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THE GETTY PRESENTS A COLORFUL ALTERNATIVE HISTORY OF SCULPTURE

The Color of Life: Polychromy in Sculpture from Antiquity to the Present
The J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Villa
March 6 – June 23, 2008

LOS ANGELES—When one thinks of figural sculpture in Western art—whether it’s Michelangelo’s David or Rodin’s The Thinker—one often imagines works carved in white marble or cast in bronze, realistic in their depiction of the human figure, but utterly devoid of color. While monochromatic sculpture has been popular for centuries, it does not reflect the full range of possibilities. Sculptors from the ancient Mediterranean finished their works with color and the painting of sculpture continued through the ages and still flourishes today. The unfamiliar, and much neglected, history of sculpture painted in color is explored in The Color of Life: Polychromy in Sculpture from Antiquity to the Present, on view at the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Villa from March 6–June 23, 2008.

The word “polychromy” refers to the art of employing many colors in decoration and is derived from the Greek “poly” (many) and “chroma” (color). The exhibition spans nearly five millennia of Western sculpture and brings together 43 objects from 22 lenders. Focusing on colored representations of the human figure—in a wide variety of materials including wood, terracotta, marble, metal, mixed media, wax, papier-mâché, and acrylic resins—The Color of Life presents polychromy in ancient sculpture and its persistence through the centuries, beginning with objects from ancient Egypt and continuing to present-day hyperrealism. Polychrome works by renowned artists such as El Greco, John Gibson, Charles-Henri-Joseph Cordier, Paul Gauguin, Duane Hanson, and John De Andrea will be on view.

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“Thanks to the great range of works in the exhibition, The Color of Life offers visitors an opportunity to better understand the use of color in sculpture over the course of some 5,000 years,” says Michael Brand, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum. “As a site that brings the arts and cultures of the ancient Mediterranean to life for today’s audiences, the Getty Villa is perfectly suited to present this alternative history of sculpture that stretches from early times to the present.”

Adds Thomas Gaehtgens, director of the Getty Research Institute, “Perceptions about color in sculpture are often rooted in misunderstandings about its use. By illuminating a largely unknown history of polychromy, this exhibition challenges many of our assumptions about Western art both past and present.”

During the Renaissance era, the unearthing of celebrated ancient sculpture—most notably the Laocoön (1506) and the Apollo Belvedere (by 1509)—led artists and patrons to assume that the ancients preferred unpainted white marble or bronze for their masterpieces. In reality, the sculptures’ vivid colors had not survived the centuries. As the revival of ancient formats, styles, and subjects became popular, artists subsequently favored using bronze and marble to create their works.

The preference for monochromatic sculpture was solidified during the Neoclassical era. It was during this era that antiquarian collectors and tastemakers began to believe that sculpture was, above all, about form. From the mid 18th century and far into the 19th century, many believed that painting a sculpture in color imitated life too closely and, therefore was unnecessary, in low taste, and aesthetically offensive. This marginalization of polychrome sculpture led to a distaste for extreme realism that has endured to this day. “Polychromy has been an integral component of sculpture for millennia, yet our notion of great historical works is still all about the pure, unstained form,” says Roberta Panzanelli, co-curator of the exhibition and senior research specialist at the Getty Research Institute. “History has dismissed polychrome sculpture as quirky and not quite true to the essence of sculpture. However, the works themselves do not recede quietly.”

For the sculptors of the ancient Mediterranean, the primary goal was to fulfill the commissions of patrons who wanted their sculpture of humans and gods to be as lifelike as possible. To achieve this result, artists painted the eyes, lips, skin, hair, clothing, and accessories of their figures to complete the illusion. Color was used for both mimetic and symbolic purposes, to animate rituals, establish hierarchy, and communicate gender.

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Because monochromatic statues of bronze and white marble have held such powerful sway over the imagination for centuries, the sight of color on ancient sculpture often catches people by surprise. To place these works in context, a portion of the exhibition juxtaposes ancient sculpture with modern experimental reconstructions. One of the most striking examples is a trio of portrait busts of the third Roman Emperor Caligula. The original marble bust, sculpted between A.D. 39–41, still contains faint traces of color that provide insight into how it may have appeared nearly two millennia ago. Two replicas of the same bust were both created within the last five years and in these experimental recreations—painstakingly created through collaborations between the Stiftung Archäologie, Munich; Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen; Glyptothek, Munich; Doerner Institute, Munich; and National Museums, Liverpool—eyelashes, wisps of hair, and skin color are all brought to life through a reconstruction of the original work’s polychromy, creating a work that feels familiar yet adds a new dimension to our understanding of ancient society.

Also on view is El Greco’s (Cretan, active in Spain, 1541-1614) pair of incredibly detailed wooden sculptures Epimetheus and Pandora (ca. 1600). The Color of Life is their dramatic reintroduction to the public after undergoing substantial conservation and technological analysis—carried out by the Museo Nacional del Prado’s conservation department—which revealed precisely carved details that had been darkened and obscured by an overpainting. The naturalistic painting of these figures, combined with their unabashed nudity, lends an intense realism to these figures and makes them an excellent example of how polychrome sculpture continued and coexisted with monochromatic sculpture throughout the ages.
One work likely to take visitors by surprise is Duane Hanson’s (American, 1925-1996) life-size polychrome bronze *Old Couple on a Bench* (1995). Far from the depictions of heroes, gods, and mythical creatures typically on view at the Getty Villa, Hanson’s hyper-realistic portrayal of an exhausted middle-class American couple could easily be mistaken for two museumgoers resting in a gallery. One of Hanson’s last works, *Old Couple on a Bench* exemplifies his focus late in his career on common people in everyday America, often devoid of narrative, and shown in physical and psychological isolation.

*The Color of Life* is a collaboration between the Getty Research Institute and the J. Paul Getty Museum, and is co-curated by Roberta Panzanelli, senior research specialist at the Getty Research Institute; Eike Schmidt, associate curator, Department of Sculpture and Decorative Arts at the J. Paul Getty Museum; and Kenneth Lapatin, associate curator, Department of Antiquities at the J. Paul Getty Museum.

The exhibition’s accompanying catalogue of the same name, edited by Roberta Panzanelli with Eike Schmidt and Kenneth Lapatin, includes 170 color and 9 black-and-white illustrations and is published by Getty Publications (Hardcover, $75; Paperback, $49.95). The book features detailed histories of the diverse works brought together for the exhibition, as well as four comprehensive essays on Greek, Roman, Renaissance, and modern polychrome statuary by noted scholars Vinzenz Brinkmann, Jan Stubbe Østergaard, Marco Collareta, and Alex Potts. The catalogue is available at the Museum Store, by calling 800-223-2431 or 310-440-7059, or online at www.getty.edu.

To complement the exhibition, the Getty is presenting several events to explore the fascinating history of polychrome sculpture. On May 2 and May 3, the Museum will host a two-day symposium entitled *Rediscovering Color: New Perspectives on Polychrome Sculpture*, in which an international group of scholars and conservators will examine conceptual and technical issues associated with polychrome sculpture.

**OTHER RELATED PUBLICATIONS**

In addition to the exhibition catalogue, additional related publications are available in the Museum Store by calling 800-223-3431 or 310-440-7059, or online at www.getty.edu/bookstore.
Ephemeral Bodies: Wax Sculpture and the Human Figure
Edited by Roberta Panzanelli; with a translation of Julius von Schlosser's History of Portraiture in Wax and contributions by Whitney Davis, Georges Didi-Huberman, Sharon Hecker, Uta Kornmeier, Joan B. Landes, Lyle Massey, and Roberta Panzanelli. This volume breaks new ground as it examines wax reproductions of the body and assesses their conceptual ambiguity, material impermanence, and implications for the history of Western art.
(Hardcover, $49.95)

Looking at Greek and Roman Sculpture in Stone: A Guide to Terms, Styles, and Techniques
By Janet Burnett Grossman
(Paperback, $16.95)

Looking at European Sculpture: A Guide to Terms, Styles, and Techniques
By Jane Bassett and Peggy Fogelman
(Paperback, $14.95)

These illustrated guides contain rich and informative histories of their respective media, with concise explanations of technical terms often encountered by museum patrons.

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