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Reuse Value. Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture from Constantine to Sherrie Levine

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One can hardly imagine that several decades ago the concept of *spolia* did not yet indicate a field of widespread research in the history of architecture, art and archaeology. The title of this volume with 12 essays and a fascinating introduction, points to this change in research focus, since the value of reuse of objects and materials has not always been recognized. As the cover text indicates, modern society has a fascination for recycling and appropriation in which the idea of reuse seems to fit rather well. The field was opened up with the famous article published in 1969 by historian Arnold Esch, ?Spolien. Zur Wiederverwendung antiker Baustücke und Skulpturen im mittelalterlichen Italien?, as Dale Kinney analyzes in her introduction to the present volume. Another impetus came several years later with Richard Brilliant?s article on sculptures in the Florentine Boboli Gardens. Since those days indeed a flow of publications, both articles and books, has been produced, addressing smaller and larger items in the field, and focusing both on objects and on the concept of what the word *spolia* may have meant. These publications have shown, as the essays in the present volume illustrate once again, that the field is much wider and much more varied than it may have seemed some 40 years ago, though on the other hand Esch had already described and analyzed many different forms and examples of *spolia*.

The volume originates in a colloquium held in 2006, to the contributions of which another six essays were added. The variety of themes addressed here is exciting and a very positive element of the book, although it also bounces the reader back and forth through various periods and from one continent to another. A wide variety of interesting items is addressed in the chapters, ranging from problems of definition (chapter four, Michael Greenhalgh, but also chapters two and eight, by Paolo Liverani and Richard Brilliant), to questions of ideology and of perception (chapters two, three and ten). In her introduction Kinney sketches the field, dealing with notions of reuse, spoliation and appropriation, and elegantly positions the various chapters of this volume in the historiography of the relevant field. The well-known ?Letter (or Report) to Pope Leo X? by Raphael and Castiglione is quoted and one could argue about the interpretation. In this Letter the quality of the sculptures from various periods used on the Arch of Constantine is brought forward as a major problem, although Kinney states that ?the reuse of materials was a sign of the miserable existence, ?without art?, of Romans in the post-classical Dark Ages? (p. 7). However, the most striking element is that it is not so much the reuse of material (*spolia*) that incited the authors to their critical remarks, but the quality of the sculptures themselves. This subtle, yet interesting, distinction is hinted at by Michael Koortbojian (p. 162) as well. As I read the Letter the use of *spolia* as such is not criticized by the authors.

In the first chapter Arnold Esch explores the different points of view of archaeologists, art historians and historians. He describes how the use of *spolia* in the Middle Ages, for instance, should not be viewed as ruining, but instead as reviving, parts of Antiquity. Gradually unfolding layers of questions about the use of *spolia* from Antiquity, Esch explores the different kinds of explanations to close his chapter with some seemingly basic, yet very important observations: ?It did not suffice to *have* antiquity, one also had to *want* antiquity? (p. 27). In several of the collected essays these notions are elaborated, in as far as they treat material or references to western antiquity.

Problems of authenticity and historical past and present, which are so vital to an understanding of the use of *spolia* and of a notion of appropriation, are discussed by Richard Brilliant. Wherever *spolia* are used, parts of some historical past are transferred to another historical level, the presence of the new creation. By inserting a new historical notion in a structure by means of *spolia*, another context is of course damaged or destroyed, in order to make a new context possible.

In the second chapter Paolo Liverani expands on earlier writings about the Arch of Constantine and succeeds in developing a fascinating yet sometimes difficult to understand reasoning. The interpretations of the *spolia* in the Arch of Constantine have been Liverani?s subject in earlier publications as well, and he picks up his thoughts about ?reuse without ideology?.(1) But instead of a mere repetition Liverani offers new insights, aided by semantic theory. Taking the ideological interpretation of the reliefs of the Arch of Constantine by L?Orange as a starting point, Liverani counters this kind of interpretation with solid arguments. However, in his reading of the sources he turns the 4th century (of which the written sources are rare, Liverani correctly states) into one unity, which it never really was. Written sources of this period may be negative on reuse, but

a more clear distinction between the first and the last quarters of the century should be made in my opinion. In fact there are no indications that the use of *spolia* in the time of Constantine was frowned upon, or if a difference between new and *spolia*-material was made at all, a point not touched upon by Liverani. From a more theoretical standpoint, the author mentions the ?historical diplopia? coined earlier by Kinney, and pleads for ?triplopia?: next to the vision of a spectator who observed the reliefs in their original Trajanic context, and that of the Constantinion spectator who saw them on the Arch, there is the reading of the contemporary viewer of today. Also building on the notions of Richard Brilliant about *spolia in se* and *spolia in re* ? with the first one referring to the reuse of actual elements and the second to the use of older images, motifs or styles without the material reuse ? Liverani adds a third kind with the *spolia in me*. The reference to this type ?has to be subjective, dictated by a convention accepted by the observer or reader?.

In the next two chapters Hugo Brandenburg and Michael Greenhalgh agree that there is a lack of ideology in many instances in the use of *spolia* in both late antiquity and the Middle Ages. Brandenburg uses his expert knowledge of Late Antique and Early Christian material in Rome and elsewhere to describe changes in mentality, which made it a common practice to reuse various kinds of material. By analyzing such changes over a longer period, he inserts the practice of reuse and the combination of new and older material into a mentality where neither ideological appropriation nor a notion of ?varietas? were guiding principles ? the most important factor was simply an appreciation of the material. Brandenburg?s conclusion is intriguing: a combination of conservatism and a more loose way of using traditional norms in architecture may be the key elements. The importance of his analysis again shows that a non-prejudiced discussion of the material is necessary, in order to avoid, or counter too much weight being placed on the notion of ?varietas?. This term was introduced by Beat Brenk and repeatedly used by him in several publications since 1987. According to him, in Early Christian architecture the use of *spolia* points at a new aesthetics, infusing the reused material with a new, Christian ideology. However, recent scholarship has been increasingly critical about the notion of ?varietas?, and has strongly argued against such an interpretation.

Greenhalgh explores problems of definition in a fascinating way, although a slightly negative tendency seems to permeate his text. Although asking for ?evidence? is crucial in any scholarly undertaking, it is the kind of evidence that should be tried and tested. Written sources never give the answers to the questions modern scholars come up with, since those sources (if they exist at all) were not produced to serve any kind of scholarly question. In his conclusion Greenhalgh returns to the questions why the reuse of marble in the Middle Ages should be studied, and he explains that the selection of the material, as well as its transportation from sometimes greater distances, indicates a more than superfluous interest in such material. The quality and feel of luxury of the material links it to Antiquity, even though the author remains very skeptical about meaning and the ideological use of *spolia*.

Dale Kinney takes the famous Cross of Herimann in Cologne as the starting point for a discussion of ancient gems in the Middle Ages, not so much trying to explain this particular object, but to ?use the history of its interpretation to think about the status of gems in the discourse of medieval use? (p. 99). The combination of the body of the crucified Christ with a female head, the cameo, produces a fascinating yet puzzling object. On the rear an inscription states that the archbishop Herimann ordered the object to be made, and in addition on its bottom his sister Ida is shown. Most of the contradictions in this object were explained away in older literature by bending several of the elements into a unified Christian interpretation, to which the family of Herimann and Ida was added. Recent research has shown that in fact the Cross of Herimann has more complicated origins than the older literature suggests: the incised copper sheets do not fit completely, the oak cross to which all the elements are attached is modern, the crucifix seems to have been nailed in the past on what is now considered to be the rear. The oddity of adding a beautiful, antique female head to complete the crucifix was interpreted as a rational act in attempts to explain away the contradictions and absurdities of this and several other examples. Although indeed most often an ?interpretatio Christiana? in the Middle Ages was meant to bend all the elements in one and the same direction, as if to deny the fact that *spolia* were used and that they were very visible, only recently has the *spolia*-character of such objects been taken into consideration anew.

In the contribution by Michael Koortbojian three examples of *spolia*-use in buildings in Rome are discussed,

all three located in each other?s vicinity. The Palazzo Mattei di Giove (1598?1617) is the showcase for Asdrubale Mattei?s collection of *spolia*, but his fascination for antiquity also made him order new products in ancient style. The emulation of classical sculptures in new products was shown on the exterior façade, whereas the classical remains (sometimes completed) were placed in the private courtyard. Not far from this palazzo Lorenzo Manlio adorned the exterior of his house by fragments of ancient sculptures, the most striking of which is the enormous inscription dated 1476, which clearly advocates Manlio as a proud Roman citizen with a clear, yet new historical consciousness. Bernardo Gamucci described what is now known as the Portico d?Ottavia in such a way as to capture it in a historical phase, or rather to restore it in that way. Gamucci showed and described the church of Sant?Angelo in Pescheria, but the building he showed was an image of a pagan structure before its transformation into a Christian one. Koortbojian compares these three cases of familiarization with the antique past very cleverly and rightly points out how each of them lacks the deep historical interest in the classical past that was fundamental in the Letter to Pope Leo X.

Of a completely different nature is the Qutb Mosque in Delhi, which is the main subject of two chapters, by Finbarr Barry Flood and Mrinalini Rajagopalan respectively. The question of the validity of such labels as Hindu, Jain, and Muslim are particularly relevant to this structure, in that it incorporates material from various periods and from different cultural and religious contexts. However, not only has this blurred the vision of 19th-century scholars and preservationists, but it has also rendered problematic the appropriation of this building complex by specific religious and cultural groups in their search for identity.

The use of material from various kinds of buildings in 20th-century architecture is the topic discussed by Hans-Rudolf Meier and Annabel Wharton (on the Chicago Tribune Tower). In the examples presented by Meier an important difference with most older reuse of material is revealed. The origin of the *spolia* is insignificant, or the *spolia* are reused at their original site, as happened with the elements that were reused in the rear of the City Hall in Utrecht, designed by Miralles around 2000. Meier shows how the use of older material sometimes created a kind of artistic freedom for the architects, which their regular architectural idiom would not allow. Such reuse bears on both the conception of architecture and on the actual buildings, though this was not the case with the tower for the Chicago Tribune, where pieces of stone of particularly venerated places all over the world and from different states were assembled and put on display. One is reminded somehow of Richard Brilliant?s thoughts about authenticity: somehow the original structures have been mutilated in order to obtain these pieces, which in turn fail to impress contemporary passers-by.

This volume presents a very interesting collection of essays on *spolia* and appropriation, discussed using examples from different cultures and periods. This broad scope is important, since the various contributions incite us to think and rethink notions and positions we all use, consciously or otherwise. At the same time, however, the agility of the reader who wishes to grasp the volume as a whole is put to the test, particularly with the example of Donald Kuspit?s chapter on postmodern appropriation art, which seems slightly out of place. The notion of reuse in general cannot very well be considered without reference to *spolia*, which in turn necessitates one to think about appropriation. Such a line of thought also opens up various other topics, such as authenticity, reception, originality and several others, and that is what sometimes neatly and sometimes more loosely connects most of the essays assembled in this exciting volume. Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney, as indefatigable pioneers in the field of *spolia*-studies, have inspired many colleagues to think and rethink their positions and notions; this collections of essays attests to that inspiration. As with many such volumes this book does not present one theme or one line of thought which other scholars can use, but the chapters are showcases for specific problems, inducing the reader to apply various approaches in their own field of research. On top of that the book is well-sized, with black-and-white illustrations of good quality.

Notes

1. P. Liverani, ?*Reimpiego senza ideologia*: la lettura antica degli spolia dall'arco di Costantino all'età carolingia?, *Römische Mitteilungen*, 111 (2004), 383-434.Back to (1)

The editors appreciate Lex Bosman's thorough and judicious review, which they accept without further comment.

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