

## 20 Respect, Responsibility, and Ruins

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In this paper, we focus on ruins of a particular kind: world heritage ruins. Our primary example is the Temple of Bel at Palmyra in Syria, which became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1980 and suffered a near devastating attack in 2015. In considering our aesthetic relation to objects of this kind, two questions arise. The first is, broadly speaking, a moral question. It concerns how we ought to conceive of and generally relate to an object of such significant cultural and historical value. The second question concerns how our aesthetic appreciation of world heritage ruins should be framed. Although our primary focus in this paper is the second question, there is, as we will show, an important link between our two concerns. It is our claim that the second question can only be addressed in a satisfactory manner if we have a clearer idea of how to respond to the first concern. In short, respect, and in particular, respectful comprehension of the object or site, has an important role to play in informing our aesthetic appreciation of world heritage ruins.

First we introduce issues relating to how we should conceive of the aesthetic appreciation of ruins through a contrast with paradigmatic Western art practices. We then explore how an object's age and participation in various historical narratives can affect the respect it is due. This helps us introduce a notion of what it is to comprehend objects of world heritage respectfully. We move on to discuss the specific case of the Temple of Bel. Here, our focus is on the particular ways in which this ruin commands our respect and how this relates to the framing at work in our aesthetic appreciation. We highlight the central role which the ruin's place in various narratives should play in our aesthetic appreciation of world heritage ruins. Finally, we close our discussion by setting out a notion of appreciative responsibility which relates to world heritage ruins and what it means to defend a broadly cognitivist account of our aesthetic appreciation of them. We conclude our discussion by raising some questions about how the points raised may influence how we conceive of the aesthetic experience of ruins more generally.

### Aesthetic Appreciation and Ruins

Generally speaking, appreciating and evaluating Western art is a multifaceted practice. Central to most such practices are, for example, identifying the work relative to a genre and category,<sup>1</sup> attending to its formal features, and situating the work in connection with the relevant artistic intentions.<sup>2</sup> Underlying these conventions of evaluation and interpretation, we tend to find a standard model of appreciation pertaining to attending accurately to the object *qua* that particular artwork. To that extent at least, our appreciative practices can be seen to emanate from the assumption that to engage with an artwork is, fundamentally, to relate to it as that particular work of art. Further, aesthetic attention is traditionally thought to be suitably directed toward the object or objects presented as a work of art by an individual or an institution; what is sometimes referred to as the “artistic vehicle.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, our attention will, typically, be directed toward the material object as constituted when the artist’s intentional activity came to an end and the work could (arguably) be said to be completed.<sup>4</sup> Any change in the artwork’s constitution following this point (excepting those planned by the artist) such as damage or mutilation, tends to be viewed as a shortcoming and a potential barrier to the appropriate aesthetic appreciation of the work itself.

It is interesting to note that when we appreciate a ruin aesthetically, several of these norms and practices do not apply in any straightforward sense. For one thing, aesthetically attending to a ruin involves, precisely, attending to the changes which time and circumstance have wrought on an object’s physical constitution. In this context, such changes are not a hindrance to our appreciation of the object *qua* ruin, but are instead part of what is being appreciated. While the maker’s intentions behind what is now the ruin may still play some role in framing appropriate aesthetic responses, their importance will often be secondary when compared with the life which the object has led (or indeed suffered) following its original creation. Attending to the physical constitution of the object will still typically be an important aspect of our aesthetic experience, though other features of the object, for example, its history or age, seem to have an equal claim to being the primary focus of perceptual attention and consideration. Further, our aesthetic appreciation of ruins is not always understood as being governed by standard models of appreciation pressing the achievement of an accurate understanding of the object *qua* ruin. We will, however, question the extent to which any standard model of this type is in fact absent from our aesthetic appreciation of ruins.

In her account of the aesthetic experience of ruins, Carolyn Korsmeyer notes that a ruin is “by its very nature a historical object” and characterizes the connection between ruins and the passing of time in terms of the ruin “summon[ing] the past into awareness.”<sup>5</sup> Korsmeyer discusses

two kinds of value that a ruin may have in this way. The “historical value” of a ruin derives from what it “disclose[s] about life and culture from bygone times,” whereas “age value” is a result of the object bearing “the marks of wear, damage, and deterioration.”<sup>6</sup> When addressing the question of what the “proper aesthetic object of a ruin” is, Korsmeyer answers that it is age value, not historical value, which is central.<sup>7</sup> In one sense, this move is consonant with paradigmatic Western art practices as it focuses attention directly onto the object. The ravages of time, or of deliberate destructive action, which the ruin is witness to are, quite literally, marked on the material object and Korsmeyer makes a plausible case for the key role which close attention, especially through touch, can play in acquainting us with the ruin and in our appreciation of it.

That said, Korsmeyer’s neo-Romantic appreciative model also de-emphasizes the material object in the process of prescribing attention to age value. This is because the most important role which the object plays on her view is to prompt our confrontation with the passage of time. Through noticing the ravages of time on the material object we think—not primarily of the object in front of us and its past—but of “the march of history and the hugeness of time in its devouring and ruthless advance.”<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Korsmeyer uses the model of the sublime to explain the role of the ruin here. In short, the ruin prompts an occasion to reflect, not on the powers of the mind, as Kant would have it, but instead, on the immensity of time.<sup>9</sup> Thus, “the direction of attention” in the experience remains “on the universe” rather than on reason “realizing its own freedom from the laws of nature and its ability to contemplate what it cannot fully grasp.”<sup>10</sup> The immensity of time on a “human rather than a cosmic scale” is at issue. In this respect, Korsmeyer can be seen to align her theory with David Hume’s, who holds that even though historical objects deserve “esteem and admiration,” such admiration has as its intentional object first and foremost the span of time which disconnects us from the object’s origins.<sup>11</sup>

The admiration or awe that both Korsmeyer and Hume put center stage in their accounts thus targets the temporal relation in which the object stands to its own origin, and to us, which inspires awe and admiration. One might wonder whether, on this way of thinking about our aesthetic experience of ruins, it is not rather the experience of passed time which becomes crucial and which may (or may not) acquire an at least partly aesthetic flavor, such as of the sublime. The object itself, and the object’s particular history and significance, are pushed into the background, and even the marks which the passing of time has wrought on the material object are valued primarily as prompts to an experience of something external to the object: “the march of history and the hugeness of time.”

When considering our aesthetic appreciation of world heritage ruins, it is plausible to think that the object—and its history and significance—will,

and should, play a greater role than Korsmeyer allows. As a first step in clarifying what this role may be, we now explore the relation between an object's place in various narratives and the respect it demands from us. This will, in turn, help bring out what respectful comprehension of an object may consist of and will provide us with a route into thinking about how an object's history and wider significance should frame our aesthetic appreciation of it.

### The Span of Time and Respect for Age

To approach world heritage ruins merely on the basis of, for example, their purely formal appearance is to disregard the kind of object the focus of our appreciation has now become. Clearly, this is a point with an important ontological dimension. A newly built functioning place of worship, say, is simply not the same kind of thing as the remaining ruins of a temple destroyed as an act of war. An understanding of the kind required here thus involves our acknowledgment of the ruined object's or site's broader history and of the value and significance which the object or site has acquired at least partly in virtue of this history.

In his work on how we should morally relate to and treat certain inanimate objects, Simon James describes respect as something which can be "*called for by an object*" and which can be required because of the fact that the object "has a certain sort of importance—though not necessarily a moral importance—that it is in some sense incumbent upon one to acknowledge."<sup>12</sup> James suggests that there is a close connection between the age of an object and that object demanding respect. This is primarily because an object's age will typically mean that the object fits into various narratives which will be salient for the respectful and humble person.<sup>13</sup>

James illustrates his point with an example of a natural object, and while our focus is human-built artifacts, the comparison is illuminating. The Cerro Torre mountain in Patagonia, and the mountaineer Cesare Maestri's ascent of it, makes salient one way in which an agent can fail to appropriately respect an old object. In order to assist his ascent of Cerro Torre, Maestri blasted compression bolts into the previously pristine mountain, thus leaving the mountain scarred by his presence.<sup>14</sup> What James sees as Maestri's aretaic failure here is explained in terms of Maestri's prioritization of his own narrative of personal achievement over various others which attach to the mountain, and which have greater significance. For instance, the physical appearance of the mountain—"its near-vertical faces, its spectacular granite spire"—James tells us, "clearly embodies certain stories or narratives" concerning "an immense natural history."<sup>15</sup> Given that this is the case, Maestri's actions constitute "a sudden and radical departure from what had, up till then, been a slowly-developing story of Cerro Torre's formation and subsequent erosion."<sup>16</sup>

This example bears on the question of how old objects might fit into our practical deliberations. More pressingly for our purposes, it also makes salient one way of explaining how an old object is respectfully conceived. That is to say, Cerro Torre should not be conceived of narrowly as a land mass to be conquered. Respect for Cerro Torre involves developing an understanding of the object's history and the various narratives in which it participates. It is largely in light of the object's history—and the narratives which attach to the object—that it is deserving of respect. In attending to these features of the object we simultaneously comprehend why the object is worthy of respect while manifesting our respect toward it by coming to understand it as the concrete historical individual that it is.

The notion of narrative and its relation to a ruin itself is intriguing and could be cashed out in many ways. To what extent, if indeed any, are these narratives constitutive features of the objects under scrutiny? How, in coming to understand the object in light of the narratives which it in various ways relates to, are we to accommodate competing narratives, possibly offered by different groups? Further, what exactly does our respect hold as its primary object here? In the case of man-made inanimate objects such as ruins, ought respect not also be extended to the individuals or groups which made them? If so, what about if the very same objects held a different (non-historical) significance for those individuals or groups, perhaps even one we would actively distance ourselves from now?

Few objects render these questions as pressing as the Syrian Temple of Bel, which recounts a unique narrative, involving not merely the history of this specific region and its peoples, but also our common past, priorities and goals. This past tells of the highest points of human civilization, as epitomized in the creation of beautiful buildings serving various social, cultural and religious functions, but also of its lowest levels of interaction, including the violent destruction of one another and our environment. Discussing this example will help to make the above questions concrete and intelligible, and enable us to shed some light on how factors of this kind influence what constitutes an adequate aesthetic appreciation of such ruins.

### **The Temple of Bel at Palmyra**

In May 2015, the so-called Palmyra offensive was initiated by ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) in an attempt to make substantial military gains in the war against the Syrian Army by capturing Tadmur, or Modern Palmyra. The District of Tadmur had by then long been of strategic importance to both sides of the conflict due to its position in central Syria. Although it is still not entirely clear exactly which buildings were destroyed by ISIL in the original offensive, and which parts were destroyed by the Russian airstrikes supporting the Syrian Army and trying



*Figure 20.1* Temple of Bel, 2010

Source: Photo Bernard Gagnon, Wikimedia Commons ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Temple\\_of\\_Bel,\\_Palmyra\\_02.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Temple_of_Bel,_Palmyra_02.jpg))

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*Figure 20.2* Temple of Bel, 2018

Source: Photo by Hasan Blal

to recapture Palmyra from ISIL, considerable damage was inflicted on the world heritage site, including the Temple of Bel (Figures 20.1 and 20.2).

Founded in the second millennium BC, Palmyra had always been a place of trade connecting Europe and Asia. In that capacity, Palmyra had acquired great wealth, which in turn made it possible to erect architectural works on a scale such as the Temple of Bel, the Great Colonnade, and other unique constructions. After the sixteenth century, however, the city started losing its political and economic importance, and by 1929 it was abandoned in favor of the newly built modern Palmyra, just south of the ancient site.

The ruins at Palmyra seem to command our respect in virtue of a complex set of relational properties which stem from the narratives they partake in. Such properties will include both historical value and age value, but also moral and aesthetic value. Conceived broadly, this moral value encompasses several possible factors, such as the human effort and sacrifice put into building what is now the ruin, the integrity of the persons responsible for its materialization, the ways of life around which the social and religious rites were organized, the manner in which the site was damaged and why, our own moral obligations towards future generations to protect and safeguard, and more.

Crucially, the aesthetic value of world heritage ruins cannot be isolated from such moral value. If nothing else, a ruin such as the Temple of Bel can become an imposing reminder of how certain moral values cannot be destroyed by hammers or mortars alone, and thereby acquire a dignified kind of beauty in virtue of that very fact. Moral notions such as religious tolerance, the worth of human life, perhaps even the very concept of our joint cultural heritage itself, call for a respectful attitude from us, and to that extent our respect for world heritage ruins cannot easily be delimited from our respect for various contextual features about it. To engage with the Temple of Bel aesthetically involves understanding at least the broad outlines of its significance in these kinds of terms, and this framing is, as we see it, central to how we should appreciate ruins aesthetically.

The claim we are making here can be seen to have two dimensions. The first is, in one sense, primarily a result of the object belonging to the category of world heritage ruins. For if one's aesthetic appreciation of the material objects which make up the ruin of the Temple of Bel treats these objects as generic rubble left following conflict-related devastation, then there is an important sense in which this aesthetic engagement fails to be an aesthetic encounter with the ruin of the Temple of Bel (qua world heritage ruin). Appreciated appropriately, the world heritage ruin of the Temple of Bel encompasses a complex and significant combination of narratives, values and properties. Failing to attend to these in a minimally satisfactory way entails failing to engage meaningfully with the object itself, so to speak. This failure is, in large part, a failure to manifest the

required respect toward the object, and results in a failure to view the individual object on its own terms.

The second dimension of our claim concerns something beyond this negative kind of duty, that is to say the duty *not* to neglect the individuality and significance of the object in one's appreciation, and shifts our discussion toward a positive standard or regulative ideal in the aesthetic appreciation of world heritage ruins. This relates to the fact that it is incumbent on the subject to allow the object and its narratives to frame our aesthetic experience, and for them together to become the rightful focus of our appreciation. For when the remains of the Temple of Bel are appreciated as possessing a dignified beauty in light of the values they enshrine, in spite of the ideological violence brought against them, our aesthetic encounter is partly directed toward a proper recognition of the significance of the ruin in front of us. In this sense, something broadly analogous to what we earlier introduced as the standard model of appreciation of Western art practices seems operative here too.<sup>17</sup> Our aesthetic appreciation involves developing our sensitivity to the world heritage ruin we are attending to as the particular object it is, where the object's particularity stems not merely from its status as a world heritage ruin but also from the various factors relating to the object's specific cultural and historical significance, the narratives in which it participates, various other relational properties and so on. There is, then, an important aspect of our aesthetic appreciation which consists not only of treating the ruin on its own terms, but also a further standard calling for us to explore and appreciate the object as an individual.

### Aesthetic Appreciation and History

What begins to emerge is a distinctly *moral* question to do with how we ought to relate to an object such as the Temple of Bel, and how the way in which the understanding and sensitivity required for such engagement is fundamentally connected to a specific conception of the aesthetic appreciation of world heritage ruins. Juxtaposing this account of aesthetic engagement with the kind of appreciation Korsmeyer considers paradigmatic for ruins in general, will help to clarify our position.<sup>18</sup>

On Korsmeyer's view, the ruined object, and specifically the marks on it that manifest age value, are conceived as playing the role of a prompt in aesthetic experience. What is prompted is an experience of the passing of time, that is, something external to the object as well as to the object's significance, the narratives it participates in and other aspects of its particular character. Such an experience, on our view, is *consistent* with the failure to manifest the appropriate respect mentioned above. That is to say, a ruin may feature merely as a generic "aged object" ravaged by time, as does, for example, a pile



of displaced stones surrounding a largely devastated building. It is, in other words, consistent with failing to grasp a ruin *as* a world heritage ruin. More than this, such an aesthetic experience of world heritage ruins is lacking because the object's individuality, history and significance are in no way the focus of our aesthetic experience. There is no doubt, of course, that the objects which physically constitute the Temple of Bel *can* be used as generic prompts for an aesthetic encounter with something external to the object. However, or so we have argued, such an experience fails to be an appropriate aesthetic appreciation of the Temple of Bel.

In Korsmeyer's terms, the experience we view as paradigmatic might be described in the following way: the age value manifested in the marks on the material object provides a focus for our aesthetic appreciation which frames an aesthetic encounter with the object's historical value and its true nature relative to the narratives within which it participates. From this perspective, Korsmeyer's distinction between age and historical value seems porous and permeable.

James points out, however, that the physical marks which witness the object's age, embody the passing of time not only in some general sense but also by embodying the object's specific history.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, James's description of how the physical state of Cerro Torre embodies the geological narratives in which the mountain participates is suggestive of the way an aesthetic appreciation of the mountain may be conceived. Very broadly, attending to the physical marks as a vehicle for contemplating the forces and natural historical narratives which led to them, and thus encountering the object as possessing various aesthetic properties in light of these factors, would seem to be an appropriately framed aesthetic appreciation of the mountain. The understanding of the aesthetic appreciation of world heritage ruins being developed here is roughly analogous. The marks on the material object and its current physical state are a vehicle for a contemplation of the object's history and significance. What remains of the entrance of the Temple of Bel, for example, the rectangular archway precariously balancing two partly dislodged stones, provides a vehicle for our contemplation of the related religious sanctuary and tolerance that the temple once offered locals and visiting tradespeople for centuries. This entrance, standing in the midst of the rubble of the rest of the temple, provides a vehicle for the imaginative exploration of the object's history and significance. It conjures an appreciation of the persistence of the temple and the defiance of the values it enshrines against attack. The solidity and seeming immovability of the walls and ceiling of the entrance help us appreciate the sanctuary offered to visitors, taking on a grandeur when we comprehend the centuries throughout which worshippers were welcomed through them.

**Appreciative Responsibility and Cognitivism**

With these points in mind, let us close our discussion by reflecting on some of the wider ramifications of the view that the aesthetic appreciation of world heritage ruins, such as the Temple of Bel, depend on our understanding of (at least) the broad outlines of its narrative history. This understanding relies on a subtle contextualization of how several elements of the relevant history are intertwined, and a sensitive deliberation concerning how to weigh these, at times perhaps conflicting, elements against each other. This is clearly a challenging process, not only because one's knowledge of the object's history might be patchy or even unreliable, but also because it can be colored by one's own—often highly contextual—moral commitments and beliefs. What is more, as the object's narrative continues to evolve, any such contextualization and deliberation obviously remains a live issue for anyone interested in appreciating it aesthetically.

Despite these considerable challenges, it seems incumbent on the subject to engage with world heritage ruins in a way which recognizes the object's cultural, historical and moral significance. Part of this is to adopt a respectful attitude towards not only the material ruin itself, but also toward at least some of the aspects of the wider culture in which our broader understanding of the world heritage ruin is steeped. As we have already seen, to do so will involve a disjunctive set of factors, possibly including esteem for the people who built the object or site (including their commitment, motivation and dedication), respect for the ways in which the object or site has been admired or worshipped since its creation (i.e., pre-damage or pre-destruction), and more. Importantly, by engaging aesthetically with a world heritage ruin in this way, we render ourselves accountable as subjects of aesthetic experience, and thus take on appreciative responsibility. For reasons briefly alluded to above, such appreciative responsibility does not necessarily involve the endorsement of the cultural and moral value-system upon which the object's significance is built. But it does call for us to have some basic understanding of what the object or site in question has meant to others, how it has been appreciated aesthetically through different times, perhaps what caused its ruination, and the very way in which it bears witness to all those things. By adopting a cognitivist approach of this kind to the aesthetic appreciation of world heritage ruins, we come to see what is truly at stake in such appreciation.

Though our focus has been on the aesthetic appreciation of world heritage ruins, our discussion would seem to have a natural extension to the aesthetic appreciation of ruins in general. We have attempted to show that when aesthetically appreciating a world heritage ruin, a call for respect demands that we attend to the object in a manner sensitive to its context, history and significance. Certainly a parallel argument could

be made for ruins in general, and the idea that they too can make similar claims on us as appreciators. Indeed, Peter Lamarque argues in this volume that part of what distinguishes ruins from mere derelict buildings or dilapidated sites is the significance of either the object which becomes ruined, or of the process of ruination itself.<sup>20</sup> While our suggestion here does not entail a denial of the view that people have aesthetic experiences of the kind Korsmeyer champions, it does raise the question of whether a bona fide aesthetic appreciation of a given ruin requires that the object's context, history and significance play a more central role in one's engagement. Further, it raises the question of whether the kind of aesthetic engagement described here should not, in fact, be taken as paradigmatic for most if not all our encounters with ruins.

## Notes

1. As discussed, perhaps most canonically, by Kendall L. Walton, "Categories of Art," *Philosophical Review* 79, no. 3 (1970): 334–67.
2. Though the exact role which (actual or hypothetical) intentions should have in appreciation (if any) is, of course, a matter of controversy. See, for example, William K. Wimsatt, and Monroe C. Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy," *Sewanee Review* 54 (1946): 468–88; Paisley Livingston, *Art and Intention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Jerrold Levinson, "Defending Hypothetical Intentionalism," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 50 (2010): 139–50.
3. David Davies, for example, discusses the "artistic vehicle" as "[t]he product of an artist's manipulation of a vehicular medium . . . the vehicle whereby a particular artistic statement is articulated" (David Davies, *Art as Performance* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 59.
4. Kelly Trogdon and Paisley Livingston, "The Complete Work," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72 (2014): 225–33.
5. Carolyn Korsmeyer, "The Triumph of Time: Romanticism Redux," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 72, no. 4 (2014): 429–35, 429.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*, 430.
8. *Ibid.*, 431.
9. *Ibid.*, 433.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Hume suggests that since the distance separating us from the origins of the ancient object is temporal and not just spatial, contemplating it tends to stretch our imaginative faculties and this, too, creates in us a feeling of admiration for the object which gets transferred by a process of association onto the object itself (Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (London: Penguin, 1969 [1739]), Part iii, sections 7 and 8). Where Korsmeyer surely parts company with Hume is in the effect our awareness of this vast span of time has on us, namely a "sensible delight and pleasure" which we find in contemplating "great and magnificent" things.
12. Simon James, "Why Old Things Matter," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 12 (2015): 313–29, 315.
13. *Ibid.*, 325. James stops short of saying that old objects themselves are deserving of respect on his view. He instead talks of the fact that humble and

respectful people would respect such old objects and suggests that the feature which explains this is the narratives which attach to the old object and not the old object itself.

14. Ibid., 324.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Our claim here is not that such a standard is a necessary condition for the aesthetic appreciation of all world heritage ruins. Rather, we argue that it often has an important role to play in such appreciation.
18. It should be noted that Korsmeyer intends her account to apply most directly to “ruins of great age from a past that we only dimly understand” (p. 434), thus it might not be surprising that such a theory may not successfully extend to world heritage ruins which—like the Temple at Bel—have a relatively well-known history and are still currently of great cultural significance.
19. Owen Hulatt’s account of our aesthetic engagement with ruins includes a description of how objects may take on a “historical physiognomy” and is, in this respect, somewhat similar to the suggestion being developed here. Hulatt’s focus, however, is, like Korsmeyer’s, on objects about which we lack substantial knowledge. Further, Hulatt discusses objects which—like his case study of a Naqadan Vessel—are not primarily historically or culturally important individually but rather as objects of a more general type (Owen Hulatt, “On a Naqadan Vessel—Our Aesthetic Response to and Restoration of Prehistoric Artefacts,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 56, no. 3 (2016).
20. Peter Lamarque, “The Value of Ruins and Depictions of Ruins,” this volume Chapter 7.

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