



MATERIAL  
AUTHENTICITY OR  
HISTORICAL FALSIFICATION

THE KNOB AND AUTHENTIC HISTORICAL SUBSTANCE

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In 1998 the Koninklijke Nederlandse Oudheidkundige Bond (Royal Netherlands Archaeological Association, KNOB) celebrated its centenary. The *Bulletin KNOB* published an extensive review of its history and called on members to continue to champion the preservation of the built heritage in relation to its historically evolved context, 'and with an eye to the preservation of authentic historical substance in particular'.<sup>1</sup> That telling addition relates to the KNOB's stance in the debate about restoration principles that had been conducted with varying degrees of intensity throughout the twentieth century.

#### PRINCIPLES AND A REFLECTION

The 'Principles and precepts for the preservation, restoration and extension of historical buildings' that the KNOB had published in 1917 represented a radical departure from the restoration views of P.J.H. Cuyper and Victor de Stuers.<sup>2</sup> Under the motto 'preservation before restoration', the Principles took issue with the reconstruction or arbitrary completion of historical buildings on the grounds that it resulted in historical falsification and the destruction of heritage objects as historical documents. In practice, however, these principles were often ignored and besides, during the post-war reconstruction period the desire to restore

the ravaged beauty of the cities fostered a less purist stance on reconstruction.<sup>3</sup> A committee set up in 1948 to review the Principles accordingly adopted a more moderate tone and placed restoration in a social perspective. In 1953 the committee published its reflections on the subject under the title 'The restoration of historical monuments. Misconceptions, difficulties and possibilities'. The desire to render monuments as aesthetically pleasing as possible and the tendency to correct defects were identified as aberrations that had caused a lot of trouble. The monument, they countered, retains a memory value 'that is directly proportional to its genuineness, to its authenticity as a historical document... One does not correct documents without falsifying them.'<sup>4</sup> It was more problematic when the monument had taken shape in different periods or had a function that entailed practical requirements; in both instances the competing interests needed to be weighed against one another based on a thorough analysis of the existing values. Restoration, the committee stated, could take different forms. Simple preservation was an option if the monument had no practical function, or restoration to the original condition, provided this could be meticulously reconstructed. When not enough was known about the original form, the monument could be completed in a

◀ 1. Interior Geertekerk looking west towards the tower, 1952 (Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, Amersfoort)

▼ 2. Interior Geertekerk looking east towards the apse, 1957. Photo G.T. Delamarre (Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed, Amersfoort)







contemporary or a historical formal idiom. This option was a form of ‘falsification’ of course, but the committee considered this approach preferable in some situations – ‘notwithstanding the barrage of complaints of spurious authenticity’.<sup>5</sup>

#### A NEW DOCTRINE?

The KNOB committee’s 1953 reflections typified post-war restoration practice in the Netherlands. The 1917 Principles had proved to be ineffectual and there was little appetite for new rules in this area.<sup>6</sup> Two decades on, however, the tide had turned. In 1972, KNOB chairman Coen Temminck Groll called for a new appraisal of the Principles in light of the current diversity of views, the continuing vogue for ‘beautifying’ heritage buildings at the expense of their historical authenticity, and the increase in the range of tasks through the addition of ‘modest’ heritage buildings and urban renewal. Two principles should once again be paramount: ‘recognition of the authenticity value of our patrimony and the prevention of historical falsification’.<sup>7</sup> But it took another six years for any such appraisal to occur and for the issue of the ‘authenticity value’ to feature prominently on the agenda. On 15 April 1978 the KNOB and the Vereniging van Nederlandse Kunsthistorici (Society of Dutch Art Historians, VNK) organized a seminar on restoration philosophy and theory in the Geertekerk in Utrecht. The boards of both organizations had noted the virtual absence of any discussion of this fundamental aspect of heritage preservation in the Netherlands. They felt that this had led to a confusing situation with respect to restoration policy and thought it would help clarify the situation to assemble the various opinions and judge them on their merits. It would then be possible to decide which ideas were suitable for realization ‘for the Netherlands of today and tomorrow’. It was hoped that the seminar might be the springboard for ‘a “blueprint” for restoration policy’, which would then need to be formulated in consultation with the responsible government authorities.<sup>8</sup> The basis for the discussion consisted of five introductions penned by architectural historian Kees Peeters, (restoration) architects Cornelis Wegener Sleswijk, Coen Temminck Groll and Wiek Röling, and the Belgian heritage expert Paul Philippot, and published in the *Bulletin*. Members were invited to respond in writing and those responses were summarized in a number of discussion points, with ‘doctrine’ and ‘authenticity’ proving to be the most contentious topics.<sup>9</sup> Peeters, who rather tellingly took the motto of the 1917 Principles as the title of his

3. Johannes Bosboom, *Interieur van de Geertekerk te Utrecht met de viering van het heilig avondmaal*, 1852 (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam)

introduction, was an avid advocate for a doctrine. He denounced the ‘physical interference’ practised by the architects tasked with ‘saving historical authenticity’.<sup>10</sup> He believed that the prevailing anarchy could only be curbed by means of a number of centrally imposed and readily verifiable principles which prioritized preliminary scientific research. Others though did not see any point in formulating a new doctrine, either because there were already enough doctrines, the most recent being the 1964 Venice Charter, or because practitioners took little notice of theoretical principles. The conclusion was that while there was little demand for normative rules for restoration work, there was a need for methodical guidelines that would be regularly tested in actual practice.

#### **AUTHENTICITY OF FORM**

The discussion of the issue of authenticity produced more surprises than an outcome satisfactory to all. Here, too, the tone was set by Peeters, who argued that it was all about the preservation of ‘the material authenticity of the historical substance’.<sup>11</sup> By authentic he meant ‘the first, the original, that which has never been replaced’.<sup>12</sup> His view was endorsed by such prepared questions as: is the authenticity of the historical substance impaired by wear and tear and maintenance, and at what percentage of replacement does authenticity cease to exist? However, Wegener Sleeswijk opened up a new perspective by pointing out that they were overlooking something essential. In his view, architecture’s primary significance lay not in the matter, but in the space and the light that was created by that matter. Preserving that was usually more worthwhile than preserving the matter; indeed, it often necessitated the replacement of matter. The value people attached to the historical object was bound up with the question of whether it was usable or beautiful, or whether it was significant from the point of view of memory; ‘being historical, being old, is not in itself a value’.<sup>13</sup> Wegener Sleeswijk acknowledged that none of this was straightforward; matter was easy enough to understand, but then there was also the question of form. He believed that it was possible to talk about an authentic form when, for example, a vanished roof construction had been restored using new materials. Temminck Groll went a step further, arguing that as well as authentic material and authentic form, he could readily imagine an authentic manner of finishing. By way of illustration, he pointed to the interior of the church where they were gathered at that moment. This originally medieval parish church had a turbulent history. Seriously damaged during the sixteenth-century Protestant Iconoclasm, after the Reformation the building functioned successively as a

Reformed church, stable, barracks, warehouse and – from 1814 onwards – as a Dutch Reformed church. In 1855 hundreds of victims of the floods in Veenendaal found temporary refuge there and five years later the church was comprehensively renovated. After the building was deconsecrated in 1930, it quickly fell into disrepair. Ten years later it was a roofless ruin with luxuriant vegetation filling the former church space (fig. 1). Thanks to the efforts of concerned citizens, however, the building was saved from demolition; in 1954 the Remonstrant congregation bought the ruin and embarked on a full-scale restoration that was completed three years later.<sup>14</sup> Temminck Groll was well acquainted with the building through his work for both the Rijksdienst voor de Monumentenzorg (Department for the Preservation of Monuments and Historic Buildings) and Utrecht’s heritage department. He informed participants that the remains of the once-stuccoed brick walls had been given a coat of plaster and it was in this context that he referred to an authentic finishing technique. Although virtually nothing in the church could be called ‘old’, he believed one could definitely talk about authentic dimensions, light, proportions and plasterwork (fig. 2). The atmosphere of the earlier church, as depicted in a nineteenth-century canvas by Johannes Bosboom, had been recaptured and he saw that, too, as ‘an instance of authenticity’ (fig. 3).<sup>15</sup>

#### **MATTER IS THE ESSENCE**

This proved to be a bridge too far, however. Philippot, who had introduced the theme of authenticity during the discussion and was to provide a summing up, deemed it dangerous to separate the abstract form from the material that gave expression to that form, because new material or plasterwork would always have a slightly different effect than the original. He therefore refused to call the reconstruction of a form authentic; ‘what is essential, what must be left intact as far as possible is the authentic material’.<sup>16</sup> Architectural historian Jan Terwen attempted to clarify the other side of the argument by pointing to the importance of the architectural conception. Authenticity, he argued, was mainly about an architect’s idea, which was subsequently realized in a structure. Any and everything could be changed or reconstructed: ‘as long as it adheres to and returns to that original idea of the architect, that’s what I consider authentic in a building’.<sup>17</sup> However, Philippot’s conclusion was brief and to the point: the concept of authenticity could only have objective meaning in relation to the material; a limited meaning perhaps, but an essential one. Whether people wanted to expand it was open to discussion. And so ended the first and also last funda-

mental discussion of the concept of authenticity within the KNOB. They had discussed the different interpretations that existed side by side in the diverse practice of heritage preservation and that were highly topical at that moment.<sup>18</sup> In 1994 the *Nara Document on Authenticity* would broaden the meaning of the concept to such an extent in the context of cultural diversity that it lost a good deal of its usefulness as a distinguishing criterion.<sup>19</sup> On the initiative of ICOMOS,

experts from some thirty countries had gathered in the Japanese city of Nara to consider the issue of authenticity in relation to cultural context. They concluded that authenticity was not confined to material and substance, but also applied to things like form, design, use, function, traditions, techniques, location, setting, spirit and feeling. The KNOB had by then long since closed that Pandora's box and retreated to the safe haven of authentic historical substance.

#### NOTES

- 1 G.W. van Herwaarden, '100 jaar Koninklijke Nederlandse Oudheidkundige Bond. Een beknopte beschrijving', *Bulletin KNOB* 97 (1989) 5, 145-180, quote 175.
- 2 The Principles were published in 1917 by the KNOB and reprinted in 1940: 'Grondbeginselen en voorschriften voor het behoud, de herstelling en de uitbreiding van oude bouwwerken, met een inleiding door dr. J. Kalf, door den Ned. Oudheidkundigen Bond', *Bouwkundig Weekblad Architectura* 61 (1940) 9, 69-75. See also W. Denslagen, *Omstreden herstel. Kritiek op het restaureren van monumenten*, The Hague 1987, 153-213.
- 3 R. de Jong, 'Authenticiteit en monumentenzorg/monumentenzorg en authenticiteit', in: *Monumenten en bouwhistorie, Jaarboek Monumentenzorg* 1996, Zwolle/Zeist 1996, 274-282, 275.
- 4 'Het restaureren van historische monumenten. Misverstanden, moeilijkheden en mogelijkheden', *Bulletin van de KNOB* 6th volume, 6 (1953) 5, (column) 169-188, quotes 171, 172.
- 5 'Het restaureren van historische monumenten' (note 4), 184.
- 6 Denslagen 1987 (note 2), 207.
- 7 'Bondsnieuws. Verslag van de Algemene ledenvergadering van de Koninklijke Nederlandse Oudheidkundige Bond op vrijdag 16 juni 1972 in de grote zaal van de Ostfriesische Landschaft te Aurich (Ostfriesland)', *Bulletin KNOB* 71 (1972) 4, 111-117, quote 113.
- 8 'KNOB. Aan de leden van de K.N.O.B. en de V.N.K.', *Bulletin KNOB* 77 (1978) 1, 1-2.
- 9 'Discussie over de problematiek van de architectuurrestauratie', *Bulletin KNOB* 77 (1978) 3-4, 179-194, quote 186.
- 10 C. Peeters, 'Behouden gaat vóór vernieuwen', introduction for the joint KNOB and VNK meeting on 15 April 1978 in Utrecht, *Bulletin KNOB* 77 (1978) 1, 3-7, quote 4.
- 11 Peeters 1978 (note 10), 5.
- 12 'Discussie over de problematiek van de architectuurrestauratie' (note 9), 189.
- 13 'Discussie over de problematiek van de architectuurrestauratie' (note 9), 186.
- 14 [H.] De J[ong], 'Een klok luidde...', *Maandblad van 'Oud-Utrecht'* 30 (1957) 1, 2-6; W. Stoker, '50 jaar monumentenzorg in stad en provincie Utrecht. 1. De monumentenzorg in de stad Utrecht tot 1957', *Jaarboek Oud-Utrecht* 1973, 148-165.
- 15 'Discussie over de problematiek van de architectuurrestauratie' (note 9), 192.
- 16 'Discussie over de problematiek van de architectuurrestauratie' (note 9), 192.
- 17 'Discussie over de problematiek van de architectuurrestauratie' (note 9), 192-193.
- 18 De Jong 1996 (note 3), 270-281. Several forms of authenticity played an important role in the extensive debate about the restoration of Paleis Het Loo and the conceptual aspect was central to the approach to Nieuwe Bouwen monuments like the Rietveld Schröder House in Utrecht. For the latter see M.T. van Thoor 'The restorations of the Rietveld Schröder House. A reflection', *Bulletin KNOB* 118 (2019), 15-31.
- 19 W. Denslagen, 'Authenticiteit en spiritualiteit', *Bulletin KNOB* 109 (2010) 4, 135-140.

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appetite for new rules. But in the 1970s the KNOB called for a re-evaluation of the principles. During a seminar on restoration philosophy and theory in 1978, participants discussed the theme of 'authenticity'. There was a wide divergence of opinions on this concept. While for some it related strictly to the authenticity of the original material, for others the notion of authenticity extended to design, form, space or finish. The latter interpretation proved to be too subjective for a collective viewpoint; the KNOB remained first and foremost the guardian of authentic historical substance.

<sup>1</sup> Royal Netherlands Archaeological Association