

The Language of Polychrome: The Use of Color in Art and Architecture during the Imperial Age

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## Introduction

In July 2022, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City opened an exhibition called *Chroma: Ancient Sculpture in Color*. It was meant to present the history of polychromy and the usage of color during antiquity. The exhibition itself was set up in their large galleries of Greek and Roman art with reconstructions of very bright, colorful statues in proximity to the original works of art<sup>1</sup>. People found the exhibition ‘jarring’ as the use of bright opaque colors was so unlike the solid white marble sculptures they were used to seeing<sup>2</sup>(see fig. 1). Scholars had many criticisms about the use of color in this exhibition but the main focus here is that the polychromy of antiquity brings up a lot of debate in the art history world. Science can only reveal so much and interpretations will always be that, interpretations. However, it is clear that the use of color was extremely important to the people of antiquity, and whether the painting was barely visible or completely opaque, it was there. During the imperialization of Rome, emperors used color in monuments and architecture, through paint or polychrome marble, as a strategic method for raising their status and credibility. Painted sculpture and colored marble was used as a language of aesthetic and power.

## Where Did the Color Go?

The idea of the ‘pure white’ marble can be traced back to the late 18th century when Neoclassical art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann published his two-volume *History of Ancient Art* in 1764. Neoclassicism (1750-1830) coincided with the enlightenment and alongside the ‘idealism of free thinkers’<sup>3</sup> the aesthetic of classical antiquity was becoming more popular. With this idealization, its name rivals the classical identity with the prefix ‘neo-’, suggesting a new form of the known Greco-Roman style<sup>4</sup>. Through their own ideas of beauty, the Neoclassicists imitated Greek and Roman art based on their looks rather than the classical study,

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<sup>1</sup>“Chroma: Ancient Sculpture in Color” The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/chroma>

<sup>2</sup>Zachary Small, “That Painted Greek Maiden at the Met: Just Whose Vision Is She?” The New York Times, August 17th, 2022.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/17/arts/design/reproductions-museums-sculpture-met-brinkmann-antiquity-polychromy.html>

<sup>3</sup>Hugh Honour, “Introduction.” In *Neo-Classicism*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1968) 13.

<sup>4</sup> Honour, “Introduction,” 14.

ultimately creating ‘stillborn’ renditions of Greco-Roman sculpture<sup>5</sup>. This aesthetic emphasized simplicity and venerated motifs such as long drapery, corinthian columns, and white marble<sup>6</sup>, all which added to the dream-like quality commonly attributed to this Neoclassical style. This simple, soft, and hyper idealized beauty can be found in sculptures from artists such as Antonio Canova (1757-1822) and J. H. Dannecker (1758-1841) (sculptures including *Cupid and Psyche* (see fig. 2) and *Sappho* (see fig. 3)). These works are, and always have been, pure white marble.

Winckelmann played a large role in this ‘aestheticization’ with his particular hyperfixation on Greek sculpture. In the telling of the *History of Ancient Art*, he is thought to have “taught others how to look at [art] and fall in love with it”<sup>7</sup>. The first book of Volume I *History of Ancient Art* is dedicated to “The origin of Art”<sup>8</sup> covering Greek, Roman, and Egyptian art. In this book he writes of Parian marble, a prestigious marble found in Paros<sup>9</sup>, under a section titled “Materials Used in Statuary”:

“On account of the homogeneousness of its substance and its composition, suitable for all sorts of work; and as its color resembles that of a pure white skin, it has for this reason also obtained the preference.”<sup>10</sup>

The uses of the words homogeneousness and pure stand out as a way to describe the lacking of blemishes or imperfections. The first edition had no reference to polychromy but after 1814 when Antoine-Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy published *Le Jupiter Olympien ou l’art de la sculpture antique considérée sous un nouveau point de vue*, mentioning the use of polychromy to hide imperfections in classical sculptures, “On Painted Statues” was added to Winckelmann's section on material<sup>11</sup>. From what is there, it does not say much about polychromy but does describe colors on a statue to Diana found in Herculaneum:

<sup>5</sup>Cited in: William Fitzgerald, “Why Neoclassicism,” *The Living Death of Antiquity* (2022): 13 (<sup>34</sup> Rosenblum (1967: 3))

<sup>6</sup> Fitzgerald, “Why Neoclassicism,” 29.

<sup>7</sup> Fitzgerald, “Why Neoclassicism,” 14.

<sup>8</sup>Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *The History of Ancient Art*, trans. G. Henry Lodge (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, 1968), 29.

<sup>9</sup>Mark Bradley, “Colour and Marble in Early Imperial Rome” *The Cambridge Classical Journal*, Vol. 52 (2006): 10

<sup>10</sup>Winckelmann, *The History of Ancient Art*, 46.

<sup>11</sup>Fitzgerald, “Why Neoclassicism,” 52.

“Painting marble figures so as to represent the dress, of which an example is furnished in a Diana...The hair is blond; the upper garment is white; so also is the tunic, around the lower part of which run three stripes. The lowest stripe is narrow and gold-colored; the next is broader, and of a purple color, and ornamented with white flowers and scrolls; the third is of the same color as the second.”<sup>12</sup>

Although he admits to the use of polychromy, Winckelmann did not believe that color was an aesthetical trait of classical antiquity to be praised. ‘Colour contributes to beauty, but it is not beauty itself, though it generally enhances beauty and its forms. Since white is the color that reflects the most rays of light, and this is most easily perceived, a beautiful body will be the most beautiful the whiter it is.’<sup>13</sup> In contradiction to his erasure of color from the ideal beauty, the Greeks and Romans used color to enhance form and bring the divine figures into the world of the living.

### **Color in Ancient Rome**

Color traces have been found on objects going back to the 6th century BC; Etruscan terracotta architecture, antifixes, cult statues, and sarcophagi all would have been painted brightly. Terracotta temples were known for having dark red and yellow decorative patterns with eastern motifs painted onto the roof tiles. The same colors were used on the antifixes which show similar pigment traces. Natural pigments were used like iron-oxides for red and darker pigments, while ochre was used to create orange/yellow colors<sup>14</sup>. The colors seen today are very faded but one can only imagine how bright they would have looked at the time they were originally painted.

Etruscan statues also had a reputation for being polychrome. Apollo of Veii (fig. 4) is a large Etruscan statue with pigment traces that are very clear to the naked eye. The dark skin and bright garb creates a stark contrast that we can assume at one time was a more vibrant pigment.

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<sup>12</sup> Winckelmann, *The History of Ancient Art*, 45.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in: Cited in: William Fitzgerald, “Why Neoclassicism,” *The Living Death of Antiquity* (2022): 13 (<sup>199</sup> Winckelmann (2006: 195))

<sup>14</sup>G. Barone, M. Fugazzotto, P. Mazzoleni, S. Raneri, A. Russo, “Color and painting techniques in Etruscan Architectural Slabs, Dyes and Pigments,” Vol. 171, (2019) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dyepig.2019.107766>.



As painted objects were primed with a cream preparation layer before laying over other colors<sup>15</sup>, it is possible that the clothing was not white originally. Looking at the dark brown sections on his dress, it is possible that these were once purple. It is hypothesized that purple and blue pigments were created by painting azurite over red pigments which turned to a brown color over time<sup>16</sup>. Bold pigments were used to increase visibility and distinguish heroic or divine figures<sup>17</sup>; although it is not clear exactly what this statue would have looked like, the tradition of color goes back many centuries and has been an important tool utilized by the future Roman leaders.

Polychromy as a tool was very prevalent during the imperialization of Rome. As a means for visibility and declaration of strength, the emperors did not shy away from including color in their monuments. The emperor Trajan ruled over Rome from 98 AD to 117 AD and was praised for his military victory over the Dacians in the early 2nd century. In his Forum is a free standing column built in 113 AD<sup>18</sup> with a spiral relief depicting the victory along with preparations, battle scenes, fortifications, and executions. With figures stacked almost on top of each other, there is very little detail left out of the jam-packed relief and there is evidence that the column was covered with color. Colors have come and gone due to rain, time, sun damage, and patinas from oxidation. In 1998, M. Del Monte of the University of Bologna with P. Ausset and R. A. Lefevre of the Paris-East Créteil University published a study titled *Traces of Ancient Colours on Trajan's Column*. They completed a series of tests on the chemical properties of the pigments left on the column. They found a large amount of red pigments, more specifically cinnabar, on and involving Trajan's figure (in scene XCIV, red pigment was found on his cloak (fig. 5)<sup>19</sup>. Out of the 155 scenes, Trajan appears 97 times and the color red was used as an identifier. The red pigment cinnabar, was an expensive pigment in which the cost was known to the public. Traces of cinnabar are also found on Augustus' Prima Porta statue and high-grade sculpture<sup>20</sup>. With the

<sup>15</sup> G. Barone, M. Fugazzotto, P. Mazzoleni, S. Raneri, A. Russo, "Color and painting techniques in Etruscan Architectural Slabs, Dyes and Pigments,"

<sup>16</sup> G. Barone, M. Fugazzotto, P. Mazzoleni, S. Raneri, A. Russo, "Color and painting techniques in Etruscan Architectural Slabs, Dyes and Pigments,"

<sup>17</sup> Mark Bradley, "The Importance of Colour on Ancient Marble Sculpture," *Art History*, Vol 32 no.3 (June 2009): 435. DOI:10.1111/j.1467-8365.2009.00666.x

<sup>18</sup> M. Del Monte, P. Ausset, and R. A. Lefevre "Traces of Ancient Colours on Trajan's Column" *Archaeometry* 40, no. 2 (February 1998): 404.

<sup>19</sup> Monte, Ausset, and Lefevre, "Traces of Ancient Colours on Trajan's Column," 410.

<sup>20</sup> Bradley, "The Importance of Colour on Ancient Marble Sculpture," 438.

connection to prestige and honor, the use of this pigment in relation to the emperor and his victory was a choice made that directly puts him alongside other venerable figures.

### Polychrome Marble

Material has always held connotations regarding class and prestige, so when marble debuted in Rome as a symbol of their connection with Greece, it became an advertisement for imperial expansion. High quality white marble was found along the islands of the Mediterranean and praised for its illuminating qualities. One of the most prestigious white marbles was mentioned by Winckelmann previously when he referred to the Parian marble found in Paros. Although it was white in color, its elite status came from the translucency<sup>21</sup>. Augustus chose for his prima porta statue to be carved from this marble for its qualities but it was still painted with red and blue pigments of cinnabar and Egyptian blue<sup>22</sup>. Patinas, glazes, and sheens were more common on this marble as it didn't completely cover the material, just colored it enough so that the light could still shine through. The goal was not to replace the color but enrich the existing one<sup>23</sup>. This shows the balance between the importance of color and the material.

As previously stated, the use of different types of marble was a way for the emperors to show off their imperial expansion. After Augustus defeated Egypt in 30 BC, the world of colored marbles opened up and they did not shy from using them. Polychrome marbles were starting to be used in bath houses with the inclusion of local stones, such as travertine, and the contrast between the familiar and exotic became a 'poetic exercise' for those who entered<sup>24</sup>. Subject matters were enriched by the use of polychrome: ranges of yellow (*giallo antico*) and cream marbles were used to imitate old cult statues, *scisto verde* imitated oxidizing bronze statues, and *rosso antico* was used in decorative fashions<sup>25</sup>. It became easy for the educated elite to identify the different marbles and telling them apart became a sort of game<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup>Bradley, "Colour and Marble in Early Imperial Rome," 17.

<sup>22</sup>Bradley, "The Importance of Colour on Ancient Marble Sculpture," 438.

<sup>23</sup>Bradley, "Colour and Marble in Early Imperial Rome," 17.

<sup>24</sup>Bradley, "Colour and Marble in Early Imperial Rome," 4.

<sup>25</sup>Bradley, "Colour and Marble in Early Imperial Rome," 1.

<sup>26</sup>Bradley, "Colour and Marble in Early Imperial Rome," 5.

Polychrome marbles were used very intentionally. Egyptian red porphyry was commonly used for imperial statues and structures and quickly became the color associated with political authority. Not only was it a symbol of the expansion into Egypt, but a symbol of physical strength and ability due to colored marble being harder to carve. The color comes from organic impurities which reduces the durability of the stone, thus it crumbles easier<sup>27</sup>. Larger blocks for large scale projects were much more difficult to acquire because they would fall apart. This knowledge was not a secret and the fragility only made its usage more impressive. The Pantheon, rebuilt by Hadrian in the early 2nd century AD, has one of the most impressive collections of polychrome marbles. The porticus holds 16 large columns of pink and gray granite from Egypt and interior marbles (red porphyry, pavonazzetto, Numidian yellow) from Asia Minor (fig. 6&7). As a grand monument to multiple gods and the largest dome in the region, the Pantheon held excellence in religious, architectural, and artistic regards while also boasting its imperial geography. The grandeur is only enhanced by the use of polychrome marble.

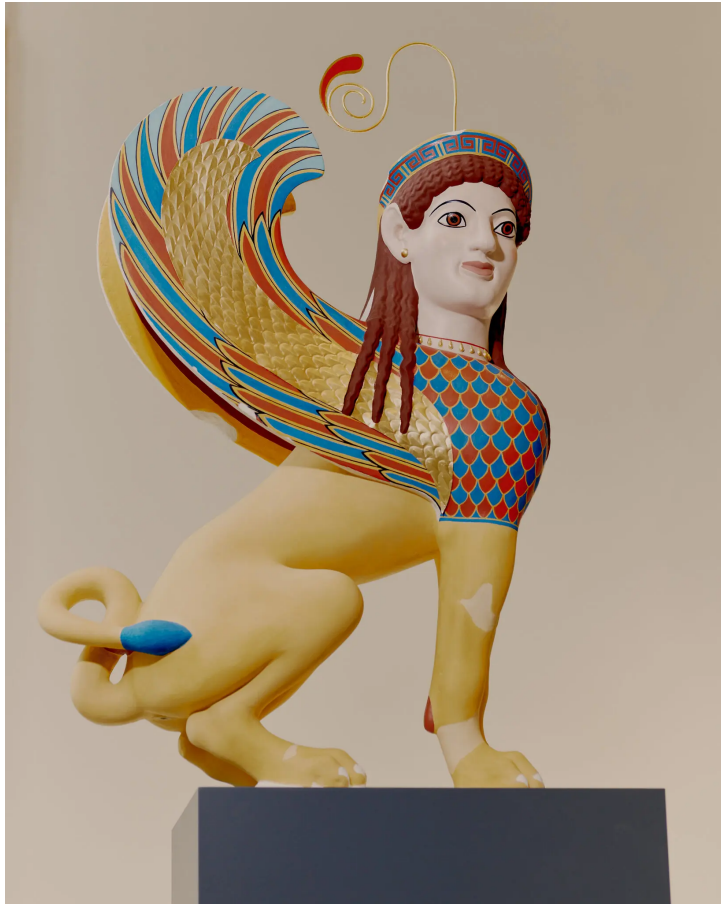
Neoclassical sculpture and its aesthetic have had an impact on how classical antiquity is viewed. In modern-day Rome, tourists have a high demand for tickets to the Villa Borghese museum to see the Bernini and Canova pieces. The first floor is filled with this sculpture, pieces that are impressive in their own right, but tucked away in the corners and against the walls are polychrome marble statues made from *nero antico* and white marble (fig. 8). The floors are also beautifully tiled in many different colors of green, red, and white marbles. It might seem ‘jarring’ for people to start thinking about the use of polychrome marble and paintings in ancient Roman art and architecture, but their use of color is like a secret right under everyone’s nose. Its presence was not only aesthetic but also existed in the realms of the social, political, and economic for the Romans. Every marble and paint used was intentionally, holding meaning that was known for the everyday person. The language of color was almost lost due to time and opposing ideas but little by little it is being found again.

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<sup>27</sup>Bradley, “Colour and Marble in Early Imperial Rome,” 16.

Appendix:

Fig. 1:



- Reconstruction of Sphinx  
made by Vinzenz Brinkmann and  
Ulrike Cock-Brinkman for “Chroma:  
Ancient Sculpture in Color”  
Photograph by: Vincent Tullo for New  
York Times (2022)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/17/arts/design/reproductions-museums-sculpture-met-brinkmann-antiquity-polychromy.html>

Fig. 2:



Antonio Canova, *Cupid and Psyche*,  
1794  
Source: Metropolitan Museum of Art

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/188954>

Fig. 3:



J. H. Dannecker, *Sappho*,  
carrara marble, 1802.  
Source: Christian von Holst

<https://christianvonholst.de/51-dannecker-sappho-ariadne-nymphengruppe/>

Fig. 4:



Apollo of Veii, 6th century BC.  
Source: Museo Nazionale Etrusco

<https://www.museoetru.it/capolavori/apollo-di-veio>



Fig. 5:



Scene XCIV of Trajan's Column (Trajan rewards a loyal soldier) \*Trajan largest figure in center\*  
Source: Trajan's Column in Rome

[http://www.trajans-column.org/?page\\_id=107](http://www.trajans-column.org/?page_id=107)

Fig. 6:



Interior marble columns of the Pantheon  
Red Porphyry  
Source: My Iphone

Fig. 7:



Text about interior floors of Pantheon  
Source: My Iphone



Fig. 8:



Statue of Running Isis, 3rd century AD, nero antico and white marble, Villa Borghese

Source: My Iphone

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