Colour in Sculpture

Colour in Sculpture:
A Survey from Ancient Mesopotamia to the Present

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For Dominique

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INTRODUCTION

The content of the presented volume is culture or period based and takes the reader diachronically through roughly five millennia. In each of the eleven chapters a number of selected works are discussed that exemplify the circumstances for sculpture-making peculiar to the culture or period represented. Within each cultural framework we look for characteristics that suggest reasons for colour in sculpture. While some will be constant, others will be indicative of local preferences, customs or requirements.

How do we perceive sculpture and what notion do we entertain when thinking of it? Perhaps we may remember the tactile and spatial qualities of sculptural works we have seen, or recall a dictionary definition such as "Sculpture is the art of forming representations of objects in the round or in relief." It is likely that form rather than surface finish will spring to mind when we are prompted to describe what we have seen. As most of our experience of sculptures tends to come from books rather than from direct encounters with works of art, we may even imagine their finish to be any shade between black and white, like that of their photographic reproductions. Had we been shown a colour photograph or gone to see a piece of sculpture we would have acquainted ourselves with other dimensions, dimensions that only colour can reveal.

When referring to colour in sculpture we may mean either the colour peculiar to the material from which the work has been made, or the tonal values created by the interplay between light and shade on the surface of the object, or – more likely – the polychrome finish with which the sculptor intended to conclude his statement.

Any surface treatment is liable to change, losing something of its original appearance. Thus we also lose some valuable clues to the sculptor's intention at the time of completion. Are we ever in a position fully to perceive what the artist conceived and intended? This raises a number of crucial questions to which we shall have to return during the course of this discussion. What are we meant to see? What do we think we see? And what do we actually see?

More than five thousand years of sculptural activity allow us some insight into how different cultures at different periods approached polychromy. We can still respond to the *joi de vivre* of young and robust cultures, or perceive the intense concentration of power encoded in colour

symbolism. We may even detect shifts of cultural and social values in the way public and private monuments have been finished; their surface treatment may reveal not only the taste but also the beliefs of a people.

Whether we study ancient cult objects or the three-dimensional configurations of the present generation, they are expressions of their own time and embody the intentions of creative individuals and the culture to which they belonged. To get to know what these intentions were involves much detective work; too often the evidence is scanty because the data have been destroyed or a great deal more of the spade work needs to be done and information gathered, sifted and analysed. Today, this involves a multi-disciplinary approach. Archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, philologists and scientists seek to retrieve what has almost been lost.

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The subject under discussion here has in part been well studied by scholars following their own line of research. A beginning was made when in the mid-eighteenth century an interest in classical art was rekindled after some important finds of classical sculptures were made. The most celebrated among these was the Laocoon group, held to be the original to which classical writers had referred although scholars later agreed to its being a Roman copy. Its reappearance inspired yet another generation of artists who saw their ideals embodied in classical Greek art.

When in 1755 J.J. Winckelmann published his essay "Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst", he set a debate in motion which would last well over one hundred years. To Winckelmann form was of the essence of classical sculpture and consequently he ignored the issue of colour. Some of his followers, in particular Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, spoke out on the subject of colour by asserting that polychromy was in fact foreign to the classical ideal.

A French scholar, equally influential, tried to put the record straight with his impressive work *Jupiter Olympien* … (1815). Quatremère de Quincy pointed out that in Ancient Greece colour on architecture and sculpture played an important role. He instigated a more thorough investigation. A number of ancient sites were examined, sketches were made and colourful reconstructions were presented to the public. The controversy thrived; a succession of papers, many in German, but also some in French and English, were published in diverse journals as time went on.

Meanwhile, sculptors followed their own ideas and ideal of the past, searching for the purest form in the purest of material, white marble.

Neoclassicism was at its height. However, in 1884 the debate took a new turn. In a public lecture the archaeologist and museum director from Leipzig, Georg Treu, read his paper "Sollen wir unsere Statuen bemalen?" in anticipation of an exhibition in Berlin the following year, for which he was responsible. He planned a display of polychromed sculptures of different periods. By posing the question of whether we should paint our statues he also dared his young contemporary sculptors to re-examine their position regarding polychromy. By the end of the nineteenth century colour had begun to seep back into the pale forms of a "sleeping beauty". But the kiss of revival came from young sculptors' "experiments". Notably, Max Klinger's work took the public (whose taste was for everything "classical") by surprise. And yet his polylithic figures, new and exciting as they were, owed much to the past. (The use of a variety of coloured stones for his sculpture *Cassandra* was an idea Klinger derived from ancient Roman statuary.)

While Quatremère de Quincy had devoted his time and energy to Greek and Roman antiquity, and to the problem of polychromy, the Englishman C.A. Stothard was searching for a better understanding of the past closer to his own time and nearer home. In 1817, two years after Quatremère's publication, he had produced two superbly illustrated volumes under the title *The Monumental Effigies of Great Britain*. The colour-plates were based on the close study he had made in France of the royal tombs at Fontevrault. These were still fully polychromed at the time when he had discovered them in their storage place, forgotten and neglected. The English effigies, which Stothard had made known to a wider public, were later handed over to restorers. Queen Victoria, who disliked polychrome sculpture, wanted their colours to be removed and to have gilt applied instead. Her taste, and the taste of her age, set the tone for an era which was, during the latter part of her reign, quite restrained.

It is an interesting phenomenon of the nineteenth century that, particularly in England, a return to the aesthetic and spiritual values of the Middle Ages should have left nothing more in its own wake but a sober and austere legacy. The Gothic revivalists had largely ignored one of the most important features of medieval art: polychromy. The spirit of an age may be sampled and copied but it cannot be relived. One particular dimension of colour is its symbolic value, which every age has to redefine; like currency, it rises or falls according to a people's emotional and spiritual strength.

Polychromy in Greek sculpture continued to preoccupy the minds of twentieth-century archaeologists and writers. In 1944 the archaeologist Gisela Richter's introductory remarks to her article on the subject

summarised well the state of affairs younger scholars have inherited. She wrote:

> There are few subjects in the field of ancient art which have aroused such heated and prolonged controversy as polychromy in Greek sculpture. In looking over the archaeological literature of the past century we find the theme taken up again and again from different points of view and we realise how long it was before the fact became established that the Greeks coloured their sculptures. The idea of painted statues somehow filled people with horror, and only after the evidence in its favour had become overwhelming did the supporters of white unpainted sculpture give up their case.
>
> The strong prejudice was of course natural. Ever since the Renaissance artists had produced white marble sculpture, in imitation, oddly enough, of the Greek and Roman examples which they knew and which in the course of time had lost their colouring.[1]

A Swedish scholar, Patrick Reuterswärd, published in quick succession two important studies on polychromed sculpture. These were his *Studien zur Polychromie: Ägypten* (1958) and his *Studien zur Polychromie: Griechenland und Rom* (1960), with which he settled the long drawn-out debate on polychromy in ancient times – at a moment when colour in sculpture became once again a live issue.

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If the first half of the twentieth century will be remembered especially for its dark and gruesome years, when nations were left shattered and the dead heaped up like rubble, hope would not let itself be buried. Since the 1960s the colours of the rainbow could be seen emblazoned everywhere, beginning with the flags of the United Nations. Bright industrial colours gave gloss to things recycled and to newly made products, including sculpture. Indeed, in art colour almost assumed a life of its own by slipping in and out of form or frame, redefining the object and its space. There were many cross-overs between painting and sculpture before even these expressions were superseded. The rawness of the material world, and of society, also began to encroach on the viewer's experience and sensibility. Decay and hyper-realism are strands of the new in colour in sculpture. Rust finishes of huge metal sculptures, on the one hand, and sculpted and coloured mirror images of everyday subjects, on the other, challenge the viewer as never before in searching what may be the acceptable boundary of art.

Challenges of a different kind also emerged, namely how to retain and conserve polychromy, and, embedded in it all, how to extract valuable information related to the culture and the period from which a polychromed object came. These are the tasks of the art historian and the conservator alike who, in tandem, have opened up a vast research field during the last century. Polychromy is no longer just the concern of the antiquarian, for much essential and related work has been done in conservation departments by specialists skilled in different sciences. However, we must acknowledge here the fact that this collaboration between the different disciplines resulted in the most exciting, and startling, displays of visual evidence; in specially mounted exhibitions the viewer comes face to face with colour reconstructions and thus begins to feel the power of polychrome sculpture and the possible reasons for its having been created. Although the settings cannot always be conjured up, we are ever more experiencing holistically the impact of ancient objects, cults and cultures through the advances of technology.

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A study of this nature has its advantages as well as its disadvantages. By drawing in the high points as on an imaginary map the reader hopefully gets a sense of how a landscape with its resources and different social demands had a bearing on the history of sculpture.

By choosing the discourse and settling on a path which to follow there is much to be discovered, but also much that one has to leave aside for when another opportunity arises. This was the case here when, for instance, I felt I could not do justice to the marvellous way in which eyes were represented in figurative art and contributed to the subject of colour in sculpture. Hence it became a separate topic for a follow-up book, shortly to be published. The same happened when I had to forego paying what was due to the dress of sculpted cult images, especially to the polychromy with its sometimes hidden meaning which will be discussed in a third book.

It is my personal satisfaction that some major art institutions in Europe and the USA took up yet another challenge by mounting exhibitions highlighting the importance of colour in sculpture. Extravagantly beautiful catalogues accompanied these exhibitions, and not least, each venue provided a forum for discussing this important subject.

Having dared to go on this intellectual journey by writing this book I now invite the reader to enjoy what is part of our common cultural inheritance.

Notes

[1] *AJA* Vol. 42 (1944).

CHAPTER ONE

ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA: MATERIALS AND PLACES

> Each person made every effort to ennoble his cult image. The one gilded his god, the other covered it in silver. Another encased his idolic image with bronze because he was poor. Another again, who was still poorer, carved himself one of wood and painted it, so that it may please. And the one who could not even afford one of wood, bought himself a god from the potter to suit his means.[1]

Sculpture involves shaping materials. It also involves shaping ideas. Whether such forms are crude or well defined, they carry a meaning which the sculptor seeks to communicate. For this purpose he uses a material that enables him to express concepts in a visual and concrete language. As he depends on materials such as clay, wood, stone and metal, their abundance or scarcity inevitably has a bearing on his creative activity and the development of sculpture at large, as we shall see on closer examination.

To trace this development we must go back several thousand years. We can do this with the help of a (mental) map of Ancient Iraq and follow the flow of two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, from north to south, from Anatolia (now Turkey) to the Persian Gulf. We notice that there is a discernible north–south divide in the way early settlers gravitated towards the more fertile areas on either side of the upper Tigris, and in the south, where they founded settlements and city-states on the expanse of land between these two major watercourses. More significant however, regarding the development of sculpture, is the geographical distribution of materials: in the north of Mesopotamia stone is easily available, but not so in the south where it is rare. There, however, clay and bitumen[2] are plentiful; they became the bricks and mortar of Babylonian civilisation.[3] Regarding other materials, neither the south nor the north has any local supply of metal or quality wood; these, as well as ivory and semi-precious stones, such as lapis lazuli, had to be imported from neighbouring countries or even from more distant lands.

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What evidence is there of colour in sculpture? Polychromed pottery and painted clay figurines of the fifth millennium BC have been found in places as far apart as Tell Halaf in the Fertile Crescent of the north towards Anatolia, and Tell al-'Ubaid near Ur in Sumer. Both places are situated on an important ancient trade route which may have been followed in the nineteenth century BC by the patriarch Abraham, who went from Ur to Haran, a few miles north-west of Tell Halaf. However, these painted clay objects belong to a much earlier period than that of the patriarchs.

Sumer and Akkad, Babylonia and Assyria, refer to successive cultures and geographically definable regions in Ancient Mesopotamia, which was occupied by different peoples at various periods in history. Each in turn produced a distinct and identifiable culture. Sumer is the most ancient civilisation that sprang up between the two rivers furthest to the south. The Sumerians were either displaced or absorbed by the Akkadian people who had settled in the lands adjoining their northern border. Although they spoke a different language, they adhered to much the same cult practices and forms of government. In time, the Babylonians brought these two smaller regions under their control and thus became the dominant power in southern Mesopotamia until they too succumbed to a mightier people. During the first millennium BC, the Assyrians outgrew their own city-state Ashur and reached out in nearly all directions, bringing many neighbouring kingdoms under their sovereignty. Their large-scale stone sculptures still speak of their strength and prowess. No civilisation was mightier than the Assyrians', yet they too lost their place among the nations in the battles for power.

Over a period of more than three thousand years, cultural development in Ancient Mesopotamia was formed and influenced by many people who were at one time geographically and ethnically separate and distinct, yet were governed by similar religious and economic forces. Their names have come down to us through ancient literature – notably the Bible, where we read of the Chaldeans who had settled around 1200 BC in Shinar, the land of Sumer. But long before the Sumerians began to build their city-states, the Akkadian-speaking people had established themselves to the north of Sumer, where during the latter part of the third millennium BC they had raised an outstanding dynasty. Akkad and Sumer were united under Babylonian rule. Thus, Babylon's pre-eminence in southern Mesopotamia lasted until the Babylonians were overrun by the Assyrians. In the words of one of their most powerful kings, Ashurnasirpal II (884–859 BC), they had conquered all countries and acquired dominion over the mountain regions and triumphed over all the countries from beyond the

Tigris to the Lebanon and the Great Sea.

There were the Hittites, Hurrians and Canaanites or Phoenicians fighting over or controlling lands along the north-western flank of Mesopotamia, with the periodic influx of the Egyptians. The east, the homeland of modern Iranians, was once peopled by the Parthians and the Medes, while in the most southern region the ever troublesome Elamites made their forays into Sumer and Babylonia. Parts of the Near East were finally, during the fourth century BC, invaded by the Greeks and thus the indigenous cultures came under a new and dominating influence. We shall here be concerned not so much with the history proper of Ancient Mesopotamia. Instead we shall concentrate on aspects pertaining to sculptural developments which will serve us as a basis from which to explore further the concept of colour in sculpture.

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The sketchily modelled terracotta figurines of the prehistoric Halaf period have the appearance of dolls, or represent strange hybrid creatures connecting the real with the fantastic. All essential features, whether humanoid or animal-like, have been roughly shaped in clay, while details such as eyes, hairs, body marks and other physiognomical characteristics have been painted on with bold brush strokes. Either black or red has been used to indicate rather than to imitate precisely what may have been the customary make-up, body decoration or adornment.

These hand-size models are among the earliest references that we know of to the age-old practice of body-painting, tattooing or scarification which seems to have been part of life in Ancient Mesopotamia, as they have been in more recent times. However, one of the two larger lime-plaster figures discovered in 1983 at Ain Ghazal, near Amman in Jordan, shows stripes on its upper leg which appear to be intentional paint marks. The half life-size figures have been dated to around 6500 BC. They are the earliest known representations of the human form.[4]

Initially such marks may have indicated ownership before they developed into decorative pattern or status symbols in their own right.[5] Clay figures offer scope for experimenting with and expressing new ideas, and colour application may have played an essential part in formulating concepts. Modern sculptors have found it useful to make *bozzetti*, or clay sketches, before committing themselves to working full scale in a more expensive and time-consuming medium. However, the Tell Halaf and al-'Ubaid figures have to be seen as the intended full expression, however roughly executed.

The Sumerian sculptor of the third millennium BC worked out a

method of combining different materials of contrasting colour value, with the effect of enlivening the sculpted image. Although his resources were limited, he was himself resourceful and explorative in his approach to creating unique pieces of sculpture. Monumental in their conception, they were however mostly on a small scale. As stone was precious and rare, he used the material sparingly. This may be best studied by a find made at Warka (Uruk) during the 1938–39 excavations. It is a limestone head or mask representing a woman, now known as the *Lady of Warka* (*c*. 3100 BC). It is probably one of the first near life-size pieces of sculpture known to us. Its incomplete state is interesting in itself. The archaeologist Seton Lloyd made the following observation about the use of material in relation to Sumerian sculpture with particular reference to this head:

> The contrivance of a life-size human figure in the round, to which this fragment bears witness at so early a date, is most remarkable, but its form suggests the material limitations of the period. There can be little doubt that the mask-form is accounted for by the scarcity and value of stone in the alluvial district of South Iraq. So that the head and probably the clothed parts of the body would be completed in some more easily obtainable material. Since wood is almost as rare as stone, one must look for some other substance of which the local supply is plentiful, and the most suitable is obviously bitumen. Remembering, for instance the lions heads from the façade of the Nin-harsag temple at al-'Ubaid' composed of fine copper-plating over a core of bitumen, it is not difficult to imagine our Warka head completed by a core [of bitumen], forming the basis for a *coiffure* modelled in some more valuable material.[6]

The head has lost all its incrustation. The eyes, eyebrows, hair and side-locks are missing. Thus it has also lost its colourful and life-enhancing expression. The mask-like face looks severe, partly because of the tight, unsmiling lips, but also because the dark eye sockets offer no focus. But what might the image of the *Lady of Warka* have looked like? Again, we are helped by the scholarly approach brought to such a problem. A reconstruction of the head was made and Seton Lloyd was then able to present his final deductions:

> The assumptions on which the reconstruction was based were accordingly as follows:
> a) That the hair was modelled in thin gold over a bitumen base. The gold would extend over the flat frontal waves and so cover the two rivets near the parting attaching the stone to the bitumen.
> b) That the coiffure may be adopted from the most characteristic hair dresses among the Diyala heads.
> c) That the rivet-holes in the temples were for attaching side-locks, also

made of bitumen covered with gold.

d) That the projection beneath and behind the ears represent the ends of a roll of short hair which almost invariably occurs beneath the chignon. The rivet-holes, for attachment of the bitumen, would also be covered by the extension of the gold over them.

e) That the parting was inlaid with bone or mother-of-pearl, which helped to secure the gold, and the eyes and eyebrows with lapis and bone, as is usual with Sumerian statues.[7]

Altogether, it is a well-planned work and its effect must have been as startling as its modern reconstruction for the Iraq Museum. The result is interesting and highly probable, but it reveals that the possibility of different interpretations exists and that we shall never know for sure about the appearance of the *Lady of Warka*.

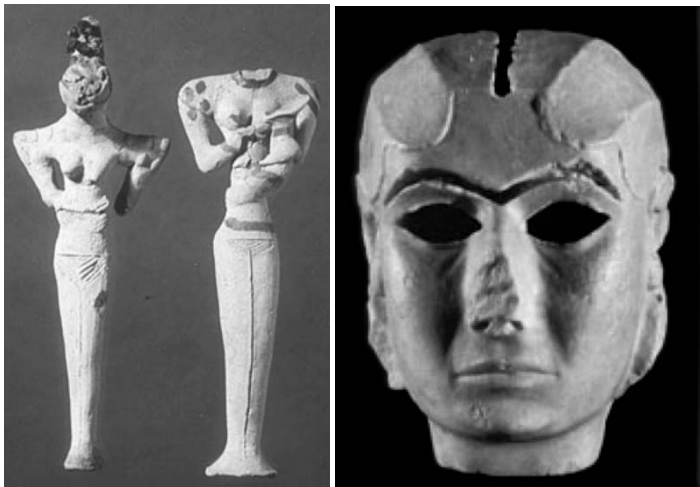Fig. 1–1, left. Clay figurines from Ur (*c*. 4500 BC), typical of the Ubaid culture in southern Iraq. Figure on the right h. 13.6 cm.

Fig. 1–2, right. Head of *The Lady of Warka* (*c*. 3100 BC); h. 21.2 cm. © Photo: D. Collon.

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We can study our own response to Sumerian craftsmanship when visiting the British Museum. There, on permanent display are – among other finds from Sumer – objects which Sir Leonard Woolley recovered

from the Royal Cemetery of Ur. One of these is the *Ram in the Thicket*. It demonstrates fully the capability of the Sumerian craftsmen and gives an indication of their inventiveness and their determination to obtain the necessary resources at whatever cost.[8]

   The Ram in the Thicket may remind us of the biblical story of Abraham, who found in the thicket a ram which he used instead of his son Isaac as a sacrificial offering. This cult object, worked seven centuries earlier and dating from about 2600 BC, is, like most works of art in Sumer and Akkad, relatively small in scale, barely half a metre in height (but when seen in photographic print one may easily mistake its size for that of a living ram).[9] Gold, silver, lapis lazuli, shell, copper and bitumen are the materials that give it its multi-coloured appearance. The sculptor worked out a scheme based roughly on the characteristic features of the animal: finely modelled head and legs, showing the taut skin stretching over the bony structure. The legs and sexual parts are covered in gold leaf, as is the thicket. The inlaid eyes are of shell and lapis lazuli, a material also used for the horns and upper part of the fleece. The ears are made of copper, now green. Shell pieces emulate the heavy fleece of the lower part of the body. However, for the underbelly the silver (now lost)[10] would have suggested a difference in quality and growth. The little platform on which the ram and the tree-like support are mounted has a regular pattern of inlaid squares of mother-of-pearl and limestone; their colours range from cream to red and blue. The brightest pink or red, while not yet part of the figurative element of the piece of sculpture, points to the fact that red is one of the most dominant colours in Ancient Mesopotamia. The archaeologist Anton Moortgat referred to the tendency to piece together such images by combining and using different materials for different body parts, thereby introducing colour contrast, or adding extra colour by inlays of semi-precious coloured stones.[11] Lapis lazuli's great popularity came during the Early Dynasty III, the period which produced the great treasure found in the Royal Cemetery of Ur, when links between Sumer and the east were particularly close. Never again was lapis lazuli to be used so effectively and so lavishly. The Badakshan mines in Afghanistan were the principal source for the semi-precious stone. Trade in this prestigious commodity once spread throughout the Near and Middle East; it may have taken the merchant caravans three months to cover the 1500 miles between Afghanistan and Sumer. Scientific analysis has shown that the varying shades of blue of the pieces of veneer on the *Ram in the Thicket* are paralleled by modern specimens from Badakshan. The blue semi-precious stone was both desirable in its solid state and much valued as a pigment, which since the Middle Ages has been known as ultramarine.[12]