The Venice Charter: a universalist utopia

Dr. Ing. Arch. Claudine Houbart
University of Liège (Belgium), c.houbart@uliege.be

Abstract. The Venice Charter celebrates its sixtieth anniversary this year. This article looks at three important moments in its history, based on the archives of Belgian art historian and conservator Raymond M. Lemaire: its drafting, its first translations, and the failed attempts to revise it. By revealing the conditions under which the Charter was created and translated, and highlighting the awareness of its limitations shortly after it was adopted, the archives help to put its universalist and intangible character into perspective.

Keywords: Venice Charter – Translation – Universalism – R. M. Lemaire

1. The Venice Charter at 60

Since its inception in 1964 at the Second International Congress of Restoration, the International Charter for the Conservation and Restoration of Monuments and Sites [1] has been disseminated globally through ICOMOS. Every tenth anniversary of the charter has provided an occasion to evaluate the applicability of its principles in light of an expanding cultural heritage landscape and a growing recognition of diverse perspectives [2, 3].

In 2024, this assessment takes on a heightened significance. In the past decade, the pace of change has quickened, and the challenges we face have gained a new urgency, underscored by the Sustainable Development Goals and their 2030 Agenda. Post-colonial discussions have prompted a reexamination of numerous objects and processes within the realm of heritage. We now stand far removed from the era of Europe's "Thirty Glorious Years", the original context from which the Venice Charter emerged. This prompts a question: should we consider discarding the charter altogether? Originating from a milieu dominated by "white Europeans", a context that largely lacked the values of diversity and pluralism [4], the Venice Charter is viewed by a segment of the heritage community within Critical Heritage Studies as a cornerstone of the "authorized heritage discourse", a term coined by anthropologist L. Smith to describe "the dominant Western discourse about heritage" [5]. Yet, simultaneously, the Venice Charter remains a topic of extensive discourse and application in the field, occasionally integrated into legal frameworks. Whether embraced, criticized, rejected, or (mis)used, the Venice Charter persists as a common touchstone. It stands as the initial doctrinal document with a clear universalistic aim in the field of heritage, and also the most general document. Its succinct principles, readily adaptable into slogans, have contributed to its enduring success.

But was this universalist character really achievable at the time the document was drafted? And hasn't the process of disseminating the Charter, through multiple translations, further weakened it? In short, is there really such a thing as a universal Venice Charter? A study of its drafting and translations, and of the aborted revision attempts seem to suggest otherwise. This article summarizes the lessons that can be learned from a study of the archives of Raymond M. Lemaire (1921 – 1997), who was rapporteur for the drafting of the charter at the 1964 symposium, and later became first secretary and second president of ICOMOS [6].

2. Drafting the Charter: the work of a few

2.1 The Venice Congress

Organized from May 25 to 31, 1964 at the Giorgio Cini Foundation on the island of San Giorgio in Venice, the Second International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments was not the first initiative aimed at sharing experience between nations. In October 1931, over 120 specialists from twenty countries had met in Athens, on the initiative of the International Museums Office

[7]. Twenty-six years later, the International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments, organized in Paris by the "Compagnie des Architectes en Chef des Monuments Historiques", brought together 170 specialists from nineteen countries [8]. However, the Venice Congress differed from these two events in several respects.

Bringing together some 500 participants from 52 countries, the congress brought together for the first time a community beyond Europe [9]. Although Europeans make up almost 90% of the assembly, a good twenty delegates came from America and seventeen from Asia. By contrast, Africa had just nine delegates, and Australia three. The accompanying exhibition featured projects from Malaysia, Lebanon, Mexico, Colombia, Cuba, Tunisia, Afghanistan and Thailand, occupying three rooms on the first floor of Palazzo Grassi [10]. But it was above all in terms of long-term results that the congress stood out from previous editions. In 1931, the conclusions of the Athens Conference, published in the "Bulletin de l'Institut de coopération culturelle" – and later erroneously referred to as the "Athens Charter" [11] – had been limited to a summary of the "points of agreement reached during the discussions" [12]. The 1957 Paris Congress confined itself to issuing "wishes" for each section, which were not widely circulated. In contrast, the Venetian congress not only led to the adoption of a coherent set of principles, the charter, but also laid the foundations for its international dissemination. In 1965, ICOMOS was founded in response to the resolution to "create an international non-governmental organization for monuments and sites". The dissemination of the Charter, and the presence of three non-Europeans among its signatories, helped to build an international image for the document, in contrast to the European character of the "Athens Charter". But this image doesn't stand up to archival scrutiny.

2.2 A select committee

Twenty-three names appear at the bottom of the official version of the Venice Charter, those of the delegates who "took part in the work of the committee for the drafting" of the document. Representative of the congress audience, they were mostly European; eight of them were Italian, French or Belgian. Alongside them, Carlos Flores Marini, recently appointed head of the Directorate of Colonial Monuments at the National Institute of Anthropology and History in Mexico City, Peruvian architect Victor Pimentel and Mostafa Zbiss, Director of the National Institute of Archaeology and Art in Tunis, apparently broadened the commission's geographical scope. But did they also broaden its cultural framework? Although originally from Latin America, both Pimentel and Flores Marini specialized in restoration at La Sapienza in the years leading up to the congress. Zbiss, originally from Andalusia, was trained in Tunisia in a colonial context. In addition, neither Zbiss's nor Pimentel's name appeared at the bottom of the version of the charter presented during the congress, preserved in the archives. Lastly, no source enables us to specify the precise role of this "drafting committee" or to understand how it was composed. In fact, the archive files suggest a more symbolic than operational role, the charter being mainly drafted by a very small group made up of Piero Gazzola, Raymond Lemaire, Paul Philippot and François Sorlin, so one Italian, two Belgians and one Frenchman [13].

The archives of Roberto Pane (1897 – 1987), professor at the University of Naples in charge of the introductory conference at the congress, reveal that as early as spring 1964, he was working with Piero Gazzola (1908 – 1979), superintendent of the Western Veneto and future president of the congress organizing committee, on a critical rereading of the Carta italiana del Restauro [14]. Drafted in 1932 in the wake of the Athens conference by Gustavo Giovannoni and Francesco Pellati, then adopted as a standard by the Italian High Council for Antiquities and Fine Arts [15], this charter should, in their view, be amended in the light of experiences since the Second World War, particularly with regard to the relationship between conservation and urban planning. Their "Proposte per une carta internazionale del restauro" (Proposals for an international restoration charter) was distributed at the congress and met with widespread approval [16]. They were not, however, the sole reference for the Venice Charter.

The most comprehensive archives concerning the drafting of the Charter are those of Raymond M. Lemaire (1921 – 1997), held at the central library of the University of Louvain in Belgium. Trained in archaeology and art history at the turn of the 1940s, Lemaire found himself unofficially associated

with the preparation of the congress by virtue of contacts forged since the late 1940s with Piero Gazzola. Rapporteur of the first session, devoted to theoretical and methodological questions, he was entrusted with the role of secretary to the drafting committee. According to his own testimony, Lemaire surrounded himself with Paul Philippot, deputy director of ICCROM, and Jean Sonnier, president of the "Compagnie des architectes en chef des monuments historiques". As soon as they arrived in Venice, prior to the opening of the congress, they started to work using not only the "Proposte", but also the Conclusions of the Athens Charter and Lemaire's teaching notes which were sent from Louvain [17]. It was from this small group, whose existence Philippot confirmed to the author during an interview in 2014, that the first version of the charter emerged. The international nature of the document's development must therefore be put into perspective, as must the role played by the Italians – essential though it was. In 2006, Gertrud Tripp admitted that, alongside Gazzola and Pane, there would have been no Venice Charter without "the French" – among whom she counted Lemaire [18].

2.3 The successive versions

The first draft, comprising fourteen articles, was already relatively close to the version adopted at the end of the congress, dated May 29, 1964. The influence of Pane and Gazzola's "Proposte" – in some cases reaffirming the principles of the Carta italiana del Restauro – is evident in a number of articles, leading to the widespread belief that Pane and Gazzola were the "fathers" of the charter. This is particularly true of articles 5, 6, 10, 11 and 15. But other parts of the text have their origins elsewhere: article 9, in particular, is surprisingly close to a document drafted by Raymond Lemaire in the Belgian context at the turn of the 1960s. This document, entitled "Esquisse de principes directeurs en matière de conservation et de restauration des monuments anciens" (Outline of guiding principles for the conservation and restoration of ancient monuments), agreed with the "Proposte" that restoration "will stop where the hypothesis begins", but where the Italian document advocated "the utmost discretion" for necessary additions, the Belgian document declared that "any essential additional work is part of the architectural composition and will bear the mark of our time", a wording very close to the definitive French version of the charter [19].

Beyond minor reformulations and changes in the order of articles, the most significant modifications made during the congress were the addition of the preamble, written by Paul Philippot and an article addressing the question of displacement, probably echoing the recent experience of the Nubian temples, in which Piero Gazzola took part (future article 7). There was also an evolution in the text's position about "modern techniques", the use of which was ultimately subject to the condition that "traditional techniques prove inadequate". Attention to the surroundings was also strengthened: in addition to prohibiting new construction that could alter the traditional setting, the second version also condemned the destruction of the context, echoing the "inappropriate isolation" already mentioned in the Carta italiana del restauro.

In the months following the congress, Raymond Lemaire was asked to improve the text: as he wrote to Gertrud Tripp, "the adoption of a text, even if imperfect, was more desirable than no charter at all; provided, of course, that the wording was corrected afterwards" [20]. The most significant modification was the addition of an article (future article 8), proposed on the very day of the adoption by Paul Philippot, who regretted that the charter did not include "a sentence specifying that, just as the monument is inseparable from the external setting in which it is inserted, it is also inseparable from the elements of sculpture or painting that are an integral part of it" [21].

Apart from this addition and some regrouping "to create a more logical order" [22], the final version shows few differences from the version adopted at the congress. However, the archives bear witness to exchanges with a number of experts in addition to the drafting committee. While some of these correspondents were among the signatories – including François Sorlin and Jean Sonnier – others, such as Luigi Crema, Guglielmo De Angelis and Walter Frodl, were not. The archives keep no record of exchanges with non-European signatories.

3. Translating the Charter : from one to multiple documents

Originally written in French, the Charter was first translated into English during the congress by Hiroshi Daifuku, representing UNESCO, in order to be presented to a wider audience. Only the archives suggest the existence of this working version, which has not yet been found [23]. However, a new English translation was prepared before December 1964 by Lord Euston, President of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings [24]. This version was different in several respects from the French original. A comparison of Article 9 of the Charter alone, devoted to restoration, in the two language versions, reveals major inconsistencies of principle. Among these, the first sentence: whereas the French version indicates that "Restoration is an operation that must remain exceptional", the English version states that "the process of restoration is a highly specialized operation". Further on in the article, the French text specifies that "any additional work recognized as indispensable for aesthetic or technical reasons is a matter of architectural composition and will bear the mark of our time". However, in English, not only are the reasons justifying the indispensable nature of the "extra work" not specified, but this work "must be distinct from the architectural composition and must bear a contemporary stamp". Yet, being "distinct from the architectural composition" is completely different from being "a matter of architectural composition". And this is only one example among many others.

In 1965, during the first General Assembly of ICOMOS in Poland, the Charter was officially distributed in four versions: French, English, Spanish and Russian, at that time the four official languages of UNESCO. While the Spanish version appeared fairly close to the French original, some articles in the Russian version, which was also based on the French version, departed from it "on several points, in order to reflect the Soviet conception of the conservation and cultural value of monuments" [25]. These differences would only become more pronounced with each subsequent translation, based on one of these versions or a combination of several versions.

Over the years, these discrepancies have been consistently recognized. Two decades ago, the Pecs Declaration on the Venice Charter recommended not only "a translation of the Charter of Venice for each country, nationality, or ethnic group that does not have access to a version of the Charter in its native language" but also urged for "a more precise re-examination and correction of the existing translations" [26]. More recently, in 2018, an exploratory study conducted by ICOMOS France as part of the European Year of Heritage concluded that "the French and English versions take a different approach to heritage from a political, philosophical, and even a spiritual standpoint", particularly concerning restoration [27]. Since most initiatives were driven by ICOMOS, by whom the Venice Charter was sometimes regarded as a kind of "decalogue" [28], they were largely motivated by a desire to reaffirm or at least consider the relevance of the document across cultural variances and shifts in the conception of heritage. For instance, the 2018 French study concluded that despite significant disparities, the French, English, Italian, German, and Dutch versions of the charter displayed a "full agreement on the essential technical concepts", such as the necessity of maintenance or the advantages of keeping buildings in use.

Despite these recurring observations, however, no systematic examination of the translations and interpretations of the charter has ever been conducted. Furthermore, the exact number of charter versions remains unknown. Thirty five are accessible on the ICOMOS website [29], but this count does not consider the existence of multiple versions sometimes coexisting in the same language (as in Spanish, for example), or the revisions made to some versions over time, like the German version in the late 1980s, based on a blend of the French and English texts [30]. This has led the author of this article to launch an interdisciplinary project on the subject, of which an exploratory phase involving the French, English, Spanish and Italian versions is currently underway [31].

4. Revising the Charter: an impossible consensus

Playing an important part, as first President and Secretary General of ICOMOS, in the reflections initiated in the 1960s by the Council of Europe in the field of historic cities' "reviving", Raymond Lemaire and Piero Gazzola were soon convinced of the necessity to review the Venice document. As soon as

February 1971, the archive reveal the existence of a common will to update the article devoted to historic cities preservation: not only "this aspect is scarcely initiated in the charter's text", but "the experience of the ten last years brought out that a pure and simple application of principles devoted to monuments as such, is not always possible, nor always desirable for the ensembles" [32]. Yet Article 14 of the Charter simply extended the principles set out in the previous articles to "monumental sites" in French and "historic sites" or "sites of monuments" in English.

A detailed analysis of the Great Beguinage of Louvain's rehabilitation by Lemaire in the late 1960s, yet often considered as a perfect illustration of the contemporary international debates, reveals many derogations to the articles of the Venice Charter, including the ones for the writing of which he played the most important part. Therefore, Lemaire's field experience was determining in revealing, soon after its adoption, the limits of the document [33].

It is only in 1975, "looking at the proliferation of texts in this matter", that the Consultative committee of ICOMOS, supported by the General Assembly gathered in Rothenburg, initiated an action plan aiming at the enlargement of the existing charter, preferred to the writing of a new document. Taking into account the documents in the process of adoption or recently adopted by UNESCO and Council of Europe – such as the Nairobi Recommandation [34] and the Amsterdam Declaration [35] –, the project was to be fed by a large consultation of the national committees before being written by a commission acting under the authority of Lemaire, as President of ICOMOS. The result would then be submitted to the next General Assembly, planned in Moscow in 1978. In December 1976, the Executive Committee created a "Venice Charter Committee" and a "Venice Charter Working Party", that got together at Ditchley Park Castle (Great-Britain) in May 1977. But whether because of the insufficient contributions of the national committees, or the disagreement of the meeting participants on the very necessity to adopt in-depth or minor modifications, the initiative was a failure. In consequence, the revision task was handed over to the ICOMOS board, thus, sent back to R.M. Lemaire who, in January 1978, wrote a revised version of the charter. Besides nuances brought into the principles of articles 9 and 12, the main innovation of the document was the addition of six new articles about the "urban and rural traditional ensembles", drawing a particular attention to economic and social aspects, upstream from architectural and historic considerations. This version was presented to the General Assembly in Moscow in May, but considered "more prolix and more obscure than the Charter itself", the text was rejected and the idea of a revision, temporarily abandoned in favour of the joint writing of an "explanatory note" and a "document on the ensembles" [36]. The documents produced by this new committee were never adopted either, and at the 1981 General assembly in Rome, the doctrinal section, under the presidency of Michel Parent, reaffirmed the validity of the Venice Charter despite Lemaire – outgoing President – and Roberto Di Stefano's plea for the adoption of a new document [37].

Despite the absence of tangible results, the mere existence of this revision project, as well as the energy put in the organisation of an international consultation leading to the Ditchley meeting, demonstrates the early awareness, at least for two of the main instigators of the charter, namely Gazzola and Lemaire, of its inadequate character to efficiently face the contemporary challenges of conservation. In fact, the perfectible character of the document had already been underlined by R.M. Lemaire during the writing process of the definitive version in 1964. In a letter to Gertrud Tripp, Austrian signatory, he wrote, in July 1964: "You certainly have been asking to yourself why I pushed so much, in Venice, towards the adoption of a document, of which I didn't ignore the imperfections. I was, and I am still convinced that the adoption of a text, even imperfect, was more desirable than any charter at all; provided that, of course, the writing would be corrected with a clear head afterwards" [38]. However, the definitive version differed only slightly from the text adopted at the congress. During the following years, despite the fact that article 14 rapidly proved to be insufficient to face the problem of the ensembles conservation, the argument stating that "a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" prevented the adoption of a revised text: rewriting a document, based on an international consensus and already fully adopted throughout the world seemed hazardous.

5. Conclusion

Sixty years on, the Venice Charter remains an international benchmark, despite changes in the field of heritage and the challenges it faces. This persistence, despite the recurring observations of its limitations and the distortions brought about by its translations, indicates a need on the part of the international community to have a common basis in a globalized world. Both the diversity of translations and the comments provided by certain national committees during the revision process also indicate the need for this common basis to be interpreted or adapted by each culture. These adaptations, in the form of different versions of the Charter, are part of its identity. There are of course isolated cases where the meaning of the charter has been intentionally misappropriated or misunderstood. For example, Lemaire always regretted the "many mistakes" perpetrated in the name of the Charter's article 9: "Haven't we come to believe, in certain circles", he asked, "that the mere essence of a safeguard operation is a modernist intervention in the edifice or neighbourhood?" [39]. As we have seen, this radical interpretation of Article 9 was mainly due to its English translation and many architects took advantage of it to justify their interventions. But in general, the translations should be seen as a response to the preamble to the charter entrusting each culture with the responsibility of "applying the plan within the framework of its own culture and traditions". Attempting to harmonise them would therefore be tantamount to erasing part of the identity of the charter which, like a historic monument, derives part of its value from the complexity of its history. But this does not mean that this history should not be observed with a critical eye. A close look at the iterations of the Venice Charter tells us a great deal about the cultural history of Europe and the world. And even if it is no doubt no longer sufficient to meet the current challenges of an ever-expanding heritage, it is an irreplaceable basis for intercultural dialogue, particularly on questions of principles and terminology. And in this respect, the universalist utopia it embodies remains as relevant today as ever.

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