Uses of the Past

Maria Fabrizius Hansen

The Elocution of Appropriation: Prolegomena to an Understanding of Spolia in Early Christian Rome


For historians of art and architecture, the term spolia indicates an older work of art that has been incorporated into a newer one. The definition of what constitutes a work of art can vary. Free-standing sculpture moved from one venue to another, such as the “Horses of San Marco” in Venice, are one example. The horses began their life somewhere in the Roman world in the late second or third century, moved on to Constantinople in the fourth century, and were taken to Venice in the thirteenth. In the nineteenth century, they were taken to Paris for a short tour atop the Arc du Triomphe du Carrousel before being brought back “home” to San Marco.

The well-traveled statues represent one definition of the term spolia. More sedentary are the architectural elements of buildings that begin their life in one period and go on to an afterlife in another. Here spolia can be everything from utilitarian brick and ashlars to richly carved columns, capitals, and moldings, as well as sculptured panels. From the modern perspective, this type of reuse, which often relies on the dismantling of extant monuments for the creation of new ones, represents a kind of destructive recycling. The fourth-century Arch of Constantine is perhaps the best-known example of this phenomenon. Virtually all of the architectural elements—masonry blocks and columns alike—and most of the sculpture derive from earlier Roman monuments.

As the San Marco horses make clear, the phenomenon of reuse expressed in the term spolia is not limited to a single period. It is, however, in the late third and early fourth centuries, the age of the Arch of Constantine, that the habit of recycling architectural members from Roman buildings of the early imperial age into new construction projects became a hallmark of design and construction across the territories of the Roman world. Within that world, no city was more richly endowed with such architecture than Rome itself. Apart from a handful of monuments from the late imperial period, such as the Arcus Novus of Diocletian, which no longer survives, or the Temple of Romulus, which does, the best evidence for this building practice is found in the city’s ecclesiastical architecture. From the great fourth-century foundations of Constantine, such as the Lateran basilica and St. Peter’s, through the twelfth century, Roman church architecture consistently reused elements of classical architecture to shape and highlight its congregational and liturgical space. This reuse brought with it a breakdown in the classical system of the orders in favor of an architecture that has seemed by comparison overly varied and almost piecemeal in conception.

The use of the word spolia to define this habit of reuse occurs first in the sixteenth century. Giorgio Vasari seems to have been the first to employ the term to discuss a process that he viewed with contempt and adduced as evidence for a decline in artistic standards that in turn shored up his own definition of Renaissance originality. Until recently Vasari’s opinion has held sway, with reuse being explained as a function of artistic and economic decline. Over the last twenty years, however, a greater appreciation of late antiquity in general and of its aesthetic values and artistic processes in particular has transformed the sense of what reuse means. Thus, while it is clear that economic factors often played a part in the growth of the phenomenon, recent scholarship also allows it to be understood less as a function of artistic and economic decline and more as an expressive choice.¹

It is in the context of this discussion that Maria Fabrizius Hansen’s Elocution of Appropriation appears. Taking the practice of reuse in medieval Roman architecture as her subject, Fabrizius Hansen both observes and attempts to explain the impulses behind it. Her overall aim is to right what she sees as a gross historiographical wrong, the pejorative attitude toward the tradition that has prevailed in the scholarly literature from Vasari’s time until very recently. Her argument is not with those scholars who seek to reassess the phenomenon of spolia, but rather with thinkers of an earlier generation, such as Bernard Berenson (The Arch of Constantine, or The Decline of Form [New York, 1954]), who had nothing good to say about the matter and whose opinions can still be found to color the basic approach to late antique and medieval building in such handbooks as Diana Kleiner’s Roman Sculpture (New Haven, 1992). Fabrizius Hansen understands this persistent judgment to be rooted in a distinct bias toward the classical, which has led to the characterization of the use of spolia as the shameful by-product of
economic necessity or failed artistic imagination. She wishes to replace this view with a new understanding based on the premise that the reuse of materials that emerges in the early Christian period is part and parcel of a larger aesthetic shift visible not only in architecture but also in the visual arts and literature.

To this end the discussion is divided into four parts. Part one lays the groundwork by observing the phenomenon of reuse and examining historical attitudes toward it. In addition it provides a narrative description of Roman buildings in which the practice is evident. These buildings include pagan monuments of the late third and early fourth centuries such as the Temple of Romulus in the Roman Forum and Roman churches of the fourth through the twelfth centuries. Here Fabricius Hansen deals with not only such extant buildings as the twelfth-century Sta. Maria in Trastevere, whose nave arcade incorporates materials from the Baths of Caracalla, but also early Constantinian projects including Saint Peter's and the Lateran, churches that were rebuilt in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but whose materials were preserved archaeologically and in the graphic record, as well as through renewed use in the modern reconstructions. Thus, in the new basilica of St. Peter, the great spiral columns of second-century manufacture that once adorned the fourth-century chancel screen became framing elements in the upper niches of the piers supporting Michelangelo's dome, while the Borromini design for the Lateran similarly used the verde antico columns from the side aisles of the original church in the nave piers.

Parts two, three, and four tackle the business of interpretation. Central to this discussion is the idea of translatio, translation. In these discussions, spolia are understood as translations in both the physical and the metaphorical sense. As objects removed from one setting and placed in another, spolia embody the physical concept of translation, or transference from one place to another, and that physical concept in turn connects to a metaphorical interpretation of spoils as objects that direct viewers to higher modes of thinking.

In part two, the idea of translatio is explored with respect to materials. Fabricius Hansen examines the disposition of spolia in church buildings, noting such practices as the hierarchical selection and distribution of capitals, columns, and entablatures and the pairing of these elements for purposes of direction and emphasis. She then turns to a consideration of building types, particularly the basilica and its translation from a pagan, civic structure into a Christian one, paying attention to the association of early churches with the physical remains of the sanctified dead. She also looks long and hard at building materials, particularly in regard to the use of luxury materials. Here the discussion is far-ranging, as it includes not only the Roman architecture that is her subject, but also materials from northern Europe, specifically the gem-encrusted ars sacra of book covers, liturgical instruments, and reliquaries that are such a characteristic part of the early medieval artistic repertoire. By examining works that incorporate ancient gems and cameos, such as the eighth-century Desiderius Cross, Fabricius Hansen aims to establish that the aesthetic that informs the medieval Roman architecture under consideration is part of a larger trend, one she describes as an "aesthetics of appropriation" characterized by the varied and eclectic manipulation of form.

Part three addresses the issue of translatio with respect to meaning. The author suggests that the seeming breakdown of coherence and order that characterizes the reuse of materials is analogous to the rejection of pagan learning by the early Christian. She goes on to argue that the medieval architecture created through reuse should be understood as a metaphorical architecture rich with hidden meanings expressed through the symbolic nature of architectural form. Thus, building parts such as columns and capitals may be understood as metaphors for the apostles, who are themselves described as pillars of the church in biblical and exegetical texts.

Finally, part four deals with the idea of time and the nature of translatio that occurs when an object created for one historical context is placed into another. Fabricius Hansen explores the meanings and associations created by the juxtaposing of the new with the old and the concomitant evocation of the past. The section closes with a return to the question of modern historiography and its discontents.

Common to each of these sections is the author's desire to observe the utilization of spolia in a larger cultural context. As use of the term translatio suggests, she finds this context in the literary and rhetorical practices of the early Christian period. Her aim is to identify an aesthetic common to literary and visual structures. This aesthetic is characterized as one of heterogeneity, in which the emphasis on individual pieces and fragmentation within the whole is given pride of place over the uniformity and coherence prized in classical aesthetic systems.

Though occasionally digressive and repetitive, the book offers a well-demonstrated and largely convincing apology for an aesthetic of appropriation that not only considers architectural reuse on its own terms but also interprets it in the larger context of the early Christian era. As such, it adds to a growing body of literature on the subject of spolia and dovetails nicely with arguments advanced by authors in cognate disciplines.  

A lack of differentiation is more problematic. All buildings from all periods are seen as essentially the same, without recognition of the various economic and political situations that define periods of Roman history. Thus, the monumental imperial projects of the fourth century in which an aesthetic of reuse is first defined are treated in the same manner as the smaller, ruder buildings of the ninth or tenth centuries, when the phenomenon had been long established. Though the images represent buildings that are often unfamiliar, they are frus-
tratingly generic. While much of the discussion is given over to the issue of pairings and patterns in the display of spolia, virtually none of the illustrations provides the visual evidence to shore up this point.

These flaws should probably be understood as the fruit of missionary zeal. In an effort to right a historically wrong, Fabricius Hansen, though unwilling to cut back or see shades of gray, has produced a book that is learned, thoughtful, and provocative. It is what one wants a work of scholarship to be.

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Notes
2. See n. 1 for examples pertinent to the visual phenomenon of reuse. On the question of sympathy with cognate disciplines, see esp. Michael Roberts, The Joved Style Poetry and Poetics in Late Antiquity (Ithaca and London, 1989).

Georgia Clarke
Roman House—Renaissance Palaces: Inventing Antiquity in Fifteenth Century Italy

Georgia Clarke’s book deals with one of the major themes that has occupied architectural history in the last two generations: the influence of ideas and concepts about ancient houses on palace architecture in Italy from around 1440 to around 1500. Her definition of palace is a building of a certain status and standing, not necessarily related to the rich and noble alone, but mainly a type of building that exhibits elements of “conscious design.” This characterization takes into account the social structure of Renaissance Italy, where courts and republics, princes and bourgeois competed in transforming the antique into a modern and suitable concept of self-representation and adequate habitat, and it emphasizes (though perhaps insufficiently) visual appearance.

There has been a great deal of detailed research in this area during the last five decades, concentrating on single buildings, prominent architects or particular clients, and specific cities or regions. Clarke’s careful bibliography is a reliable vadecemucum to this field. Her book also provides what had been missing: a panoramic view that includes north and south, centers and peripheries. She explores many of the most important examples: the Roman Casa dei Crescenzi (an early, still medieval but advanced example of the integration of antique remains); the Palazzo Ducale in Urbino; the Neapolitan palaces of Diomede Carafa and Angelo Cuomo; the Palazzi Rucellai and Gondi in Florence; Palazzo Vitelleschi in Tarquinia; and Palazzo Orsini in Nola. She divides her highly readable and erudite text into five chapters, dealing with questions of antiquity and identity, variety, magnificence, and imitation; and with aspects of texts and memory, discovery and creation. All these terms are current and somewhat trendy. Recently, research has explored widely the function of the appeal to antiquity and, in the happier cases, succeeded in integrating this particular branch of art-historical literature into the more general discourse on memory, aesthetics, and iconic criticism.

Even so, Clarke’s “reading” of architecture, with a focus mainly on Vitruvius, falls back into a traditional, particularistic attitude. There is no objection to her philological insistence on the importance of the antique source, for example regarding courtyards. Her list of manuscripts and printed copies of Vitruvius in the appendix is valuable (though selective), as architectural history has concentrated too exclusively on the physical remains of antiquity and neglected the written tradition. And there is no doubt that the reading and exegesis of Vitruvius is at least as elucidating as the drawings and measurements of antique buildings or fragments (documented in far too many “databases” in recent years, with uncertain effectiveness). Clarke’s analysis of Francesco di Giorgio’s and Giuliano da Sangallo’s drawings of Roman palaces shows instead the fruitfulness of a close reading that does not depend on a huge technical apparatus. But this book perpetuates a somewhat homespun antiquarian research. It is a critical compilation of the existing literature—though I wish to emphasize that, unlike much Anglo-Saxon academic writing, Clarke’s takes into account the multilingual production of the scholarly community.

The author’s chapter on façades and ancient and early modern rustication makes it evident that the concentration on classical antiquarian sources—writing in particular—does not really enable her fully to describe, capture, and interpret the great impact of the discovery and transformation of the antique on Renaissance Europe. Although in her discussion on the façade of the Palazzo Medici in Florence Clarke acknowledges the important role played by the drafted masonry of the castle of Frederick II in Prato and of the Forum of Augustus in Rome (thought by many in the quattro-