

AUTHENTICITY OF MURAL PAINTINGS IN SECULAR BUILDINGS

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The question of authenticity of works of art is relevant mainly for collectors and theoreticians of conservation and heritage protection. However, in the conservation and restoration practice it is also important to decide what we respect as the original. A monument is not only a historical substance, but also an aesthetical message from the past, and that is why we should preserve both aspects. It is also very important to protect the material and immaterial value of each painting.

The specific character of secular monuments needs a special approach. Secular buildings were widely used objects subject to wear and tear; their interiors were overpainted and whitewashed many times. Each layer bears witness to its time.

The paper presents a different approach to the question of authenticity and its practical meaning for conservators' daily practice.

KEYWORDS: mural painting, conservation, secular architecture, authenticity, reconstruction.

Twenty years have passed since the Nara conference devoted to the issues of the authenticity of historical monuments took place.¹ Differences in the approach to this issue in the Eastern and Western cultures are widely known today. Let us recapitulate: while the West worships the 'historical monument substance', the matter treated as a holy relic,² i.e. a relic from a

certain epoch preserved in its original place, as the only one that is authentic, the Far East reconstructs its historical monuments built of non-durable materials every few decades, while monuments survive due to thousand-year-old building.³ The authenticity of historical monuments is a complex notion that covers both the material and immaterial value.⁴

1 In fact, two conferences in Bergen and Nara were devoted to this subject: *Conference on Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention, preparatory workshop*, Bergen, Norway, 31 January – 2 February 1994, ed. Knut Einar Larsen, Niels Marstein, Riksantik, 1994; and *Nara Conference of Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention*, Nara, Japan 1–6 November 1994, Paris: UNESCO, 1995.

2 Andrzej Tomaszewski, „Materialne i niematerialne wartości

dóbr kultury w tradycji i nauce zachodniej”, in: *Ku nowej filozofii dziedzictwa*, (selection and edition) Ewa Święcka, Kraków: Międzynarodowe Centrum Kultury, 2012, p. 62.

3 Nobuo Ito, “Authenticity’ Inherent in Cultural Heritage in Asia and Japan”, in: *Nara Conference of Authenticity in Relation to the World Heritage Convention*, p. 40.

4 Andrzej Tomaszewski, *op. cit.*, p. 63.



1. The baroque Aula Leopoldina is abundantly adorned with paintings and stucco decorations. Since its creation it has remained the most representative hall of the University in Wrocław (Poland), photo by Ewa Śwęcicka, 2006

Barokinė Leopoldinos aula, gausiai išpuošta sienų tapyba ir stiuko puošyba. Nuo pat įkūrimo tai yra reprezentatyviausia Vroclavo universiteto (Lenkija) salė

Considerations of issues related to authenticity have been the subject of research conducted mainly by theoreticians of conservation and protection of cultural heritage.⁵ Numerous conferences and seminars were held; however, this notion keeps coming up and is constantly redefined. Why? It is not only because it is relevant for the researchers, but also because every day hundreds of conservators-restorers around the

⁵ The Polish National Committee ICOMOS has several specialised commissions that organise scientific meetings. On 24 October 2015 the third seminar on various aspects of authenticity took place.

world face the need to make practical solutions and decide whether mural paintings that are of interest ought to be beautiful or faithful. This is a dilemma that was previously the domain of translation from a foreign language. However, what does the fidelity of the conservation process really mean? Should we only rescue the traces of history and old age, often preserved in illegible fragments, or also restore the lost beauty of the message conveyed by a complete work of art, which is the case in the majority of paintings? The long-ridiculed concepts of 19th century restorers who repainted old, blurred paintings are still dismissed, but at the same time, modern art conservation largely draws on their experience. More and more paintings are made in an imitative manner, and no one dares criticise 'total reconstructions' performed increasingly more often nowadays.

Limiting the area of considerations to secular architecture is also justified by the issues related to mural

paintings. Sacral architecture more often retains traditional functions, which the accompanying decorative design corresponds to. Secular buildings are, first and foremost, intensely used residential houses: tenement buildings, palaces, mansions and castles. However, one should also mention public objects: universities, town halls, courts, schools and banks. Both their façades and interiors were decorated. Being widely used objects, they were subject to wear and tear. The surviving ones may be divided into four groups: constantly admired since their creation until now, traced under later layers, continuously used and ‘renovated’ in residential spaces, and ‘recovered’⁶ in various ways. Which of them deserve to be referred to as authentic and in what circumstances?

I. PAINTINGS PRESERVED THANKS TO TRADITION – IN THE FORM IN WHICH THEY WERE CREATED

Preserving paintings in an unchanged form for years and even centuries requires the fulfilment of special conditions. First of all, it is the durable technique of preparation, such as, for example, fresco, and appropriate weather conditions. Another factor that is favourable to the preservation of historical monuments is their physical security, absence of wars and revolutions or destructive historical events, as well as constant recognition and usage that guarantees permanence and invariability [ill. 1]. Their authenticity does not raise any doubts.

a. Decorations that survived thanks to their beauty may be admired most often in the south of Europe, where the fresco technique

6 Another group can be distinguished, namely, paintings removed off walls and transferred onto another base. I have given this subject matter special attention in a separate paper, see: Ewa Święcka, „Pojęcie autentyczności i malarstwo ściennie” (The Notion of Authenticity and Wall Painting), in: *Architectus* (1) 37, 2014, pp. 41–47.

achieved unmatched technical excellence. Durability along with the mastery of the painters are the factors that explain why nobody dared redecorate Italian palaces. Similar examples may be found all over Europe, but they are not so numerous. The situation of paintings on building façades is considerably worse. In fact, these can be found mostly in the south.

b. A separate group of historical monuments classified as mural paintings are inscriptions, documents and even some forms of graffiti. They have been preserved not because of their artistic value, but because of their historical significance [ill. 2]. In this group one can sometimes encounter various relics of ‘unwanted heritage’; these can be, for example, remnants from the period of partitions and wars. People tend to feel rather emotional about such monuments and these objects are often destroyed, covered with new layers of paint or whitewashed.

II. DISCOVERED, TRACED PAINTINGS

The dilemma whether one should look for historical decorations and uncover older layers or leave the walls intact has been bothering art conservators for years. Uncovered paintings are included in the scientific circulation of knowledge on a historical object and have documentary value, but as it is impossible to guarantee their further safe existence, perhaps it would be better to leave them intact? Paintings left under layers of covering seem to be patiently waiting for the next generations of explorers, but such a concept is considered naïve,⁷ which is probably right, because they may be unintentionally destroyed. On the other hand, each discovery raises

7 Władysław Zalewski, „Odkrywanie malowideł ściennych”, in: *Księga Pamiątkowa ofiarowana profesorowi Wiesławowi Domasłowskiemu*, ed. Bożena Soldenhoff, Toruń: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, 2002, pp. 338–339.



2. The cell was a place of solitary confinement for the students of the University of Riga who committed various offences. They left various drawings and inscriptions in several languages on the walls. Today, these inscriptions have historical value, and some of their authors later became renowned, photo by Ewa Śwęcicka, 2010

Šioje celėje už įvairius nusizengimus buvo kalinami Rygos universiteto studentai. Ant sienų jie paliko piešinių ir užrašų įvairiomis kalbomis. Šiandien šie užrašai turi istorinę vertę, o tarp jų autorių būta kelių, kurie vėliau išgarsėjo

doubt. In the case of numerous layers of decorations, it should be decided which layer shall be exposed. On a larger scale, it is impossible to preserve several layers; removing layers of overpaintings is in most cases a destructive process.⁸ Reaching the earliest layer is a

⁸ In certain justified cases, the procedure of separation is performed on some decorations. These are exceptional and technically very demanding situations. Furthermore, there is a problem when a new venue for exhibition has to be found for the 'recovered' layers of decoration, for which there is no place in

valuating activity, whereas the original, primary layer does not necessarily have to be preserved in the best condition or is historically the most valuable. Which of them shall therefore be considered authentic?

- a. Paintings uncovered under later layers are encountered quite often. During architectural research, art conservators analyse the pieces of uncovered works on walls and ceilings, searching for traces of polychromies. In old interiors, previous layers are uncovered, often with precious decoration. Sometimes the traces of the preserved painting do not correspond to the architecture of the building, for example, when windows have been enlarged,

the original space. See: „Problematyka rozwarstwiania malowideł ściennych i sztalugowych w świetle dotychczasowych dokonań“, in: *Studia i Materiały Wydziału Konserwacji i Restauracji Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Krakowie*, Vol. XVI, Kraków, 2007.



3. Remnants of the painting decoration and polychrome portal framework have been preserved in a Renaissance tenement in Levoča. Currently the building houses the Slovakian National Museum, photo by Ewa Śwęcicka, 2007

Renesansiniame name Levočoje yra išlikusios tapybinio dekoravimo ir polichrominio portalo rėmo liekanos. Šiuo metu pastate yra įsikūręs Slovakijos nacionalinis muziejus

the layout of the rooms has been changed or passages have been made. When a Renaissance palace has been converted into a Baroque one by enlarging the windows and rooms, shall we regard as authentic the well-preserved Renaissance decoration because it is older, or rather the Baroque ornaments because they correspond to the character of the building? Or maybe both? Inside a museum, it is possible to expose uncovered fragments of works and traces

of several layers [ill. 3], but in a space that is used for other purposes it may look strange.

- b. Paintings discovered during archaeological excavations bear witness to the epoch of their origin. These paintings often have traces of historical layers of paint. However, sometimes, due to the conditions of natural environment or when it is impossible to expose them, they are transferred to museums [ills. 4 a and 4 b]. As an example we may quote the Faras painting exhibited in the National Museum in Warsaw. After the transfer to the museum, it was possible to separate some layers of the compositions in a laboratory.⁹

⁹ Hanna Jędrzejewska, „Konservacja malowidła z niszy w Faras“, in: *Rocznik Muzeum Narodowego w Warszawie*, Vol. XIV, 1970, pp. 431–457.



4a



4b

4. Fragments of paintings excavated in the palace of Knossos [ill. 4 a] were replaced with copies [ill. 4 b], whereas the originals were transferred to the Archaeological Museum in the nearby city of Heraklion (Greece), photo by Ewa Śwęcka, 2007

Knoso rūmuose aptiktos tapybos fragmentai [il. 4 a] buvo pakeisti kopijomis [il. 4 b], o originalai perkelti į Archeologijos muziejų netoliese esančiame Herakliono (Graikija) mieste

III. RECOVERED PAINTINGS

This term is rather broad, but principally it refers to the reconstructions and considerable re-integrations of paintings preserved in residual form. Reconstruction of works of art was perceived as falsification of history for a long time. Since the last quarter of the 20th century, the attitude to reconstruction has largely changed. There are more and more examples of reconstruction of monumental mural paintings. On this occasion it is possible to rely not only on the talents of contemporary painters, but also on modern research

methods, which allow using the existing documentation better and more precisely.¹⁰

a. Reconstructions of destroyed paintings when historical architecture has survived, but the original painting decoration is already gone. Traces of painting preserved under secondary plasterwork are scarce, but they allow ‘integrating’ the reconstructed design into the preserved original drawing made by a long-deceased artist. An example of such work may be the currently performed reconstructions in the Old Orangery of the Royal Baths Park in Warsaw [ill. 5].¹¹

¹⁰ *Dwór Artura w Gdańsku: sztuka i sztuka konserwacji, Materiały z konferencji naukowej 2002*, ed. Teresa Grzybkowska, Jolanta Talbierska, Gdańsk: Oficyna Pomorska, 2004. The volume includes a series of articles on modern reconstruction methods, inter alia, colour reproduction on the basis of analogy and special readings of black and white photographs.

¹¹ Maria Irena Kwiatkowska, „Na temat malarskiej dekoracji w Łazienkowskiej Wielkiej Oranżerii“, in: *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, 2, 2013, pp. 311–323. Drawings and documents of the decoration were already known before, but traces of paintings were only discovered in 2012.



5. The basis for the monumental reconstruction of painted decoration in the Old Orangery of the Royal Baths Park (Łazienki Królewskie) in Warsaw was scanty traces and the preserved original designs, photo by Ewa Śwęcka, 2014

Senosios oranžerijos Varšuvos Karališkųjų pirčių parke (Łazienki Królewskie) monumentalio tapybinio deko rekonstrukcija buvo pagrįsta vos žiūrėjimais pėdsakais ir išlikusiais originaliais planais

- b. Paintings utterly destroyed along with the architectural monument, e.g. as a result of cataclysms or wars. It follows from the preserved (usually photographic) documentation that there were painted decorations inside the building. The message is precise and reliable enough to allow starting research and reconstruction. There are many examples of such completed reconstruction projects.

IV. DECORATIONS INSIDE RESIDENTIAL SPACES

The history of painted ornaments in residential spaces depends on the age of the building and the way the subsequent generations handled the original interior design. It was usually enough to whitewash and repaint the interior, but sometimes the old layers were hacked off. Since the interior primarily served the functional purpose, the reasons for painting were mainly of hygienic rather than artistic nature. Mantel-pieces, torches and candles soiled the walls; therefore, it was necessary to renovate them periodically, which is still done nowadays. The approach of art conservators to old residential spaces varies depending on the epoch to which the decorations can be traced back.

- a. Decorations in Gothic and Renaissance burghers' houses are processed with great

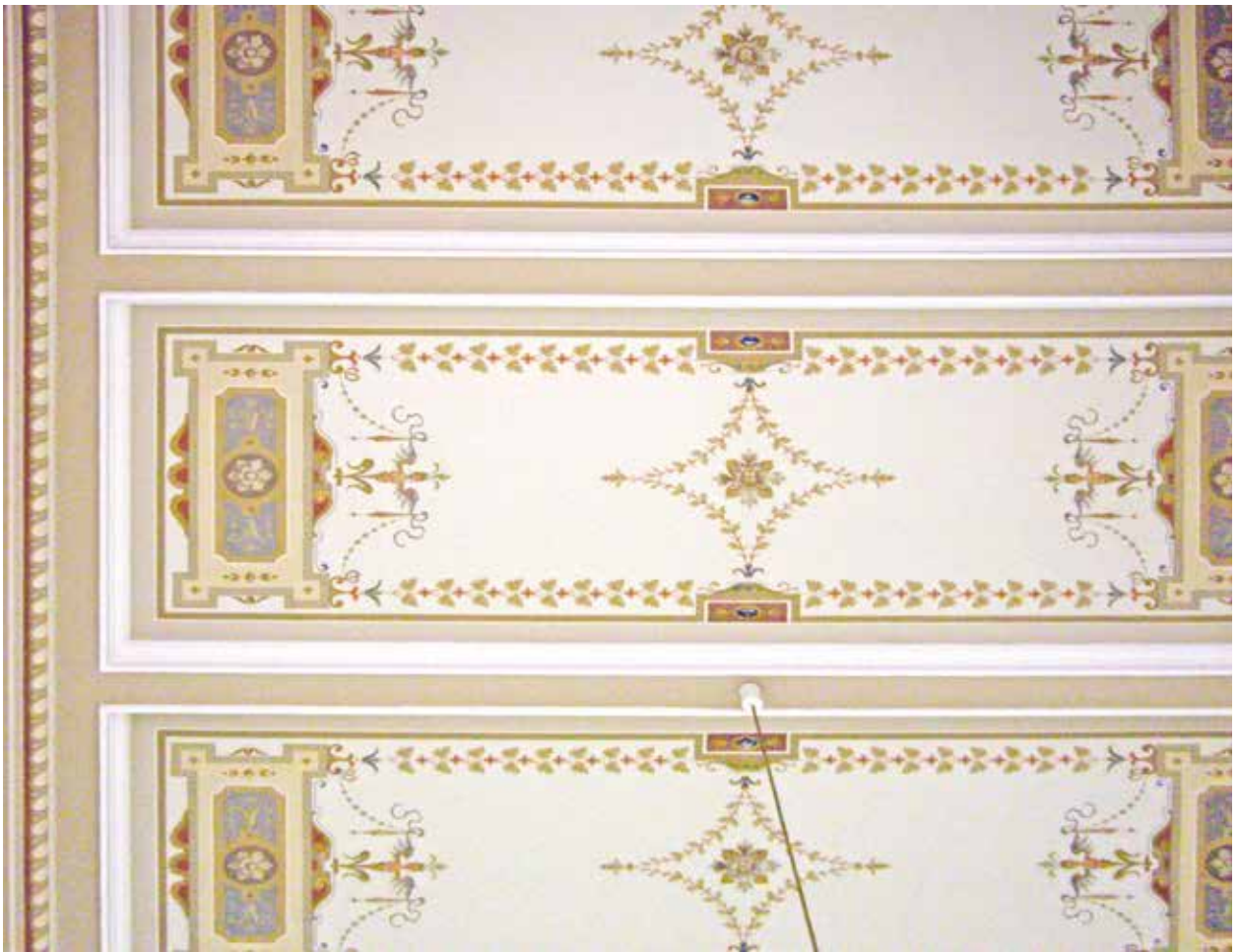


6. In the medieval keep in Siedlęcin (Poland), frescos presenting the story of King Arthur and Sir Lancelot were discovered under layers of whitewash. At the moment, the interior can be visited as a museum, photo by Ewa Śwęcka, 2009

Siedlencino (Lenkija) viduramžių pilies bokšte po tinko sluoksniais buvo aptiktos freskos, pasakojančios karaliaus Artūro ir sero Lanceloto istoriją. Šiuo metu pilies interjerą galima apžiūrėti kaip muziejų

effort and precision; they often have museum value. They are treated as relics and, as such, embellish the interiors with the charm of historical atmosphere [ill. 6]. The paintings are usually not completed, whereas restoration works are performed with full respect for the historical substance that is to be retained.

b. 19th–20th century decorations, often repetitive or even stencilled, are not counted among works of art, but tend to be perceived as craft, often of a very high level [ill. 7]. This is why they were traditionally ‘renovated’ while preserving the old forms. Old patterns are successfully reproduced nowadays as well. However, it so happens that in the modern age we encounter wall paintings of particular value. Authenticity in the antique perspective is relatively easy to define. Paintings of certain masters are worth more than others on the market. Although this ranking does not really apply to wall paintings, it is worth quoting an example when no attempt to restore a valuable piece of art was made in time. During the Congress of



7. Stencil decorations may be rather complex, both as far as the colours and the abundance of forms are concerned. Detail of ceiling decoration in one of the rooms of the Museum of Natural History in Prague, photo by Ewa Śwęcka, 2008

Trafaretinė puošyba gali būti pakankamai sudėtinga spalvų ir formų gausos požiūriu. Lubų puošybos fragmentas viename iš Prahos Gamtos istorijos muziejaus salių

Culture in Warsaw in 1955, Pablo Picasso drew a mermaid – a symbol of the Polish capital city – with a piece of charcoal on the wall of a newly built housing estate he was visiting. ‘Ordinary people’ living there were fed up with obtrusive tourists and journalists, so they covered the painting when the building was

being renovated.¹² Therefore, the unquestionable authenticity of the work was not sufficient to protect it, and today it would be difficult to establish its market value.

Authenticity is a complex notion that may not be limited solely to the genuine character of a historical document or a work by a particular old master. This is also the reliability of the message, which is a constantly repeated narration. As was already mentioned in the introduction, most of the paintings are works of art and sometimes evidence of craftsmanship. The discoloured

¹² Alina Zglinicka, „Życie z syrenką“, in: *Picasso w Polsce*, ed. Mięczyśław Bibrowski, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1979, p. 227.

residue of polychromies may have value for museums, but in a representational or residential interior it will have no decorative role. 'A work of art is expected to be beautiful, while a monument should be authentic.'¹³

Another approach is applied to historical documents, inscriptions in prisons, confinement cells, and even some historical graffiti. They deserve the respect shown for the written word. Nobody is trying to reconstruct the gaps and deficiencies in medieval codes, even when the missing parchment parts are being filled in and the text is known. However, in the case of prints, such as, for example, historical maps made by renowned engravers, gaps and missing parts are reconstructed. Pieces can be reproducible when there is no risk of distorting the message, and as such can be compared to craft paintings.

Where is the border between the documentary value of painting and its role in embellishing people's lives? The answer to this question is not obvious. In a way, reconstruction also fulfils and continues the will expressed by the painter who wanted to decorate the interior and 'rescue its beauty'.¹⁴ Therefore, we must not exclude the authenticity of a reconstruction that faithfully reflects the image, colour and size of a lost work of art. 'There is no contradiction between authenticity and reliability; whatever is not authentic, does not have to be unreliable. A message that is partially or wholly unauthentic and was not created in the period it informs us about may still carry a reliable message. [...] The truth of such information can be checked on the basis of the knowledge of scientific background of reconstruction and the knowledge about the artists

who created a particular piece and thus became our informers on the lost original piece of art.'¹⁵

Time is linear in the Western culture, which means there is no coming back to lost or destroyed works of art, or to historical monuments that were subject to improper, destructive conservation and maintenance. The medium of the material and non-material value of historical monuments is the authentic historical substance, which should be the focus of the efforts of art restorers.¹⁶ It is their knowledge, talent and skills that are decisive for the survival of the smallest bit of historical matter.¹⁷ After each, even the most perfect, conservation less and less of this authentic substance remains.

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PASAULIETINIŲ PASTATŲ SIENŲ TAPYBOS AUTENTIŠKUMAS

Ewa Święcka

SANTRAUKA

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: sienų tapyba, konservavimas, pasaulietinė architektūra, autentiškumas, rekonstrukcija.

Su autentiškumu susijusius klausimus savo tyrimuose dažniausiai nagrinėja konservavimo ir kultūros paveldo teoretikai. Tačiau tai yra ir praktinė problema. Šimtai konservatorių-restauratorių visame pasaulyje kiekvieną dieną susiduria su poreikiu ieškoti praktinių sprendimų ir nuspręsti, ar mus dominanti sienų tapyba turėtų būti graži, ar artima originalui. Ar turėtume stengtis išgelbėti istorijos ir bėgančio laiko pėdsakus, dažnai išlikusius neįskaitomose fragmentuose, ar bandyti atkurti ir rekonstruoti prarastą meno kūrinio grožį? Istorinių paminklų autentiškumas yra sudėtinga sąvoka, kuri apima ir materialią, ir nematerialią vertę.

Pasaulietiniai pastatai visų pirma yra intensyviai naudojami gyvenamieji namai: gyvenamieji būstai, rūmai, dvarai ir pilys. Tačiau reikia paminėti ir visuomeninius pastatus: universitetus, rotušes, teismus, mokyklas ir bankus. Buvo puošiami tiek fasadai, tiek interjerai. Dėl intensyvaus naudojimo šie pastatai dėvėjosi. Išlikusiuosius galima suskirstyti į keturias grupes: pastatai, kuriais nepaliauta grožėtis nuo pat jų sukūrimo iki šių laikų; tie, kurių vaizdas slypi po vėlesniais sluoksniais; tie, kurie buvo nuolatos naudojami, o jų gyvenamosios erdvės „renovuojamos“; bei įvairiais būdais „atkurti“ pastatai.

Autentiškumas yra sudėtinga sąvoka, kuri nebūtinai yra susijusi vien tik su autentišku istorinio dokumento ar senojo meistro kūrinio pobūdžiu. Ši sąvoka taip pat yra susijusi su žinios, perteikiamos kaip nuolatos kartojamas naratyvas, patikimumu. Išblukusios sienų tapybos liekanos gali būti vertingos muziejams, tačiau reprezentaciniame ar rezidenciniame interjere jos neatlieka dekoratyvaus

vaidmens. Meno kūrinų rekonstrukcija ilgą laiką buvo laikoma istorijos falsifikavimu. Nuo paskutinio XX a. ketvirčio požiūris į ją smarkiai pasikeitė. Atsiranda vis daugiau monumentalios sienų tapybos rekonstrukcijos pavyzdžių. Tokiais atvejais yra pasikliaunama ne tik šiuolaikinių dailininkų talentu, bet ir pažangiais tyrimo metodais, kurie leidžia geriau ir tiksliau remtis esama dokumentacija.

Vakarų kultūroje laikas yra linijinis, o tai reiškia, kad prarastų arba sunaikintų meno kūrinų ar istorinių meno paminklų, kurie buvo netinkamai arba destruktiviai konservuoti ir saugomi, sugrąžinti neįmanoma. Materialią ir nematerialią istorinių paminklų vertę perteikia autentiška istorinė substancija, į kurią turėtų būti nukreiptos meno restauratorių pastangos. Jų žinios, gebėjimai ir įgūdžiai turi lemiamą reikšmę net menkiausios istorinės materijos dalelytės išsaugojimui. Po kiekvieno, net ir tobuliausio, konservavimo šios autentiškos substancijos lieka vis mažiau.