early 16th-century Vicenza, or museum displays in the 19th or 20th centuries? Where should we start if we want to understand the significance of reusing "classical" sculptures?

In the Mediterranean world of the 'classical' age, a certain order of things and a corresponding hierarchy of values

took shape over the long course of centuries, until it came to be identified with the Roman empire. Upon the death of Constantine (337 CE), with freedom of worship granted to the Christians and the creation of a New Rome on the Bosphorus called Constantinople (now Istanbul), this order of things seemed to solidify, but soon the opposite occurred, also because the subdivision (or multiplication) of the empire into two parts, East and West, segmented its strength and its destiny. The survival, and then slow decline, of the Eastern empire was considerably longer than in the West, but the catastrophe of the ancient world led to the death of enormous libraries, gigantic archives, and endless inscriptions, with a desultory but incessant rhythm that the demographic, economic and social crisis made impossible to control. Ancient institutions perished, as did the religion of the ancient gods and their temples, schools and armies, aqueducts and cities; and everywhere stretched a landscape of dereliction and ruin.

The role of art objects changed markedly within the space of a few generations. The veneration of the great Greek artists, shared by the Romans and attested in the earliest 'art-historical' writings in European history (from the 3rd century BCE up to Pliny the Elder, 1st century CE), ended almost abruptly. Bronzes by Polyclitus and Praxiteles, paintings by Parrhasius and Apelles, which had been the glory of the richest Greek cities and later of Rome, were neglected or destroyed. Melted down, the bronze of artworks could be more usefully turned into weapons, containers, coins, or tools; the marble of temples, arches, and statues was more valuable ground into lime or broken into pieces to fill in a ditch or build a stable. The elementary necessities of life had overturned the ancient hierarchies of values.

Only particularly precious objects survived, such as—among those in this exhibition—the Farnese Cup, which from the 13th century on wandered from sovereign to sovereign and high-ranking collectors; or an ivory diptych of 487 CE, now in Brescia, reused for liturgical purposes a few centuries later.

The immense ruins of Rome (but also of a hundred other depopulated cities) were reduced within the span of a few generations to passive quarries for building materials, giving rise to an extraction economy destined to last until well into the 16th century. But the progressive reduction of the decorative *corpus* of Classical Antiquity spurred the saving and valuing of what was left, its *remnants*. Every capital, every architrave, every column could on occasion be understood as *pars pro toto*, a materialization, as it were, of the rhetorical figure of synecdoche, able to condense in itself also what had been destroyed. And even if the irreparable disintegration of the world, devastating the order of things and reducing it to chaos, had overturned the hierarchies of values, there still remained alive, or latent, the awareness that there must be, or have already been, some kind of hierarchy; and from the powerful remainder of amphitheaters and baths whose purpose and use were no longer known, of unguarded temples, of deserted cities, an undecipherable authority burst forth.

Every remnant of that defunct world contained within itself a strong evocative, but also associative and synthetic potential: its function as witness of a shattered empire intensified its presence and its meaning. Even the *tesserae* of colored marble (like those of porphyry and serpentine) found in Cosmatesque work such as the seven slabs from Anagni

in this exhibition, in that they had been lifted from sumptuous abandoned Roman architecture, had the power to evoke and synthesize the glory of the imperial and papal city.

The aesthetic, juridical, and economic order of the precious marbles imported from imperial Rome to create prestigious decorations called for the preservation *in perpetuo* of their original form and function. Reducing them into fragments with which to compose Cosmatesque decorations irreparably obliterated their original context, but it intensified the meaning of each *tessera*, its pertinence to Rome. This is perhaps the most extreme case of a recurrent paradox of reuse: it *damages* the ancient artworks and their context, and yet in some way it ensures their *preservation*. If Trajan's Column is still standing, it is also because in the Middle Ages it served a little church as its bell tower, not without incurring in some damage. If the great *oscillum* of Velletri (shown in this exhibition) is so well-preserved, it is also because it was inappropriately reinterpreted as a *Deposition of Christ* by the addition of some haloes. Transformation and tradition (altering and preserving) are two sides of the same coin: living with antiquity.

Excerpt adapted from Salvatore Settis' essay *Short Circuits: When (Art) History Collapses*, in *Recycling Beauty*, Fondazione Prada, Milan, p. 60.

ARCHITECTURE

In Italy, the reuse of entire buildings or individual ancient elements in the post-antique era is a widespread phenomenon. Whether on the scale of cities or architecture, in the detail of construction or as decoration, our cities and landscapes are characterized by various types of appropriation, interpretation, and reuse of the antique.

As an extension of the exhibition, as well as a non-exhaustive suggestion for a research journey exploring our coexistence with antiquity, the curatorial team and Alessandro Poggio have selected the following places, architectures, and sculptures as examples of the alteration and conservation of Egyptian, Etruscan, Greek, and Roman antiquity on an urban scale:

Piedmont

- Cherasco: Church of San Pietro
- Pollenzo: Area of the ancient amphitheater

Lombardy

- Milan: Columns of San Lorenzo, Porta Nuova Arches

Veneto

- Murano: Basilica of Santi Maria e Donato
- Padua: Arca di Rolando da Piazzola at Basilica of Sant'Antonio, Palazzo Vescovile
- Venice: Bell tower of San Vidal, Palazzo Mastelli, Ponte dei Preti, Sior Antonio Rioba, Tetrarchs of the Basilica of San Marco

Emilia-Romagna

- Modena: Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta e San Geminiano
- Rimini: Bridge of Tiberius

Tuscany

- Lucca: Basilica of San Frediano, Church of Santa Maria Forisportam, Piazza Anfiteatro
- Montepulciano: Palazzo Bucelli
- Pisa: Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, Church of San Paolo a Ripa d'Arno, Church of San Zeno, Via San Martino and Via la Pera, Via San Martino
- Volterra: Porta all'Arco

Umbria

- Assisi: Church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva
- Perugia: Arch of Augustus, Porta Marzia
- Spello: Collegiate Church of Santa Maria Maggiore, Porta Venere
- Spoleto: Bell tower of the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, Church of San Ponziano, Piazza del Duomo

Latium

- Anagni: Cathedral of Santa Maria Annunziata, Ancient walls
- Rome: Arch of Dolabella and Silanus, Basilica of Santa Cecilia in Trastevere, Bell tower of the Basilica of SS Giovanni e Paolo, Church of San Nicola in Carcere, Cordonata capitolina, Via Florida and Largo Arenula, House of Lorenzo Manlio, House of the Crescenzi, Madama Lucrezia, Pantheon, Parapet of the Campidoglio, Pasquino, Piazza del Quirinale, Piazza della Rotonda, Piazza di Pietra, Piè di Marmo, Pons Fabricius, Theater of Marcellus, Via Appia
- Palestrina: Palazzo Barberini, Piazza Regina Margherita
- Terracina: Piazza del Municipio, urban stretch of the Via Appia
- Tivoli: Ponte Lucano

Campania

- Benevento: Bell tower of the Cathedral of Santa Maria de Episcopo, Church of Santa Sofia and cloister, Piazza Papiniano, Rocca dei Rettori, Via Bartolomeo Camerario, Vico Volpe
- Minuta di Scala: Church of SS Annunziata
- Naples: Basilica of San Paolo Maggiore, Basilica of Santa Restituta, Bell tower of the Pietrasanta, Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, Via San Biagio dei Librai and Vico Figurari, Via San Gregorio Armeno
- Pozzuoli: Cathedral of San Procolo Martire
- Ravello: Basilica of Santa Maria Assunta e San Pantaleone, Church of Santa Maria a Gradillo
- Sessa Aurunca: Cathedral of SS Pietro e Paolo

Apulia

- Barletta: Colossus

Calabria

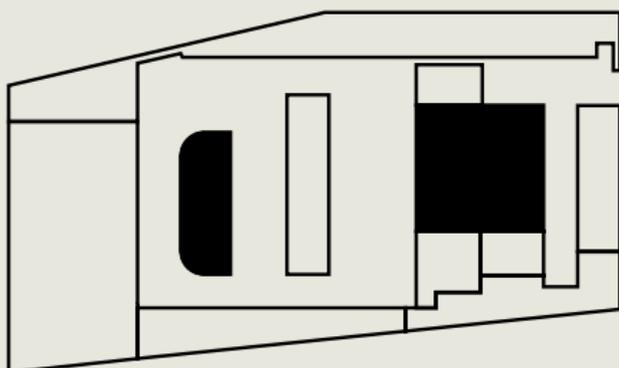
- Gerace: Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta

Sicily

- Syracuse: Cathedral of the Natività di Maria Santissima

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