

The Eye and the Beholder

The Eye and the Beholder:
The Depiction of the Eye in Western Sculpture
with Special Reference to the Period 1350–1700
and to Colour in Sculpture

By

Hannelore Hägele

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P U B L I S H I N G

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In memory of my sister Ursula Hägele

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Fig. 8–6 *Volckamersche Memorial*, central group of a Last Supper stone relief (1499) by Veit Stoss; h. 485 x w. 200 cm. St Sebald's Church, Nuremberg (No. 33453). © Hirmer Fotoarchiv – ARTOTHEK.

Fig. 8–7 Pilsen *Madonna*, polychrome statue from the workshop of The Master of the Crucifixion Group of St Bartholomaeus in Pilsen (c. or after 1450). Loaned by the bishopric of Pilsen to the National Gallery, Prague; photographed before (upward gaze) and after restoration. Photos: National Gallery, Prague / O. Palán.

Fig. 8–8 Plaster cast of an eye for teaching purposes as reproduced in Eduard Lanteri © Photo: Courtesy of the University Library Cambridge.

Plate 8–1 Dissected face and neck (head turned to the right; 1746), by Jacques-Fabien Gautier-Dagoty. Coloured engraving. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, print collection.

Plate 8–2 Coloured woodcut showing female with yellow cataract. Reproduced in various editions of Bartisch's *Ophthalmodouleia* (1583).

Plate 8–3 Eye surgery; coloured print in Bartisch's *Ophthalmodouleia* (1583).

Plate 8–4 Bust of King Louis XIV, Chateau de Versailles et de Trianon, Versailles, France (1665); white marble; h. 80 cm; Gian Lorenzo Bernini. Photo: Wikipedia Commons.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from?
My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth.
(Psalm 121:1)

The completion of any major piece of work involves the help and goodwill of others; this is certainly the case here. I owe a special debt of gratitude to my two supervisors, the late Dr John Gage and Professor Jean Michel Massing, who each in turn guided me through a crucial phase of my doctoral research. Their confidence in my project was also reflected in the awards I received through the Cambridge European Trust, the Kettle's Yard Travel Fund and the Faculty of Architecture and History of Art's special fund that made it possible for me to travel abroad. Also thanks go to Mr Brian Sewell, who encouraged me to continue my studies, and to the late Mrs Brenda Skene. Dr Dominique Collon's support and enduring friendship never failed. Due to the generosity of my sister, Ursula Hägele, I was able to focus entirely on my work. Sadly, she never saw the end result. Repeatedly, practical help came when most needed. Mr Andrew Challen, Mr Myke Clifford, Dr Victoria George, Mr Bruce Godfrey, Mrs Margaret Herbertson, Dr Julian Luxford and Dr Ursula Seibold-Bultmann were all drawn into the maelstrom of producing this book, and so were the staff of the University Library at Cambridge and the staff and fellow students at the Department of History of Art. I am especially grateful to Wolfson College for having accepted me as a Junior Member. Finally, during the preparation of this book for publication I had the invaluable help of my editor, Mrs Jenny Knight – thank you. Also, thanks go to CSP for the final stage of production of this book.

INTRODUCTION

Subtract the mind and the eye is open to no purpose.¹

The present work on the sculpted eye grew out of an earlier study based on my interest in a much wider research area, colour in sculpture. Although novel to me, the topic had been studied by scholars who come from a different branch of knowledge.

Two important earlier studies concerning the sculpted eye are of significance here. The first, by Hugo Magnus, looked at how the Greeks gradually overcame the archaic and minimal style and began to represent the carved eye in an idealized form. Primarily interested in the shape and position of the eye, Magnus came to the subject as a qualified practitioner and historian of ophthalmology² who had a great interest in and profound knowledge of Greek sculpture. His professional insight into the precise physiological nature of the eye gave him a vantage point which he aptly applied to his historical study.³ Similarly, the work of the Egyptologist Alfred Lucas, who was keenly interested in the material aspects of Egyptian art, led him to enquire into the eyes of sculpted figures, but focusing on inlaid eyes. He was responsible for their stylistic classification, judging the eye by how well it was represented and the quality of craftsmanship involved.

As with other specific aspects of sculpture, including polychromy, the stylistic and cultural importance of the sculpted eye was little explored in studies other than those related to these two ancient cultures. Indeed, while the craft aspect of Greek inlaid eyes still preoccupied scholars during the late twentieth century,⁴ this concern had never carried over to the same extent into either medieval or Renaissance studies of sculpture. The reason for this is that in medieval sculpture inlaid eyes were comparatively rare and hence seldom required special attention, unlike those of Egyptian,

¹ Meister Eckhart, ed. C. de B. Evans (London 1924–31), 1:288.

² Richey L. Waugh (1998), p. 481. In his translator's afterword to Hugo Magnus's *Ophthalmology of the Ancients*, Waugh wrote: "to this translator it seems that Magnus should be considered as: The Neglected Historian of Ancient Ophthalmology".

³ Hugo Magnus (1892), Vols. 17–20.

⁴ Denys Haynes (1992).

Greek or Roman origin. During the Middle Ages sculptures were mostly polychromed, and this included the eyes – they were prepared and painted as part of the figure or bust. Since the Renaissance sculptors have concentrated on other methods of portraying the eye, but these have yet to be examined fully.⁵ The basic fact remains: whether inlaid, carved or modelled, the sculpted eye has many stylistic variants designed to fulfil quite specific criteria. The study of a detail such as the eye will shed light not only on style but also on matters of cultural, religious and social import. Various scholars whose field of research is in these areas have already opened up the topic to a degree that suggests there is far more to this subject than there might appear to be. For example, literature and folklore have both led scholars to examine the visual organ from just these vantage points. Dagobert Frey, being neither the first nor the last, studied in depth the Evil Eye, a phenomenon that covered a vast geographical and cultural terrain. Gudrun Schleusener-Eichholz, on the other hand, focused on German and Latin medieval writings and analysed material relating particularly to the eye in the Middle Ages.

The study of the sculpted eye requires the researcher⁶ to take a closer look at his model, the natural eye. He does not expect the represented eye to conform in every detail to the living organ but hopes to find out what the sculptor considered important – that is, which features he emphasized or which he left out, and even whether he aimed at conveying a close resemblance to the natural eye in spite of the material's inherent limitations. Some grounding in the physiological and mechanical aspects of the eye is therefore of help when trying to assess the visual material presented. As Hugo Magnus demonstrated, it takes a prepared eye and mind to compare and discover what is unique to each style; and from Alfred Lucas we learn that sculptors sometimes give hardly a second thought to how the eye appears in reality while producing images that follow specific artistic conventions. The reason for my excursions into other fields, for example the natural sciences, is that during the period when the body of sculpture under discussion was created, there was, parallel to it, an ongoing philosophical and scientific striving towards a better understanding of the natural eye, and also towards relating vision to universal principles. Against this background of enquiry, many a sculptor of the fifteenth century tried to find a new solution to a problem largely of his own making. The approach to the coloured three-dimensional image

⁵ G.W.F. Hegel (1835), pp. 148–149. Hegel commented on the absence of the glance in Neoclassical sculpture.

⁶ I shall adopt throughout this book the masculine gender except where the context dictates otherwise.

had begun to change. The abandoning of colour application as a legitimate, life-enhancing finish to sculpture forced sculptors to question the importance of eye expression to their work, also whether a shift from predominantly wooden carvings to white marble and bronze images allowed them to depict realistically the colourful and mobile eye so characteristic and fundamental to animated beings.

The present topic requires a multi-disciplinary approach and it is within this framework of reference that my own enquiry into the nature and role of the sculpted eye will take place. I intend to include, where appropriate, examples from the fields of natural history and philosophy, and also to point to recent discoveries about the natural eye. I shall use this knowledge as a matrix against which the sculpted representation of the eye may be seen and discussed. Regarding the role of the beholder, he is to be understood as the sculptor, the intended viewer of his work or the art historian who comes to it as a critic, aesthete or historian.

The study of the represented eye in all its aspects often depends on how accessible information is to the researcher, who requires far better viewing of examples than is often possible. In this respect I shall rely largely on the finds made available by conservators in published reports on figurative works and their eyes. Some of these will reveal or confirm aspects of the represented eye that are crucial to my topic.

CHAPTER ONE

SCULPTED EYES IN ANTIQUITY: FROM THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST TO THE END OF THE ROMAN WORLD

the iris, on the other hand, continues from the pupil to the white. And here has colour, called by name black, red-coloured, blue-grey, or glossy,¹

One of the most characteristic features of the natural eye is its colouring. And so, the materials that even the earliest sculptors were choosing for the eyes of their cult images resembled its colour value. In sculptural terms the full chromaticity of the eye is often reduced to show perhaps no more than the contrast between its darker and lighter parts, yet colour plays a major role in effecting its life-enhancing appearance. How important the eye was in relationship to the ancient image, and within its cultural context, became of great interest to nineteenth-century scholarship. Archaeological finds made it possible for them to compare the eyes of statues not only with examples taken from many localities and periods, but also with what the ancients professed to have known about the eye: its physiology and diseases, and some related myths and beliefs. In our own time insight into the subject increases as conservation studies probe the materials technology of the past and as textual research reveals more and more of the hidden intentions and reasons for shaping and colouring the eye.

As most new studies stem and branch out from an existing body of knowledge, often receiving its due only in the form of footnotes, I decided to bring into the main part of my study some material that lies well outside my chosen period, radiating out from the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. By so doing I shall be able to present a rich backdrop against which to contrast the findings related to an equally interesting yet quite different approach to presenting eyes in sculpture. Both the ancient and the late-medieval sculptor came to terms – each in his own way – with one of

¹ Galen, See “On the Naming of the Parts of the Body”, in *Greek Medicine ...*, ed. and transl. Arthur J. Brock, London, Dent & Sons, 1929.

the most demanding aspects of physiology: the eye and its surroundings. While the art historian may be in a position to compare the works of one period with those of another, it would be wrong to assume that the medieval craftsman had any first-hand experience of the ancient images to which I shall be referring. Besides, observational and manual competences are not the only deciding factors by which the approaches to making eyes will have to be judged. The eye as an icon is deeply embedded in the psyche and symbolism of mankind, and interpretable in so many different ways that what to us may appear a crude or childish expression may have once been the representation of a most powerful symbol.

There are many ways of fashioning the eye, yet we find that, as with the figure as a whole, there are styles that belong solely to an age or a people. It is their choice of material, their invention, their skill which they developed. However, across culture and time the living eye is approached with the same understanding and concern wherever we care to look: health and diseases, its shape and colouring, its ability to express emotions or to impress its distinctive features upon the viewer's mind – all these are part of a common experience which gradually developed into the branch of science we now call ophthalmology. In the present chapter we learn about the physiology of the eye from observations made by both ancient and modern eye doctors. While focusing primarily on the eye, it touches on something much larger. Indeed, the need for the present research into sculpted eyes arose when I studied colour in sculpture.² Polychromy itself is a very complex subject with many aspects, of which the eye is just one but which in the present context is given the depth and space it deserves while mindful of two questions: how and what does the eye contribute to colour in sculpture? Shells, crystal, bitumen, ivory, marble, enamel, silver, gold, bronze, lapis lazuli and other precious stones, red and green pigments and kohl – these were the materials traditionally used for the inlays and the painting of eyes. Some of the oldest known human representations, which were discovered at Jericho, the most ancient of cities, had been fitted with elongated, closed cowrie shells. Their serrated edges suggest shut eyes with eyelashes running parallel across the middle of the concealed orbs. In Jordan, at 'Ain Ghazal, a group of figures which date back to around 6500 BC was found in burial grounds.³ The inlays correspond with the dark and light parts of the eye; indeed, colour had already become an important feature, for a thin, finishing layer of plaster, tinted with (red) oxide pigment, was applied to the modelled surfaces of

² Hannelore Hägele (2013).

³ Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; exh. no. 1955.565-PPNB: portrait skull with cowrie inlays.

the humanoid shapes and smoothed over, while a black paste (bitumen perhaps) was used for the eyes. Fabric for headdresses may have provided additional colour.⁴ The oblong shell, its shape analogous to the closed eye, the combination of black asphalt with white, and also the reddened plaster, show how significant to the early people facial expression was and how great its impact on the viewer was too. Also, they thought that applying green paint to the eye (the least natural colour in relation to the human physique) was a potent protection against any evil influence, whether carried by flies or by glances.⁵ We catch a glimpse of how one might (or how they did) relate especially to the eye. Medicine and religion, superstition, visions and the dread of darkness all tied in with the crafting and representing of the sculpted eye and its function as part of a cult object.



Fig. 1–1 Human skull. Originally plastered and painted with inset cowrie shells. From the Neolithic settlement at Jericho (c. 7000 BC).

⁴ The woven pattern of a fabric is imprinted on the head.

⁵ See museum cat. *A Cave in the Desert* (1985). One exhibit, a fragment showing an eye from a statue, is first painted red-brown, then a green band is added.

The array of materials which the prehistoric image-makers used was by no means always locally available or accessible to all the users across place and time. Much cost and effort may have gone into acquiring some of these substances on which a high value was placed because of their often cultic significance. This raises a fundamental question, namely: how important was the matching of the depicted with the natural eye? Were the colour substances selected because they came closest to representing realistically the living eye, or was one or other colour chosen to symbolize something more abstract or supernatural, despite – or perhaps because of – the fact that it gave the eyes a strange or an unreal appearance?

The most striking feature of a cache of *orant* figures found at Tell Asmar in Syria in spring 1934, dating back to the first half of the third millennium BC, is their overlarge inlaid eyes composed of several materials.⁶ They all stare ahead into the distance or space. The statues have a group resemblance and they appear to have been made to represent the same idea for the same purpose; some have long, wavy hair, beards, and eyebrows which are also inlaid and meet together at the bridge of the nose. The eye sockets were hollowed out to take the cut shapes of the eyeballs. The whites of the eyes were recessed in the centre to take the often overlarge discs of polished lapis lazuli. The individual parts were then stuck together with a mastic, similar to bitumen, much used not only as an adhesive but also as a black paint. With it hair and beards were painted, as were the dark lines surrounding the eyes and suggesting either eyelashes or the kohl applied to the eyes of people as a protective and perhaps also as a cosmetic measure.⁷

These *orant* figures and the many variants of lunette or mask-shaped eye votives all point to a cult linked to the eye which prevailed in ancient times. It had socio-religious significance to the peoples not only of ancient Mesopotamia but also to those in the Aegean. At Tell Braq in the Khabur valley in eastern Syria a temple once dedicated to the eye goddess Ishtar was discovered where dozens of votive objects based on the eye motif were found.⁸ Another find related to the eye cult is particularly interesting, for the partially gilded alabaster figurine of the goddess has red ruby-inlaid eyes.

⁶ Some of these are now in the Baghdad Museum, Iraq, and some in the Oriental Institute, Chicago.

⁷ Black kohl and also green paste of malachite were applied to the eyes.

⁸ See M.E.L. Mallowan (1947), pp. 150ff. and plates XXV, XXVI, LI.



Fig. 1–2 Eye idol from Mari, Syria (c. 3500–3300 BC). White alabaster; h. 4.8 cm. Found at Tell Braq, Temple of the Eyes, Aleppo, Syria.

Why was so much attention paid to the eyes? The reason is twofold: firstly, to protect the visual organ. The eye is prone to disease and loss of vision, something as much feared then as it is today. Secondly, out of ignorance a belief – mere superstition perhaps – takes hold of such fears and distorts them out of recognition. This probably happened with the widespread fear of the Evil Eye: the belief that by merely staring at somebody a mishap may be induced in the person exposed to the stare.¹⁰ As a means of protecting the eyes it was customary to paint them with either a green¹¹ or black lotion. This salve was meant to ward off any evil spirit, and may well have done so if it kept any disease-carrying insects at bay. The reasoning behind the fear that the eye may be the seat of some strange power does not seem bizarre when considering how, for instance, the power of hypnosis or unkind looks can disturb the psyche of a human being; how a loving glance strengthens a relationship; and belief in an unseen seeing god who keeps one's actions under surveillance.

¹⁰ The Evil Eye was also known in northern Europe. See Frey (1953) and Ulmer (1994).

¹¹ Gorin (1982), chapter 1, mentions as a popular remedy for sick eyes: a mixture of tanner's verdigris, copper and yellow sulphide of arsenic, which was made into a paste. The Egyptian *Ebers Papyrus* describes a green salve for the cure of various eye diseases.

The maker of the red ruby-eyed Babylonian goddess Ishtar¹² gave the beholder an experience of something of the intrinsic power which resides in the object. Or perhaps that power is simply the emotion drawn out from the subject as he encounters in the dark interior of a temple a mysterious glimmer due to the polished stones.¹³ While red is an unlikely colour for healthy eyes, in the statuette the colour was used symbolically, as was probably the blue colour of the lapis stone in the *orant* figures.

Another issue is of course the development of early craftsmanship. What were the sculptors able to do and how did they choose to employ such skills as they had acquired? There can be no doubt that the eye represents a challenge at all levels of craftsmanship, regardless of the tradition a sculptor is following or the style he is working in. The overriding principle when making an image may, however, not have depended solely on an individual's knowledge and skill – essential to matching the natural eye – but in how the eyes he made had to be seen within the context in which the representation was placed and used for their designated purpose. A closer look at four quite different cult images will prime us for a wider discussion on eyes, for which some nineteenth-century scholars have prepared the ground.

Quite different from the Ishtar figurine are the inlaid eyes of the Egyptian *Seated Scribe* from Saqqara, also in the Musée du Louvre.¹⁴ This Fourth Dynasty figure (2620–2500 BC) was described by the archaeologist James D. Breckenridge as “an outstanding example of lifelike naturalism”. Indeed, the scribe looks convincingly real at first glance, although his unblinking eyes and motionless posture momentarily deceive the beholder. Scientists at the Laboratoire de Recherche des Musées de France (LRMF) had the opportunity to examine the inlaid eyes and noted that their essential features compare well with those of the human eye. The sculptor chose for the orbital segment a piece of white marble (magnesite) and ground it into an almond shape, then hollowed it out and bored through its centre an aperture that he closed from the rear with a crystal lens cut from a piece of quartz. This he polished until convex in shape, but left the material slightly thicker in the middle for the pupil. In fact, he not only varied the thickness of the lens adroitly but he also effected iridial colouring by keeping the underside of the lens matt. This he did by engraving radial lines which break the incoming light as it penetrates the polished surface. A fine layer of bitumen or resin, in which

¹² Musée du Louvre.

¹³ See Klinger's bust *Elsa Asenije* (c. 1900), Neue Pinakothek, Munich, which offers this experience.

¹⁴ See Didier Dubrana, *Science & Vie*, no. 972, September 1998, p. 51.

the rim of the lens is embedded, further influences and enhances the colour aspect. With the same proficiency inlaid eyes were made for other early dynastic tomb figures¹⁵ which exemplify a high degree of craftsmanship and understanding of the visual organ and the psychological impact of the gaze. But by any standard these fabricated eyes are exceptional.

In ancient Egypt, as in Mesopotamia, the eye was regarded as a source of good and evil. Medicine and witchcraft went hand in hand. Eye surgery was confidently performed, yet the priestly craft of dispelling or invoking powers was essential to the Egyptian, whether alive or dead. Horus, the red-eyed god,¹⁶ the *Wedjat* eye¹⁷ (a much displayed symbol) and the custom of painting the eyes¹⁸ all point to a dominant cult that focuses on the eye. However, in statuary the eye was never singled out as the only source of colour; the statue itself was invariably polychromed. Yet the practice of emphasizing or exchanging the eye colour for one which is far from natural to it, as is the case with gold or red, or for intense blue, or by applying green eye paint,¹⁹ leaves us in no doubt about the importance of the eye with regard to colour in sculpture.

While the inlaying of eyes is one approach to adding colour to sculpture, the other method is, of course, the painting in colour of the main features of the eye – specifically the pupil, the iris, two bold lines for eyelashes, and the eyebrows – to complete or emphasize the sculpted forms. Sometimes, as on Cycladic idols, the flat unmodelled face was given such detail only in paint, for which any pigment available, such as red ochre or black, was used. However, most of the paint marks disappeared during the course of time and the only indications of the former brushwork are their possible ghost patterns. The paint, while it lasted, protected the surface underneath from the corroding influence of the burial grounds.²⁰

It is by what has been lost and was found again, although often spoiled and perhaps out of its former context, that it has become possible to piece together the history of artefacts and their provenance as well as in some

¹⁵ Prince Rahotep and Princess Nofret; Meidum (Fourth Dynasty, 2613–2494 BC); Cairo Museum, Egypt.

¹⁶ Red symbolized anger. Horus was angered by his adversary, Seth who damaged his eye; hence the symbol of the red Horus eye. See Hermann Kees (1943).

¹⁷ British Museum, London, c. 1000–700 BC; EA 29222.

¹⁸ Painting the eyes of statues is still a ceremonial practice in present-day India.

¹⁹ There are biblical references to eye-paint (e.g. 2 Kings 9:30). Jezebel painted her eyes to be attractive to Jehu. Old Testament references to eye-painting are associated with women of evil character.

²⁰ Hendrix (1997/98). Some of these “paint ghosts” are visible only under special lighting conditions.

instances their severed parts. By reassembling or reconstructing a damaged piece of sculpture, or by examining under controlled laboratory conditions the material technology of a find, we now know so much more about the making of sculpture in ancient times. Some of the earlier assumptions that, for instance, in classical Greece colour and sculpture were mutually exclusive, have been overturned by nineteenth-century scholarship which debated and addressed the question of colour in sculpture. However, some extremely important finds, such as the two fifth-century BC bronze figures from Riace and the discovery of the former workshop of Phidias (c. 500 – c. 430 BC) had yet to be made, and it was owing to these and other more recent recoveries that we also know more about how inlaid eyes in bronzes were made. Publications, mostly in specialized journals, tracked the developments in this field, offering the student some insight into the sophisticated techniques employed by the early craftsmen and, not least, by the modern conservation departments where the myth of ancient skills is being taken apart. The visitor to museums, however, is often looking at hollow-eyed bronze heads which, like the mask, have no eyes on which to fasten the gaze. The physical presence of the statue speaks of nearness, yet at the emotional level one feels apart, for the distant past stares out of the hollows, undefined and unresponsive.

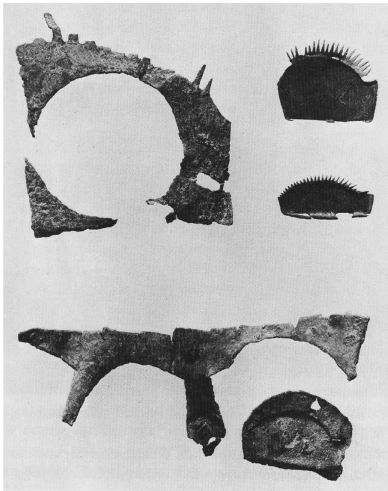


Fig. 1–3 Waste material found in Phidias's workshop (c. 500 – c. 430 BC) during excavation. Eye shapes cut out from bronze platelets.

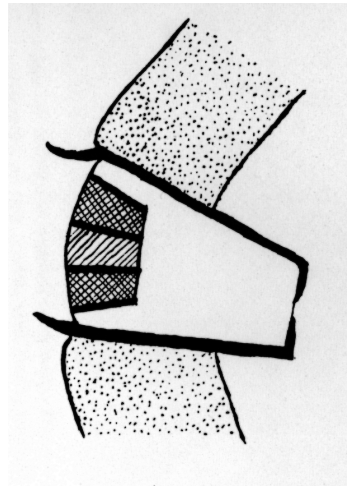


Fig. 1–4 Construction of an inset eye.