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
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.\textsuperscript{7} 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.\textsuperscript{4} Humanists and artists may have noticed passages about the painting of ancient marble sculpture in such sources as Plato\textquoteleft s Republic and Virgil\textquoteleft s Eclogues, but to find the most unambiguous reference to classical polychromy, they needed to go no further than Pliny the Elder\textquoteleft s Natural History, the text that was commonly cited by those seeking to reconstruct the glories of ancient art.\textsuperscript{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, \textquoteleft Those which the hand of Nicias has touched.\textquoteright\textsuperscript{6}

This passage caught the eye of at least one Renaissance sculptor. Ghiberti paraphrases chunks of Pliny\textquoteleft 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 \textquoteleft Prositale\textquoteright and, elsewhere in the same text, \textquoteleft Praxitele.\textquoteright In other words, Ghiberti might not have realized that the tale was about the works of Praxiteles, but the passage clearly describes polychrome sculpture: \textquoteleft 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.\textquoteright Ghiberti added the phrase \textquoteleft del marmo\textquoteright 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\textquoteleft 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. They certainly saw ancient sculptures made of colored stones, which take advantage of the materials to create a contrast between hues. 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. Donatello was said to be an expert in polishing precious stones. 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. 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). 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. New technical examina-
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. This passage was cited by scholars and artists, including Petrarch, Biondo Flavio, Filarete, and Leon Battista Alberti. 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 dialogs, 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 tincting 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
of the most pitifully human ones. This colorful antiquity—bleeding, blushing, and glittering—is what was reborn in the quattrocento. 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. 1497–1502. Fresco. Santa Maria Novella, Florence. (Photo: author).
NOTES


commentariorum IV (1980): 297–422; and McHam, Pliny, especially pp. 103–21 on Alberti and Ghiberti.


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.


12. Filarete, Trattato di architettura I, 75.


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

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.


22. I am grateful for the generous insights of Dr. Laura Speranza at the Opiificio. 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.