



Mediterranean Polychromies in Medieval Art: for a *Corpus* of colored sculpture between East and West

The joint project of a database on color and its multiple artistic applications and functions arises from the fruitful comparison of data relating to polychrome sculptures of the Middle Ages in the East and West. The database classifies and systematizes the results of different studies focusing on an early chronology, often affected by the lacking of interests and case studies. The areas that will be taken into consideration are those of sculpture in stone (marble in particular), wood, terracotta, ivory and stucco, in monumental and museum contexts. A comparative look that takes into account the artistic media offers the opportunity to reflect on specific technical skills, common practices and aesthetic and visual effects in the use of color.

Among the aspects considered there is the use of polychromy to mask or hide the surface, to articulate the space of the representation, to enhance structurally relevant or visually significant elements.

East

Unlike Western developments, in which figurative statuary presents a wide spectrum of chromatic possibilities, in line with the most ancient expressions of sculpture of Roman derivation, in Byzantium this is true only for the Tetrarchic and Late Antique periods. The Justinian and Middle Byzantine periods coincide with a more marked preference for ornamental sculpture, with an architectural function or reserved for liturgical furnishings. The polychromy is present in these cases with non-mimetic intentions, to bring out the two-dimensional visual aspect and the contrast between the background and the ornamental pattern (figg. 1-3). The cases of "contamination" between different artistic techniques (fig. 1) are particularly significant in such a context – according to the taste for the *poikilia*. From a technical point of view, the data collected show a multiple variety of polychromy solutions (pigments directly applied on the surfaces, preparation with natural media, additions of mastics, finishes with metallic elements). The cross-analysis of the procedures led to unexpected results regarding the workshops and the use of materials locally available.



Fig. 1 - Sebaste of Phrygia (Turkey), Northern church, marble templon (detail), *champlevé* with gold pigments.

Fig. 2 - Kütüküyalı (Istanbul), Katholikon, marble cornice with blue pigments on the background.

Fig. 3 - Istanbul, Kariye Camii, small marble capital with red and gold pigments.



West

Important traces of color characterize many works belonging to European medieval arts.

The study of sculpture has now highlighted the relevance of polychromy in the field of religious and symbolic meaning in relation to theological thought (figg. 4-5), without forgetting the theme of the mimesis of nature and secular symbolism (fig. 6).

But what is the role of color used on stone sculptures in the wider figurative culture that also makes use of materials such as wood, ivory and terracotta? Is it possible to understand the cultural models underlying the different development of two artistic conceptions such as the eastern and the western one?

What are the common starting points, the contaminations and the divergences? Is it possible to outline a geography of color?

This new project will try to go beyond single case studies in order to outline a history of color in the two different cultural areas.

Fig. 4 - Paris, Musée du Louvre, Virgin with the Child (detail), colored stone, Lorraine, c. 1330.

Fig. 5 - Bourges, Cathedral of St. Stephen, capital with azure colour on the background, northern door.

Fig. 6 - Abbey of Fontevraud, tomb effigy of Eleanor of Aquitaine and Henry II.



Short Bibliography

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Paola Antonella Andreuccetti
Istituto Storico Lucchese
e-mail: paolaanto088@gmail.com

Silvia Pedone
Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei
e-mail: silvia.pedone@lincei.it