Ernst van de Wetering, the Dutch art historian, recently remarked, perhaps only partly in jest, that in today’s world a few thousand people earn their living touching works of art while earnestly preventing untold thousands of others from doing just that. This tiny minority of which van de Wetering speaks is busy, in museums and ateliers all over the world, in what Bernard Berenson with a tinge of contempt called “the kitchen of art.” He meant by this to describe that murky backstage frequented by scholars, technicians, and craftsmen where the pulleys, gears, curtains, and props of the art world are manipulated. “BB,” for one, was profoundly suspicious. Regarded more benevolently, this “off limits” terrain is generally known as the “restoration studio” or, alternatively, as the “conservation laboratory.” These two terms, though usually describing settings that are quite similar, refer, in fact, to very different traditions. A brief backward glance will illustrate this.

There is ample evidence that the specificity and singularity of certain man-made objects bearing artistic meaning have been recognized as being worthy of conservation since remotest antiquity. The need to preserve and maintain the special characteristics as they are represented in a “work of art” is already clearly evident in an account of the elder Pliny. He recounts how a painting by Aristeides of Thebes, a contemporary of Apelles, representing “A Tragic Actor and a Boy,” “was ruined through the ignorance of the painter to whom Marcus Junius as praetor [ca. 25 B.C.] entrusted it to be cleaned before the games of Apollo.”

The desire to intervene, when necessary, to preserve artistic patrimony runs uninterruptedly through mediaeval times, becomes ever more compelling during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, and finally, and not surprisingly, emerges full-blown in the Age of Enlightenment. Until the mid-eighteenth century one finds that it was practicing creative artists who, almost invariably, were charged with intervening upon the handiwork of their predecessors and fellow-artists: Duccio revising Guido da Siena (in the Palazzo Pubblico Madonna), Cellini completing a fragment from the antique (the Ganymede), Vasari reinventing the Palazzo Vecchio (the “Sala dei Cinquecento”); the list is endless . . . and the results occasionally disastrous. What is surprising, however, when compared to the often disturbing visual testimony, is that when a written record
survives, whether in correspondence, contracts, memoirs, or the like, the level of artistic (as opposed to art-historical) awareness and perception is of a very high order indeed. It is a discourse occurring between artist and artist or between artist and patron, each perfectly cognizant of the responsibilities and implications of their undertaking. These concerns were shared not only within the confines of the princely or ecclesiastical courts of Europe but also in the most serene Venetian Republic. Here, the resourceful and energetic Pietro Edwards, an Italian of English descent, was, by 1778, in charge of the Republic’s “public paintings,” drawing up inventories, ordering surveys, and supervising restoration campaigns. He is, in every way, a new figure in the scheme of things: neither artist nor patron but a knowledgeable connoisseur in public service—the prototype of the modern curator. France in this same period saw the emergence of yet another novelty, the “professional” restorer. It was, in fact, during the waning decades of the ancien régime that several enterprising and hugely egocentric craftsmen developed transfer and lining techniques that were to put some of the Crown’s greatest masterpieces at unconscionable risk. Not painters by training, the Hacquins, père et fils, the Picaults, père et fils, the widow Godefroid, to mention the most prominent, plied their trade well into the museum age, each promoting his or her own special and very secret techniques. This coincided roughly with the fall of the monarchy and the establishment of the Musée National (later Musée Napoléon, and later still, Musée du Louvre). It was the first public gallery to open its doors, and although artists of the stature of Jacques Louis David were still very much involved in the new enterprise, the museum consecrated the roles of restorer, curator, and administrator. The “kitchen of art” is born.

It was only in 1888 that a museum (Berlin) established the first in-house studio.

Unlike other institutions—hospitals, universities, libraries—whose origins can boast roots dating back centuries, the museum is a “new” invention. Its growth and development, through the course of the nineteenth century, was conditioned by a mixture of local traditions, expediency, and idealism. Restoration remained a craft practiced by independent, secretive private entrepreneurs who were able to maintain a delicate balance between their private and public clientele. It was only in 1888 that a museum (Berlin) established the first in-house studio. Art history, meanwhile, was no less a newcomer to the academic landscape. Indeed, until the early years of the last century all the activities connected to the care, study, and administration of art objects were dispatched in a somewhat ad-hoc manner by cultured, well-intentioned, and generally quite talented amateurs posing as professionals—updated versions of Pietro Edwards. Though not necessarily trained in the art academies, they continued to maintain close ties with artists and the creative environment. The world of collecting and dealing was also very much part of this milieu, for it was during the nineteenth century that the private demand for art and its consumption assumed gigantic proportions as the princely collections began to be dispersed.
At this juncture we again meet Mr. Berenson, one of the first, and surely one of the most gifted, practitioners of the new art historical discipline. Pursuing his inquiries as much on research as on perception, his method can be described in one word: connoisseurship. As he himself admirably put it: “connoisseurship . . . proceeds, as scientific research always does, by the isolation of characteristics of the known and their confrontation with the unknown.”

The currency of “history” soon overshadowed the values of “art.”

Not long after this was written in 1902, Alois Riegel theorized about the nature of artistic “monuments” (including for the first time all manner of art works in this category). Riegel deals with artistic value, defining it in its various manifestations. Yet he adds to his analysis a very important, perhaps the most important ingredient: historical value. This concept, having almost nothing to do with connoisseurship, is a clear signal that the intellectual paths to be traveled by Messrs. Berenson and Riegel and their followers would progressively diverge. It can reasonably be argued that the advances of art history through the last century—and they have been prodigious—were conditioned by the dynamic juxtaposition of these contrasting poles, the one weighted by its concern over stylistic, formal, and aesthetic issues, and the other centered on questions of contextual, historical interpretation. Not, of course, in the sense of being contradictory or mutually exclusive, but rather as two sides of the same coin. Inexorably, however, the currency of “history” soon overshadowed the values of “art.” This was, after all, the dawn of the new century and the practitioners of the new art historical discipline were still in search of legitimacy. What Mr. Berenson stood for was an interpretative pursuit based primarily on intuition, talent, perception, and honed on relentless visual inquiry . . . what has become known as “eye.” Such an approach could not but be profoundly suspect, particularly to that growing number of “historicists” who were at last earning a respectable place in the academic sun.

A parallel evolution was occurring in the practice of restoration: the “studio” was being transformed into the “laboratory.” Those generations of resourceful craftsmen who, a century earlier, had carefully wrested their practice from the hands of creative artists found themselves, by the end of the nineteenth century, on the threshold of becoming “conservators,” a distinctly desirable and upwardly mobile progression. But the qualifications were now becoming far more complex and demanding: no longer was proficiency at the easel and at the work-table sufficient. The microscope, the X-ray radiograph, the spectrometer, and a host of other tools and techniques were eagerly embraced by the descendants of the Picaults and Hacquins. No longer were the esoteric secrets of the craft to be passed down from master to pupil; specialized, public institutes would freely provide the training and openly develop the parameters. The distance separating the “art” of restoration and the “science” of conservation was growing ever greater. In a century enchanted by the siren song of science and technology, restorers rushed headlong in this direction.
By the mid-1950s paintings and all manner of other works of art were being “treated” by earnest, highly trained conservation technicians clad in white smocks within the confines of carefully scrubbed, white-tiled labs where nary a sliver of daylight, nor for that matter a bit of common sense or aesthetic judgment, was allowed to penetrate. No artifact, public or private, seemed immune, and the dismal results all too often became front-page news: the brutal “cleanings” at London’s National Gallery, the savage “deconstruction” of the Jarves early Italian paintings at Yale, the transformation of some celebrated fresco cycles (Piero at Arezzo and Giotto at Santa Croce) into archaeological digs... a long litany of undertakings often performed with the application of “modern” but wholly unsuitable materials such as plastics, fiberglass, aluminum, synthetic resins, and waxes of all stripes.

While no one today would question the fact that technology and the physical sciences must be applied to the understanding of works of art as material objects, and that this understanding will contribute to their future preservation, it is no less evident that the process is doomed to failure if the artistic identity of these objects is ignored. And indeed it was, almost programmatically.

The problem was compounded by the fact that, by mid-century, art-historical criticism was ill equipped to come to the rescue. That field had, itself, veered dramatically towards a diligent, occasionally Marxist, historicism with ever-narrowing specialist pursuits. The coin of art history was being significantly debased by the pursuit of aberrant intellectual dead-ends. Fortunately, there were brilliant exceptions: figures such as John Pope-Hennessy, Federico Zeri, and Pierre Rosenberg, to mention only three of the most influential. They and their successors were able to persevere in their staunch pursuit of the “old-fashioned” approach—the intuitive, insightful, yet rigorously philological process of reading the artistic texts placed before them. Not surprisingly, Pope-Hennessy titled the account of his life in art *Learning to Look*.

Unlike the realm of scholarship where a tradition can survive in written form, for a craft it must be handed down, master-to-pupil, within the context of a shop practice. The situation in the restoration studio, therefore, was particularly serious. In this most tactile and visual of tasks, manual skills and perceptive talents were not only discounted but even discouraged. There was every reason to fear that, within perhaps a generation, the evolution from craft to technology would become irreversible.

They and their successors were
If there was a turning point in this progress it may well have occurred in 1963, when the Italian scholar and critic Cesare Brandi published *Teoria del Restauro*. It is a compendium of lectures, papers, and studies that Brandi had developed over many years, particularly as head of Rome’s Istituto Centrale del Restauro. These texts, imbued with the historical idealism of Benedetto Croce, became immensely influential and can be said to have given the practice of restoration the ideological compass and programmatic equilibrium it had always lacked. The primacy of the artistic component within the object’s material manifestation was definitively affirmed, and, although variously implemented in different working environments, Brandi’s conceptual ground rules are now universally recognized and respected. In America, where the pendulum had swung furthest in the direction of reductive applied technology, the terrain was particularly arduous. Operators, much respected in their time, such as Murray Pease (at the Metropolitan Museum in the 1940s) and Sheldon Keck (at the Brooklyn Museum and later at Cooperstown in the 1950s) had rendered the field impervious to the thoughtful and measured approach advocated by Brandi and other Europeans. To this day, the pendulum has not entirely reversed its motion. It was surely hastened in its swing, however, by the arrival to these shores of Andrea Rothe who, about twenty-five years ago, took the helm of the paintings conservation department at the nascent J. Paul Getty Museum, then in Malibu. Rothe had trained in Florence and fully partook of that city’s humanistic and artisan traditions. He was followed at the Metropolitan Museum, in a similar position, by the late John Brialey who had previously presided over a thriving private practice in London. Exploiting their very visible pulpits, Rothe and Brialey were not just eloquent advocates, they also presided over the intellectual formation and training of scores of younger talents. The changes—surely for the better—that they have set in motion have been profound.

The restoration profession marked a further important milestone in 1980, and by a remarkable historical coincidence it was again in Rome. That year the Vatican authorities began what was surely to be the most significant conservation project of the century: the Sistine Chapel. In a novel arrangement, the immense costs were to be borne by a Japanese media company in exchange for the visual rights for a number of years. Cesare Brandi’s significant legacy was acknowledged by the fact that Gianluigi Colalucci, a pupil of Brandi’s and a graduate of the Istituto Centrale del Restauro, was named the chief restorer. Fabrizio Mancinelli, a brilliant young scholar attached to the Vatican Museums, was charged with overseeing the project and coordinating its art-historical research. This collaboration between the skilled “hand” of the restorer and the curatorial “eye” guiding its progress, had long been advocated by Brandi and others, but in the Sistine project it was implemented as never before. The Chapel was to become, on a huge scale, the model of how the best resources of traditional manual crafts, up-to-date scientific and technological tools, and scrupulous scholarly investigation can be combined—a clear lesson that such a combination can and should be equally effective in much smaller and less significant projects. In reconciling the often conflicting priorities of different disciplines, the Vatican undertaking will remain a paragon able to persevere in their staunch pursuit of the “old-fashioned” approach.
of achievement in the field of restoration. However, despite the spectacular results obtained in the Sistine project, paradoxically it became the object of fierce world-wide criticism. The fame of the monument itself may have partly contributed to this attention, but certainly the premature publication of the dramatic cleaning “tests” was particularly ill conceived.

Naturally, it was in the interest of the Japanese sponsors to begin recouping their investment as quickly as possible. The problem, of which all the responsible authorities should have been well aware, is that photographic emulsions, no matter how sophisticated, can never render faithfully the correct tonal rapport between two adjacent areas of differing brightness: the “clean” will inevitably appear faded and thin, the “dirty” as saturated and dark. Film simply does not possess the exposure latitude to compensate for such differences. The hugely contrasted images that appeared in every magazine shocked even the more informed observers . . . yet another cleaning controversy was upon us! In reality, and justifiably, never had greater care and sensitivity been lavished on painted images. No one who was accorded the privilege of visiting the workplace atop the scaffolding and of examining Michelangelo’s miraculous surfaces with the far more sensitive lens of the human eye could doubt that what had survived the centuries had been preserved intact. Fortunately, the Vatican’s own counter-offensive on behalf of the project and the more measured and responsible assessment by the specialist community has, in time, blunted much of the ill-advised earlier criticism.

Can we, then, feel confident that order and sanity have at last returned to the kitchen of art? Are the artistic priorities that served as guideposts to generations of scholars and restorers still considered valid for the understanding and conservation of our cultural heritage? The answer is . . . yes and no. Yes to the extent that we are still from time to time treated to events such as the recent Gentileschi or the present El Greco exhibitions at the Metropolitan. These remarkable undertakings, combining the talents of curators and restorers, exemplify the levels of quality that can be achieved—in scholarship, research connoisseurship, and presentation, when the noblest traditions of their individual pursuits are respected with intelligence, perhaps even reverence. And no when one realizes that the dark clouds of academic historicism and hyperspecialization continue to blur the horizon. The socioeconomic concerns of “post-modern” criticism have contributed to further debase the currency of art history. In this intellectual climate, the subject of the discourse—the artistic artifact itself—has been progressively and almost totally marginalized. Having been subverted and deprived of its intrinsic values, the work of art has, in effect, been rendered superfluous. Considered in this light, it is not surprising that a distinguished scholarly periodical was recently the host to articles such as: “Blemished Physiologies: Delacroix, Paganini, and the Cholera Epidemic of 1832” and “Two Waldorf-Astorias: Spatial Economics as Totem and Fetish.” In the field of conservation, a respected journal offered: “Contribution of dust at floor level to particle deposit within the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts,” wherein the authors dramatically concluded that the “study suggests visitors’ shoes are an important contributor to dust loading on the floors in museums.” erved with such unappetizing dishes of nouvelle art inquiry, the only solution for the civilized patron will be firmly but politely to . . . send them back to the kitchen.
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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 22 Number 4, on page 23

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