
Spolia are, in the most general terms, reused architectural—and, by analogy, artistic—elements. Long known but deemed unworthy of scholarly treatment, spolia studies have, in the words of Arnold Esch, “gained momentum since the 1950s” and since the 1980s “increased at an almost explosive rate.” The essays collected here grew from a colloquium at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in December 2006 whose goal was “to probe the apparent parallels between the use of spolia in premodern art and architecture and the various modes of appropriation theorized and practiced in modern and contemporary art,” according to co-editors and colloquium organizers Richard Brilliant and Dale Kinney. Six essays in this collection “represent additional epochs and points of view.”

The twelve essays plus Kinney’s introduction and Brilliant’s epilogue combine to provide a good overview of the history and issues of the field, leaning (in accord with the largely architectural nature of spolia dating to antiquity) heavily to the architectural. The Arch of Constantine is an important case in point. In Brilliant’s chapter “Authenticity and Alienation,” a half-page photo of the Arch faces a diagram which labels its Trajanic, Hadrianic, Aurelian, and Constantinian sources. Annabel J. Wharton’s chapter takes as its subject the Chicago Tribune Tower. A full-page photo shows a section of its façade embedded with fragments from the Houses of Parliament, the dome of St. Peter’s Basilica, the pyramid at Giza, and temples in Cambodia.

This is primarily a book of scholarly essays, heavily buttressed by sources in English, German, Italian, and other languages. Highlights include an ideal opening essay, Arnold Esch’s “On the Reuse of Antiquity: The Perspectives of the Archaeologist and of the Historian,” lucidly translated from the German by Benjamin Anderson. Michael Greenhalgh’s “Spolia: A Definition in Ruins” includes an annotated seventeen-element “pyramid of reuse possibilities” ranging from “Stones are broken up for other purposes” to “War trophies.” Donald Kuspit’s “Some Thoughts About the Significance of Postmodern Appropriation Art” is the only chapter to focus on modern and contemporary art. Indexes of Persons, Places, and Particulars confirm the book’s overwhelming emphasis on architecture and its sculptural elements. Recommended for architecture collections.

Craig Bunch, Assistant Librarian, McNay Art Museum, craig.bunch@mcnayart.org