

Looking at Colour on post-Antique Sculpture

Review of:

Circumlitio. The Polychromy of Antique and Medieval Sculpture. Proceedings of the Johann David Passavant Colloquium, 10-12 December 2008. Vinzenz Brinkmann, Oliver Primavesi, Max Hollein, eds. Liebighaus Skulpturensammlung, Frankfurt am Main, 2010

As Alex Potts points out in his essay, 'Colors of Sculpture', 'all sculpture is colored, in a literal sense'.¹ Yet, despite the fact that the addition of colour to objects as well as its presence as an inescapable fact of sculptural media makes imperative its inclusion in any consideration of sculptors' intentions and the meaning of their work, Amanda Claridge is right to note in her review,² that polychromed sculpture has been given short shrift in the post-enlightenment settlement.

The ideal of monochrome sculpture, often associated primarily with Winckelmann, was first articulated with real philosophical force by Johann Gottfried Herder and held such sway throughout the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and, more importantly, throughout the formative years of art history as a discipline, that polychromy was largely removed from the discussion and the predominance in sculptural taste and scholarship of form over colour was seldom deemed worthy of comment. Although the colouring of sculpture was never denied as a point of fact (as Oliver Primavesi points out in his article here, 'Artemis, Her Shrine and Her Smile: Winckelmann's Discovery of Ancient Greek Polychromy', 24-77), it came to be regarded in many contexts as essentially undesirable, leading, for example, to the wholesale stripping of polychromy from many of the greatest Netherlandish carved altarpieces. That the precise extent and nature of the polychromy of Jan Borman's *St George Altarpiece* in Brussels continues to be unknown testifies to the thoroughness and determination which characterised the efforts of the restorers who undertook its removal. The lingering, subliminal expectation that sculpture should be true to its materials gives polychromy a residual potential to shock and surprise, exploited by contemporary artists such as Gavin Turk whose exquisitely polychromed bronzes of everyday objects are matched in the hyper-realism of their surfaces by the unnerving, fleshy models of Ron Mueck, the ceramics of Victor Spinski and the wooden sculpture of Richard Haden.

Herder took the view that the whiteness and formal purity of classical sculpture permitted a sensory experience of a directness that engendered an equally pure 'feeling'. For him, this was central to the understanding and experience of the self. Jason Gaiger has pointed out that, in Herder's fragmentary text, 'On the

¹ Alex Potts, 'Colors of Sculpture' in Roberta Panzanelli, ed., with Eike Schmidt and Kenneth Lapatin, *The Color of Life*, exh. cat., J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum and the Getty Research Institute, 2008, 78-97, 78.

² 'Looking for Colour on Greek and Roman Sculpture' in this journal, this issue.

meaning of feeling', he rejected the Cartesian account of self-knowledge as an abstraction able to be grasped in isolation from the concrete world, in favour of one founded on sensory and emotional experience: not 'cogito ergo sum', but 'Ich fühle mich: ich bin!'; 'I feel: I am!'³ However, it was in his later essay, *Sculpture: some observations on shape and form from Pygmalion's creative dream*, that Herder first gave coherent voice in an art-critical context to the priority of form over colour, initiating a view of sculpture characterised by Alex Potts as the 'fetishization of achromy'.⁴

In the nineteenth century, the new technology of photography made the (monochrome) reproduction of sculpture often extremely beautiful, as seen in images made by Roger Fenton, Charles Nègre, Alphonse Eugène Hubert, John Beasley Greene and others.⁵ However, the relative lack of scholarly attention paid to colour in and on sculpture was not only an expression of aesthetic preference. Rather, it hardened, for some, into an article of faith concerning the absolute priority of form. In such instances, the subtlety of Herder's approach was, perhaps inevitably, lost and Potts' 'fetishisation of achromy' became manifest as an effective demonization of polychromy. This tendency was exemplified by Lord Balcarres (David Lindsay, the earl of Crawford) in his monograph on Donatello, published in 1903. Discussing the polychromed terracotta bust popularly known as a portrait of the Florentine politician and writer Niccolò da Uzzano, and most recently attributed, by Francesco Caglioti, to Desiderio da Settignano, Balcarres wrote that, 'The bust of Niccolò da Uzzano has gained its widespread popularity from its least genuine feature – namely the paint with which it is disfigured. The daubs of colour give it a fictitious importance, an actual realism which invests it with the illusion of living flesh and blood. This is all the more unfortunate, as the bust is a remarkable work, and does not gain by being made into a "speaking likeness". Its merits can best be appreciated in a cast, where the *form* is reproduced without the dubious *embellishments* of later times' [my italics].⁶

The study of painted, gilded and otherwise coloured sculpture has, of course, survived the disdain of Balcarres and his peers, though it often appears still to be regarded as a niche or specialist interest rather than a part of the mainstream of sculptural writing. Coverage of the field also remains patchy. Work attending to the polychromy of Italian sculpture of the fifteenth century, for example, remains relatively scarce. Pope-Hennessy touched on the subject and, though his primary focus was the pictorial relationship between painting and sculpture, his 1969 essay 'The Interaction of Painting and Sculpture in Florence in the Fifteenth Century' was the first extended discussion in English of a particular category of polychromed object, stucco reliefs of the *Virgin and Child*.⁷ Ulrich Middeldorf considered

³ Jason Gaiger, introduction to Johann Gottfried Herder, *Sculpture: some observations on shape and form from Pygmalion's creative dream*, trans. and ed., Jason Gaiger, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, 9.

⁴ Alex Potts, 'Colors of Sculpture' 2008, 78.

⁵ For a recent discussion of the photography of sculpture in the nineteenth century, see Roxana Marcoci ed., *The Original Copy: Photography of Sculpture, 1839 to Today*, exh. cat., MoMA, New York (New York: Museum of Modern Art 2010).

⁶ Lord Balcarres (David Lindsay, Earl of Crawford), *Donatello*, London: Duckworth & Co., 1903, 126.

⁷ John Pope-Hennessy, 'The Interaction of Painting and Sculpture in Florence in the Fifteenth Century', *The Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, vol. 117, 1969, 406-24.

collaboration between painters and sculptors in the polychroming practice of Neri di Bicci, the publication of whose *Ricordanze* by Bruno Santi in 1976 made available a substantial resource for the practical understanding of at least some part of the relationship between practitioners in the two arts.⁸ Helen Geddes' study of Jacopo della Quercia's *Trenta Polyptych* further examines the importance of polychromy in the early fifteenth century, whilst the question of the supposed decline in the importance of colour in sculpture has been addressed by Patrik Reuterswärd.⁹

Although the question of meaning in unpolychromed sculpture is discussed in Geraldine Johnson's, 'Art or Artefact: Madonna and Child Reliefs in the Early Renaissance', little of the literature deals with either the iconographic significance of polychromy or its relationship to the media it covers.¹⁰ Is it intended to transform, exalt, deny or transcend the material of the carved, modelled or cast object? In consequence, there remains in much of the scholarship touching on polychromy a divide between technical writing and historically interpretative texts. For example, although both Donatello's *Bardi Crucifix* and *Cavalcanti Annunciation* have been subjected to recent conservation and technical analysis, the literature produced in light of these campaigns has been largely descriptive of the processes and structures of their polychromy.¹¹ What little has been written beyond that, in the case of the *Annunciation*, has been either only tentatively analytical, as in the case of Brenda Preyer and Diane Finiello Zervas's 'Donatello's *Nunziata del Sasso*: the Cavalcanti Chapel at Santa Croce and its Patrons', or boldly speculative as in Ulrich Pfisterer's, *Donatello und die Entdeckung der Stile*.¹² The polychromy of the *Bardi Crucifix* has

⁸ Ulrich Middeldorf, 'Some Florentine Painted Madonna Reliefs', in John T. Paoletti and Wendy Stedman Sheard, eds., *Collaboration in Italian Renaissance Art*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978, 77-89; Neri di Bicci, *Le Ricordanze (10 Marzo 1453 – 24 Aprile 1475)*, ed. Bruno Santi, Pisa: Marlin 1976. Neri di Bicci's practice is more recently addressed in Giancarlo Gentilini, 'Desiderio in the Workshop: Masters and Pupils, Works and Clients mentioned in the Documentation and Sources', in Marc Bormand, Beatrice Paolozzi-Strozzi and Nicholas Penny, eds., *Desiderio da Settignano: Sculptor of Renaissance Florence*, exh. cat., Louvre, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Milan: 5 Continents/Musée du Louvre, 2007, 25-47, especially 36-8.

⁹ Helen Geddes, 'The Polychromy of early Italian sculpture: the marble altarpiece by Jacopo della Quercia in San Frediano, Lucca, 1412-22', *Sculpture Journal*, vol. 11, 2004, 32-48; Patrik Reuterswärd 'The Breakthrough of Monochrome Sculpture during the Renaissance', *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*, vol. 69, 2000, 125-149.

¹⁰ Geraldine Johnson, 'Art or Artefact: Madonna and Child Reliefs in the Early Renaissance' in Stuart Currie and Peta Motture, eds., *The Sculpted Object 1400-1700*, Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1997, 1-17, especially 2-7.

¹¹ For the technical analyses see Carlo Lalli, Pietro Moioli, Maria Rizzi, Claudio Seccaroni, Laura Speranza and Peter Stiberc, 'Il Crocifisso di Donatello nella Basilica di Santa Croce a Firenze. Osservazioni dopo il Restauro', *OPD Restauro*, vol. 18, 2006, 13-38 (also published as 'The Crucifix by Donatello at the Basilica of Santa Croce in Florence: Post-restoration Observations', *OPD Restauro: Supplement with English text*, vol. 18, 2006, 7-22); Andreina Andreoni, Francesca Kumar, Roberto Manni, and Maria Grazia Vaccari, 'Annunziata Cavalcanti: scheda di restauro', *OPD Restauro*, vol. 7, 1995, 185-92.

¹² See Diane Finiello Zervas and Brenda Preyer, 'Donatello's *Nunziata del Sasso*: the Cavalcanti Chapel at Santa Croce and its Patrons', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 150, no. 1260, March 2008, 152-65; Ulrich Pfisterer, *Donatello und die Entdeckung der Stile*, Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2002. Although Preyer and Zervas offer some commentary on the surface, this study is invaluable primarily for its unpicking of the patronage and later history of the object in relation to succeeding generations of the Cavalcanti family. The possibility that technical data might be interpreted in a variety of ways is underlined in Pfisterer's book, which proposes a reading of the *Annunciation* based on a very particular view of

been unremarked since its restoration, other than to note the excellence of its condition. No technical analysis or contextualising work on the polychromed surface of the Padua *Entombment*, Donatello's last great stone carving, has yet been published.

In recent decades, sculptural polychromy has nonetheless become an increasingly busy area of investigation. Technical case studies of the type produced with such care, lucidity and regularity by the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence have ensured that our understanding of the techniques of polychromy has grown enormously in recent years.¹³ Surveys of sculpture from particular regions and in specific media (usually wood), and the catalogues of thematic exhibitions, for example Raffaele Casciaro's, *Rinascimento Scolpito: Maestri del legno tra Marche e Umbria*, have provided a focus for both scholarship and viewing.¹⁴

On occasion, these have attained something of the sense of polychromed sculpture as part of a *gestalt* experience and, when confronted by polychromy in a context that gives space to its meaning and function as well as its curiosity, the public has responded with awe. Xavier Bray's 2009 exhibition of Spanish devotional sculpture and painting of the seventeenth century at the National Gallery in London, *The Sacred Made Real*, although dealing with a later historical moment than is principally at issue here, was a magnificent achievement, exploring the relationship between painting and sculpture in a culture where their mimetic quality is paramount for devotional and theological reasons and where the material realisation in wood and paint of the spiritual visions of affective meditation and ecstatic experience formed (and continue to form) a central part of religious practice.

Donatello's relationship to texts and to literary humanism. Interpretative analysis of the *Annunciation* is also offered in Maria Grazia Vaccari, 'The *Cavalcanti Annunciation*', *Sculpture Journal*, vol. 9, 2003, 19-37, which serves as a helpful sequel to the original OPD report.

¹³ See, for example, J. Bauermeister, Marco Ciatti and Antonello Pandolfo, 'I crocifissi lignei di Giovanni Pisano: proposte per un confronto tecnico', *OPD Restauro*, Ser. 1, no. 3, 1988, 153-64; Gianluigi Canocchi, Marco Ciatti, Antonello Pandolfo, 'La scultura dipinta. Nota su alcuni restauri', *OPD Restauro*, Ser. 1, no. 3, 1988, 29-41; Giorgio Bonsanti, Annamaria Giusti, Oriana Sartiani, Carlo Biliotti, Carlo Lalli and Arcangelo Moles, 'Stemma Martelli: scheda di restauro', *OPD Restauro*, vol. 12, 2000, 232-7. Studies of individual objects have also been supplemented by thematic analyses and methodological reports which deal with polychromy: see Peter Stiberc, 'La scultura lignea del Rinascimento fiorentino. Osservazioni sulla tecnica scultorea', *OPD Restauro*, vol. 17, 2005, 304-16; Annamaria Giusti, Carlo Biliotti and Cristina Samarelli, 'Alcuni casi di utilizzo del laser nella pulitura dei marmi', *OPD Restauro*, vol. 8, 1996, 120-6. This last deals in part at least with the extent to which gilding on marble statuary can be reclaimed using laser cleaning, for example on the marble niche figures of Orsanmichele. The individual reports on the conservation of polychromed objects by the OPD are too numerous to list here.

¹⁴ Raffaele Casciaro, ed., *Rinascimento Scolpito: Maestri del legno tra Marche e Umbria*, exh. cat., Convento di San Domenico, Camerino, Milan: Cinisello Balsamo, 2006. See also, for example, Paolo Biavati and Gaetano Marchetti, eds., *Antiche sculture lignee in Bologna: dal sec. XII al sec. XIX: trattazione generale e analisi estetica delle opere*, Bologna: Officina Grafica Bolognese, 1974; Clara Baracchini, ed., *Scultura lignea: Lucca 1200-1425*, exh. cat., Museo Nazionale di Palazzo Mansi – Museo Nazionale di Palazzo Guinigi, 2 vols., Florence: S.P.E.S., 1995; A. Bagnoli and R. Bartolini, eds., *Scultura Dipinta: Maestri di legname e pittori a Siena, 1250-1450*, exh. cat., Pinacoteca Nazionale di Siena, Florence: Centro Di, 1987. For work on individual objects and smaller exhibitions, the bibliographies of these examples are invaluable. See also Clara Baracchini and Giovanni Parmini, *Scultura Lignea dipinta: I materiali e le tecniche*, Florence: S.P.E.S., 1996. Spanish polychromed sculpture has also been the subject of numerous survey texts, among the earliest being Juan Antonio Güell y Lopez del Piélago Güell, *Escultura policroma religiosa española*, Paris: Établissements Dujardin, 1925.

The beautifully illustrated catalogue of that exhibition is an important addition to the recent scholarship of polychromy.¹⁵

The same is true of *Circumlitio*, the book at issue here. The resourcefulness and energy of its editors, Vinzenz Brinkman, Oliver Primavesi and Max Hollein, in organising the colloquium which brought about this body of work is matched by their vision, and that of Jan Stubbe Østergaard, founder of the Copenhagen Polychromy Network, in including scholars of medieval art among their classical peers. The value inherent in considering the ways that the appearance of sculpture is transformed by the application of surface treatments, and the impact such treatments have on its reception and understanding is not period-specific and the recognition of this is among the book's most useful aspects.

Although only five of the essays deal with the post-classical world, they make a broad and interesting group, approaching their various topics with both the surveyor's eye and the specialist's focus in two general texts and three case studies. The case studies deal respectively with a particular material, a particular sculptural project and the virtual reconstruction of a particular object. The surveys address the techniques employed by medieval polychromers and the variety of objects whose colour formed so prominent a part of the medieval visual field. Together, they provide both a swift introduction to the field of medieval polychromy and a series of deeply-sunk shafts, which give a tantalising sense of the riches remaining to be mined.

Harald Theiss's 'A Brief Overview of the Decorative Techniques Used in Sculptural Polychromy in the Middle Ages' (136-153) is precisely what its title suggests, but its brevity is no obstacle to its utility. Unusually, perhaps, for so specialist an article in an equally specialist collection, its discussion of both the methods and materials of medieval polychromy is couched in language of exemplary clarity in which technical jargon is kept to a minimum. The result is a direct, well-illustrated and illuminating text, which provides much of the basic information necessary to understanding exactly how, and with what, polychromed surfaces were made. The examples are apposite and the essay comprises the most compact and straightforward introduction to its subject currently available. It will be among the most consulted sections of the book, which may point up its one (minor) weakness, the result of its conversion from a conference paper; it might helpfully have shown the way, in footnotes, to more detailed specialist work on the various techniques it discusses. That it does not, however, detracts little from its essential and welcome quality.

If Theiss's essay has the aspect of a short, technical reference work, Stefan Roller's, 'The Polychromy of Mediaeval Sculpture: a Brief Overview' (338-355) is more akin to a personal journey through several centuries of sculpture and its associated scholarship. Roller chooses his objects carefully, dealing with work of the highest quality, giving a sense of their diversity of scale and material, and weaving them into a narrative which possesses elements born both of close looking and of the author's wide historical understanding. The discussion of the use of *Echtmaterialien*, 'real' materials, gives an impression of their sculptural possibilities as

¹⁵ Xavier Bray with Alfonso Rodríguez G. de Ceballos, Daphne Barbour and Judy Ozone, *The Sacred Made Real: Spanish Painting and Sculpture 1600-1700*, London: National Gallery Publications, 2009.

well as their colouristic contribution and the whole essay permits and encourages a view of polychromy which is far richer than the mere addition of colour to surfaces.

The three case studies enable the reader to approach some of the questions raised by Theiss and Roller in more detail. Dieter Köcher's 'Madder in Sources from Antiquity to the Middle Ages' (154-167) touches first on antique references but deals at greater length with the presence in medieval texts of one particular dyestuff. Köcher has little, on the face of it, to say about polychromy *per se*, but provides instead an object-lesson in tracing the genealogy of knowledge and the growth of a scientific approach to the materials used by artists and craftsmen in the period. The windows he opens on the demand for Flemish as opposed to other types of madder, for example, and on the regulation of its growth, preparation and trade underline the concerns for quality, price and the protection of markets that drove so much medieval trade.

Documenting the attempt on the part of the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg to recreate the freshly completed state of the surface of a fourteenth-century *St George*, Arnulf von Ulmann's 'The Virtual Reconstruction of Mediaeval Polychromy (382-392)' is a differently complicated project. The wooden figure, whose polychromy is of the subdued hues that might be expected after six hundred years or more, is dramatically reimagined with a perfection that seems all the more astonishing for its illustration not as a lone object but in a digitally reworked museum setting. Despite the sheeny brilliance of the proposed surface, however, the narrative of the reconstruction, framed by the technical considerations taken into account in its prosecution, makes clear the care with which the results were checked against the exact character of the materials used by the polychromers.

Nonetheless, no matter how careful the process by which the reconstruction was achieved and however great an appreciation it engenders of the high degree of skill deployed by the artists whose work it revives, the project does beg the question of how closely we are able to reproduce polychromy in a virtual environment. Von Ulmann is right to emphasise the loss of our sense of the richness of the original surface on the *St George*, but might not some of its nuance and subtlety equally have been lost in the construction of its avatar? The extent to which a precise technical knowledge of pigments, binding media, glazes and metal-leaf can be used to create an impression of the same effects as were at the disposal of polychromers continues to exercise classical archaeologists as well as medievalists; a cautionary note to that effect might have been worthwhile here. A similarly circumspect approach might have been taken to the suggestion that *St George* represents 'a monumental imitation of a work of goldsmithery', not because this is necessarily out of the question, but because the polychromy of sculpture has been shown elsewhere to have a life of its own, unrelated to the colouring of works on a smaller scale in precious metal and enamel.

An example where this is emphatically the case is Susie Nash's article, "'The Lord's Crucifix of costly workmanship': Colour, Collaboration and the Making of Meaning on the *Well of Moses*' (356-381). The essay discusses the polychromy of the *Well of Moses* at the Carthusian monastery of Champmol, made by Claus Sluter and Jean Malouel at the behest of Philip the Bold, duke of Burgundy at the close of the fourteenth century and the start of the fifteenth. In recent years, Nash has entirely reconfigured scholarly discussion of this most extraordinary sculptural ensemble

including, amongst other things, dismantling Panofsky's suggestion that it might have appeared as 'a Goldenes Roessl in enormous enlargement', and contending instead that the application of colour to the *Well of Moses* was not merely decorative but central to its meaning and function. In his conclusion, Von Ulmann touches on the same issue, in that instance linking the costume of the saint to the type of veneration he might have received. In Nash's contribution here, the connection is at the very heart of heart of a piece of work which, in many ways, exemplifies the rich possibilities of the combination of technical and interpretative studies that are suggested by *Circumlitio* in its entirety.

Starting with a brief survey of the historiography of the *Well*, Nash goes on to address the documentation of its polychromy, demonstrating the abundance of information to be gleaned from the archival record and giving a thorough overview of the progress of the work, covering materials, prices and the personnel of Sluter and Malouel's *équipes*. In a third section, she draws this technical and documentary material together with historical research concerning the cross's function, as determined by indulgences granted to it, by Carthusian devotional practice and by the personal history of Philip the Bold, constructing a reading of the ensemble as intricately coherent as the object itself. The sculptural programme of the well, as first reappraised in Nash's articles on the monument published in *The Burlington Magazine* in 2005, 2006 and 2008, has often been treated with reference primarily to either its style or its assumed content.¹⁶ However, the sheer comprehensiveness of Nash's scholarship, lightly worn and fluently expressed in those studies and this essay, demonstrates the inadequacy of previous approaches and makes here for a compelling piece of work which draws its conclusions with seeming inevitability. In company with the same author's recent article on the prices of artists' materials at Champmol, it confidently asserts the importance of polychromy not as a secondary adjunct to the study of classical or medieval sculpture but to the proper understanding of three-dimensional objects in any period.¹⁷

Susie Nash's article is fortunate in being furnished with some of the best full page photographs in the book, many of whose illustrations are on the small side. In general, however, their size is compensated for by their sharpness and clarity, the evident care with which they have been chosen and their sheer number. Appropriately for a book so concerned with materials, the importance and usefulness of *Circumlitio* is matched by the generosity and quality of its own manufacture. The paper stock and the binding are suitably substantial and the design, for which Cornelia Wruck should be congratulated, makes a book which is as much a pleasure to handle and look at as it is instructive and helpful to read. *Circumlitio* was made possible by the award of the Leibniz Prize to Oliver Primavesi in 2007. Would that more such awards were spent so productively. I hope very

¹⁶ Susie Nash, 'Claus Sluter's 'Well of Moses' for the Chartreuse de Champmol Reconsidered: part I', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 147, no. 1233, December 2005, 798-809; 'Claus Sluter's 'Well of Moses' for the Chartreuse de Champmol Reconsidered: part II', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 148, no. 1240, July 2006, 456-67; 'Claus Sluter's 'Well of Moses' for the Chartreuse de Champmol Reconsidered: Part III', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 150, no. 1268, November 2008, 724-41.

¹⁷ Susie Nash, 'Prices of Artists' Materials at the Chartreuse de Champmol', in Jo Kirby, Susie Nash and Joanna Cannon, eds., *Trade in Artists' Materials: Markets and Commerce in Europe to 1700*, London: Archetype, 2010), 97-182.

much that the prize at least allowed Professor Primavesi a good dinner in addition to providing the rest of us with such a good book.

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