

HOW THE QUATTROCENTO SAW ANCIENT SCULPTURE IN COLOR

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We generally assume that quattrocento artists studied ancient marble sculptures that had lost their original polychromy and that they therefore associated classicism with pure white.¹ Intellectuals and artists, however, had a broader definition of antiquity, which included colored objects.² But even if we take the narrowest definition of the classical—marble ancient Roman and Greek sculpture—textual evidence proves that Renaissance artists and intellectuals knew about ancient polychromy. Indeed, when Lorenzo Ghiberti bemoaned the iconoclasm of the early Middle Ages, he lamented the loss of this colorful antiquity: “All of the statues and pictures of such nobility and ancient

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and perfect dignity were dismantled and lacerated . . . and then in order to remove the ancient practice of idolatry, they decided to make all of the temples white. Since art was finished, the temples remained white for around 600 years.”³ Antiquity was colorful, the Dark Ages white.

Ghiberti and others imagined the lost marvels of antiquity by looking to ancient texts, a few of which clearly state that ancient marble sculpture was polychrome.⁴ Humanists and artists may have noticed passages about the painting of ancient marble sculpture in such sources as Plato’s *Republic* and Virgil’s *Eclogues*, but to find the most unambiguous reference to classical polychromy, they needed to go no further than Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History*, the text that was commonly cited by those seeking to reconstruct the glories of ancient art.⁵ Pliny praises the painter Nicias for his naturalistic depictions and recounts that the famous sculptor Praxiteles, when asked which of his own marble statues he liked best, answered, “Those which the hand of Nicias has touched.”⁶

This passage caught the eye of at least one Renaissance sculptor. Ghiberti paraphrases chunks of Pliny’s account, including in his section on ancient painting the passage about Nicias, who is praised, as he is in Pliny, for the painting of light and shadow, myths, horses, and dogs. Ghiberti tells the anecdote about Praxiteles, a bit garbled, as here he is called “Prositale” and, elsewhere in the same text, “Praxitele.”⁷ In other words, Ghiberti might not have realized that the tale was about the works of Praxiteles, but the passage clearly describes polychrome sculpture: “This is that Nicia about whom Prositale, when he was asked which of his marble works he would praise, responded: those on which Nicia has laid his hand.”⁸ Ghiberti added the phrase “del marmo” to remove any ambiguity. Ghiberti must have been struck by this account of polychrome marble sculpture, as he chose to include this passage and not others from Pliny’s chapters on artists.

In reconstructing the lost colors of antiquity, Renaissance artists and patrons may also have been able to see traces of pigment on mon-

umental sculpture.⁹ They certainly saw ancient sculptures made of colored stones, which take advantage of the materials to create a contrast between hues.¹⁰ Patrons also avidly collected cameos and other small, sculpted objects—in these, the variations of color in the stones are used to articulate the images.¹¹ Donatello was said to be an expert in polishing precious stones.¹² Artists imitated not only specific motifs and figures but also the idea of relief sculpture, in which the forms of the relief are highlighted by the use of color. Filarete's bronze doors for Saint Peter's in Rome, which, in their technology and imagery, are a triumphant rebirth of classicism, were ornamented with multicolored enamel.¹³ The enameled parts were rondels with profile portraits of the emperors, surely based on such small-scale ancient works. Likewise, Donatello, in making multicolored stucco narrative tondi for the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo, was essentially creating large-scale cameos, low relief sculptures with white figures set against a ground of a few colors (fig. 1).¹⁴ These precious sculptures were surely so avidly copied because they hinted at another antiquity, dazzling in its material richness. Humanists and artists mourned the loss of the fabled resplendent glory that ancient texts described, and cameos and other precious objects must have seemed to be relics of that literally golden (and red, blue, yellow, and purple) age.

Artists imitated this colorful antiquity by painting and gilding their marble sculptures from the duecento until the end of the quattrocento—a continuous tradition of polychrome sculpture from the early imitations of Roman marble sculpture until the time of Michelangelo. Technical examinations have revealed that such eminent monuments in the history of classicizing marble sculpture as the pulpits of Nicola and Giovanni Pisano, Arnolfo di Cambio's sculptures for the façade of the Duomo of Florence, the statues placed in the exterior niches of Orsanmichele, the tombs of Leonardo Bruni and Carlo Marsuppini, and the reliefs in the Tempio Malatestiano were originally gilded and painted in blue, red, green, and other hues.¹⁵ New technical examina-



Fig. 1. Donatello, *Saint John on Patmos*. Ca. 1428–29. Stucco and cocchiopesto. San Lorenzo, Florence. (Photo: author).

tions continue to reveal traces of polychromy. In other words, it is not the Renaissance that had lost the colors of antiquity, but rather we that have lost the colors of the Renaissance.

Renaissance artists also created polychrome works in terracotta, stucco, and wax, which were considered to be classical media in the quattrocento. Pliny describes their use, praising terracotta as less expensive, but potentially more artful, than gold.¹⁶ This passage was cited by scholars and artists, including Petrarch, Biondo Flavio, Filarete, and Leon Battista Alberti.¹⁷ Surviving sculptures also attested to the classical use of terracotta and stucco. Ancient terracotta vases with reliefs in blue, red, and black were admired in Arezzo since the due-

cento, collected by Lorenzo de' Medici, and compared to Donatello's sculptures.¹⁸ Even before the rediscovery of the Domus Aurea, ancient stucco reliefs were visible in Rome.¹⁹ These classical works seem to have been, for the most part, monochromatic, if not always white—Pliny mentions clay statues being tinted red, and stuccoes that survive are generally white. Renaissance humanists and artists, however, seem to have assumed that these works were multicolored. In one of Petrarch's dialogues, Pleasure says: "I like colored sculptures," and Reason responds with a discussion of sculpture in stucco, wax, and clay, paraphrasing Pliny.²⁰ It is possible (although not the most likely interpretation) to read "colored sculptures" as sculptures that are each tinted only one color, but Renaissance artists seem to have imagined even these monochromatic ancient sculptures as polychrome. The quattrocento sculptures made of these classical media are painted and glazed in a panoply of colors (e.g., fig. 2). Likewise, when Pliny writes of tinting stucco red by using ground pottery, he seems to be describing a work that is monochrome, but Donatello used this ancient technique to create fields of red color in his three- and four-color reliefs in the Old Sacristy (fig. 1).²¹ Many of these Renaissance polychrome sculptures were, in later centuries, painted brown or white to simulate bronze or marble—even now, as I witnessed in recent visits to the laboratories of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure in Florence, restorers are removing these monochromatic veils to reveal realistic polychromy—the true colors of the quattrocento.²²

The classical sculpture that Pliny lauded and Donatello, Ghiberti, and others sought to resurrect seemed alive. Pliny devoted praise to a disconcertingly real sculpture of a lame man, depicted so vividly that viewers could feel the pain of his ulcer—another passage Ghiberti translates.²³ In the early quattrocento, Cennino Cennini suggested that ancient sculptures were so convincing because of the practice of live casting.²⁴ Filippino Lippi painted such a living antiquity—a polychrome statue of Mars that becomes animate (fig. 3).²⁵ Color is integral to both the splendor of the most elevated images and the earthiness



Fig. 2. Style of Andrea della Robbia, bust of a youth. 1450–1500. Glazed terracotta. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (Photo: <http://www.metmuseum.org>).

of the most pitifully human ones. This colorful antiquity—bleeding, blushing, and glittering—is what was reborn in the quattrocento.²⁶ It is the bleaching and abstraction of classicism at the beginning of the cinquecento that is the anomaly. What would Ghiberti have thought of this new age of white?

I offer my warm thanks to Joost Keizer, Laura Speranza, Rachel Boyd, and Anthony D’Elia.



Fig. 3. Filippino Lippi, statue of Mars, detail from *St. Philip Driving the Demon from the Temple at Hierapolis*. 1487–1502. Fresco. Santa Maria Novella, Florence. (Photo: author).

NOTES

1. M. Collareta, "From Color to Black and White, and Back Again: The Early Middle Ages and Early Modern Times," in *The Color of Life: Polychromy in Sculpture from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. R. Panzanelli (Los Angeles: 2008), 72–3; J. S. Østergaard, "The Polychromy of Antique Sculpture: A Challenge to Western Ideals?" in *Circumlitio: The Polychromy of Antique and Mediaeval Sculpture*, ed. E. Brinkmann, O. Primavesi, and M. Hollein (Munich: 2010), 78–9; and, for a discussion that problematizes the polychrome/monochrome binary, F. Fehrenbach, "Coming Alive: Some Remarks on the Rise of Monochrome Sculpture in the Renaissance," *Source* 30, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 47–55. For a suggestion that Medieval viewers (including Niccolò and Giovanni Pisano) might have recognized that ancient statues were "old sculptures that had lost their paint," see P. Reuterswärd, "The Breakthrough of Monochrome Sculpture during the Renaissance," *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift* 69 (2000): 128, 137.
2. A. Nagel and C. S. Wood, "What Counted as an 'Antiquity' in the Renaissance," in *Renaissance Medievalisms*, ed. K. Eisenbichler (Toronto: 2009), 53–74.
3. "tutte le statue e le picture furon disfatte e lacerate di tanta nobiltà et anticha e perfetta dignità . . . E poi levare via ogni anticho costume di ydolatria, constituirono i templi tutti essere bianchi. . . . Finita che fu l'arte, stettero e templi bianchi circa d'anni 600," L. Ghiberti, *I commentarii* (*Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, II, I, 333*), ed. L. Bartoli (Florence: 1998), 83. See also C. Gilbert, "Ghiberti on the Destruction of Art," *I Tatti Studies in The Italian Renaissance* 6 (1995): 135–44; Collareta, 68; and S. B. McHam, *Pliny and the Artistic Culture of the Renaissance: The Legacy of the Natural History* (New Haven: 2013), 112–13.
4. O. Primavesi, "Plastica policroma nella letteratura antica? Proposte di nuova lettura," in *I colori del bianco: Policromia nella scultura antica* (Rome: 2004), 290–314.
5. Primavesi, 295–97 (Plato, *Republic* IV: 420 C–D), 301–02 (Virgil, *Eclogues* VII: 29–32), 305–06 (Pliny, *Natural History* XXXV: 133). For the quattrocento reception of the *Republic*, see J. Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden: 1991), I: 105–54. The first Latin translation was in 1402 (Hankins, I: 110). On the reception of the *Eclogues* in the trecento and quattrocento, see V. Zabughin, *Vergilio nel rinascimento italiano* (Bologna: 1921), I: 42–3, 51–3, 203–05, 231–77. On the immense popularity of Pliny, see C. Nauert, Jr., "C. Plinius Secundus (Naturalis Historia)," *Catalogus translationum et*

- commentariorum* IV (1980): 297–422; and McHam, *Pliny*, especially pp. 103–21 on Alberti and Ghiberti.
6. “quibus Nicias manum admovisset,” Latin in Pliny the Elder, *The Elder Pliny’s Chapters on the History of Art*, trans. K. Jex-Blake and ed. E. Sellers (St. Clair Shores: 1968?), 156, 158 (my translation).
 7. Ghiberti, *I commentarii*, 62, 79–80. See also, on Ghiberti’s use of Pliny (as opposed to Alberti’s refusal to do so), the introduction to the same volume, pp. 23–5.
 8. “Questo è quello Nicia el quale diceva Prositale, quando egli era domandato quali delle sue opere del marmo spetialmente egli lodasse, egli rispondea ove a Nicia porta le mani,” Ghiberti, *I commentarii*, 79–80, also cited, but not discussed, in McHam, *Pliny*, 335. For Ghiberti’s use of Pliny in general, see McHam, *Pliny*, 109–21.
 9. For polychromy on the Parthenon remaining in the eighteenth century and polychromy on the Laocoön visible in old photographs, see V. Brinkmann, “The Polychromy of Ancient Greek Sculpture,” in *The Color of Life: Polychromy in Sculpture from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. R. Panzanelli (Los Angeles: 2008), 31, and V. Brinkmann, “Statues in Colour: Aesthetics, Research and Perspectives,” in *Circumlitio: The Polychromy of Antique and Mediaeval Sculpture*, ed. E. Brinkmann, O. Primavesi, and M. Hollein (Munich: 2010), 13.
 10. A. Averlino, il Filarete, *Trattato di architettura*, ed. A. M. Finoli and L. Grassi (Milan: 1972), I: 75. P. P. Bober and R. Rubinstein, *Renaissance Artists & Antique Sculpture: A Handbook of Sources* (London: 1986), 77–8, 87.
 11. Filarete, *Trattato di architettura* II, 679–81; Bober and Rubinstein, *Renaissance Artists*, 54, 74–5, 81, 104–5, 155–7, 202–3; and L. Fusco and G. Corti, *Lorenzo de’ Medici, Collector and Antiquarian* (Cambridge: 2006), 94–106.
 12. Filarete, *Trattato di architettura* I, 75.
 13. J. Pope-Hennessy, *Italian Renaissance Sculpture*, 3rd ed. (New York: 1985), 318.
 14. See also E. J. Shepherd, “L’antico e Donatello. Archeologia e sperimentazione tecnica,” in *Donatello e la Sagrestia Vecchia di San Lorenzo: Temi, studi, proposte di un cantiere di restauro* (Florence: 1986), 55.
 15. For Arnolfo, see L. Speranza, “Marmo e colore: Due scoperte recenti su monumenti medievale a Firenze restaurati dall’Opificio delle Pietre Dure,” in *Il colore nel medioevo: Arte, simbolo, tecnica: Pietra e colore: Conoscenza, conservazione e restauro della policromia*,” ed. P. A. Andreuccetti and I. L. Cervelli (Lucca: 2009), 75–6. For the Tempio Malatestiano, see, in the

- same volume, C. Muscolino, “Policromie ritrovate nei rilievi del Tempio Malatestiano di Rimini,” 139–48. For the Marsuppini tomb and other works, see, in the same volume, A. Giusti, “Il contributo del restauro per la conoscenza della policromia su pietra,” 177–84. For Donatello’s *Saint Mark* at Orsanmichele, see A. M. Giusti et al., “San Marco,” *OPD Restauro*, special issue, *Il restauro del marmo* (1986): 134–50. On the Pisani, Orsanmichele, and the tombs, see A. Andreuccetti, *La policromia della scultura lapidea in Toscana tra XIII e XV secolo* (Florence: 2008), 91–3, 98–101, 115–18.
16. Pliny, *History of Art*, 174–81 (*Natural History* bk. 35: ch. II). On the reception of these passages and terracotta and stucco sculpture in the quattrocento, see McHam, *Pliny*, 117–20.
 17. On stucco, see L. B. Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. J. Rykwert, N. Leach, and R. Tavernor (Cambridge, MA: 1988), 177 (bk. VI: ch. IX); and Filarete, *Trattato di architettura* I: 256. On terracotta, see F. Biondo, *Rome restaurée: Roma instaurata*, ed. and trans. A. Raffarin (Paris: 2012), II: 200–03 (bk. III: ch. LXXV), and Petrarch, cited below.
 18. Shepherd, “L’antico e Donatello,” 54.
 19. Filarete, *Trattato di architettura* I: 256, mentions stucco reliefs visible in the Coliseum and other ancient buildings.
 20. *De remediis utriusque fortunae* (I: 41), translated into Italian in M. Bettini, *Francesco Petrarca sulla arti figurative: Tra Plinio e sant’Agostino* (Livorno: 2002), 62, and discussed on p. 50.
 21. Shepherd, “L’antico e Donatello,” 52–7; C. Danti, “Gli stucchi di Donatello,” in *Brunelleschi e Donatello nella Sagrestia Vecchia di San Lorenzo* (Florence: 1989), 56–9.
 22. I am grateful for the generous insights of Dr. Laura Speranza at the Opificio. For cleanings that revealed original polychromy under layers of white or dark brown, see examples in P. Bacci, *Francesco di Valdambrino, emulo di Ghiberti e collaboratore di Jacopo della Quercia* (Siena: 1936).
 23. Pliny, *History of Art*, 47–9; Ghiberti, *I commentarii*, 61.
 24. C. Cennini, *Il libro dell’arte*, ed. F. Frezzato (Vicenza: 2003), 208 (CLXXXV). On the passage, see also N. Gramaccini, “Das genaue Abbild der Natur—Ricciis Tiere und die Theorie des Naturabgusses seit Cennino Cennini,” in *Natur und Antike in der Renaissance* (Frankfurt: 1986), 198–225, esp. 206–07; and R. Panzanelli, “Compelling Presence: Wax Effigies in Renaissance Florence,” in *Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure* (Los Angeles: 2008), 17, 18.

25. See A. Nagel, *The Controversy of Renaissance Art* (Chicago: 2011), 121–24.
26. On quattrocento classicism as colorful and lively, see A. Warburg, “Sandro Botticelli (1898),” in *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance*, trans. D. Britt (Los Angeles: 1999), 161.