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Cultural redemption: an exploration of the psychological dimensions of visual art restoration within post-traumatic culture

Howse, Jeannine

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Abstract

In this research report I explore the role of visual art restoration as a form of cultural redemption. My temporal focus is the post-traumatic moment in contemporary culture, and the process I am trying to make visible through the idea of restoration is the containment of loss. This process is redemptive in the sense that it saves the artwork from defect or loss through the expenditure of effort.

Speaking out of a post-colonial context, I focus primarily on the psychological impulse in Western restoration practice. While the impulse to conserve objects of cultural value is not limited to Western society, Western practice is my central concern. In my analysis therefore, I make use of different Western discursive histories and philosophies to examine this process and its cultural engagement. These include complex issues around value, trauma, and the therapeutic potential of art. My argument is centred around the psychological aspects of the traumatic crisis of loss. I examine how trauma impacts on the individual to throw some light on the manifestation of this crisis on a social level within the collective. This application of psychotherapy relates to the notions of collective guilt and the working through of loss as presented by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich in *The Inability to Mourn* (1967/1975), where they explore how the psychological functions in similar ways on both levels.

My analysis is motivated by personal interest in art restoration and my own artistic practice. Through my research it became evident to me that very little has been written about restoration beyond its technical and historical range. It is important to note that a limited scope of relevant literature is available locally. Much more regarding the field of restoration is available overseas, as there has been increased interest in this field and the far-reaching after effects of restoration in recent times. Books, journals, and papers addressing the technical aspects of restoration abound. Yet while the technical is imperative for the continued development of restoration practice, it is equally necessary to explore the role this process has in wider psychological and cultural terms. In this research report I hope to present a start to understanding the effect of restoration within the wider cultural moment.