

Lesson 5 Open Your Mind, Defeat Your Biases

The Colorful Truth About Ancient Sculptures

In the early 1980s, Vinzenz Brinkmann was studying archaeology as a graduate student at the University of Munich. He wanted to figure out a way to closely examine the marks left by tools on ancient Greek and Roman marble sculptures, so he developed a special ultraviolet lamp that would reveal marble surfaces in great detail. When Brinkmann shone his lamp on the sculptures, he was astonished to see something that he had not expected. There were clear signs of polychromy: the use of various colors in the decoration of statues or works of architecture.

Brinkmann was curious, so he decided to investigate his findings further by examining more ancient statues. To his surprise, he found evidence of polychromy on almost every statue he looked at. He soon realized that many of these traces could be detected without his special lamp. They could even be seen clearly with the naked eye. Brinkmann continued to research polychromy in ancient statues with his wife, archaeologist Ulrike Koch-Brinkmann. Their research showed undeniable evidence that, while white marble was a highly valued material for

Greek and Roman sculptors, its smooth surface was not always left bare. Instead, the white marble was used like a canvas. Vivid pigments could be applied in order to decorate the sculptures in many rich colors, from yellow, red, and green to blue, pink, and even gold.

Does this discovery seem surprising? If someone asks you to imagine a Greek or Roman statue, a pure white divine figure will probably come to mind.

However, Brinkmann and Koch-Brinkmann's research revealed that this image is actually inaccurate. Where did this misconception about ancient art come from, and when did it first arise? In fact, it dates back hundreds of years.

White marble has been considered the standard material for sculpture in Western art since the Renaissance, when many ancient sculptures of Greece and Rome were being excavated and newly admired for their artistic beauty. Over a period of more than 1,000 years, much of the paint with which these sculptures were originally decorated wore off. Any paint that remained was faded, and more of it came off during the excavation process itself.

As a result, when these ancient statues were taken out of the ground, their surfaces were plain white marble. People of the Renaissance marveled at the smoothness of the white marble and the striking manner in which it enhanced the contrast of light and shadow.

In the year 1489, an ancient Roman sculpture, which became known as the Apollo Belvedere, was dug up in Italy. Renaissance artists were amazed by how its bare stone surface highlighted the elegant outline of the sculpted body. This discovery reinforced the artists' admiration for white marble. Both artists and scholars began to associate undecorated white marble with ideal beauty. The great Renaissance artist Michelangelo was no exception. He even traveled to different quarries around Italy in order to purchase high-quality white marble for his own sculptures.

The Renaissance public's appreciation of bare white stone led to a bias against using color to decorate sculptures, and this resulted in Renaissance artists leaving most of their marble creations unpainted.

Over time, the association of whiteness with artistic beauty grew strong in people's minds, and it became deeply rooted in Western art and culture.

A German scholar who was one of the founders of art history in the West even remarked, "the whiter the body is, the more beautiful it is."

Despite the excavation of ancient Greek and Roman artifacts with traces of color in the 18th and 19th centuries, the bias toward white marble sculpture was so firmly established that people's perceptions did not alter. Many scholars simply refused to believe that polychromy was used, while those who did were publicly criticized. Sculptures painted with bright colors and patterns were regarded as inferior works created by immature artists. Some insisted that Greek and Roman artifacts bearing obvious traces of color were in fact from other civilizations that existed before ancient Greece. Until the 1960s, sculptures with noticeable color were largely ignored. Some of them even had their colors wiped off so that the bare white surface beneath could be seen. For these reasons, the misconception that formed during the Renaissance lasted all the way into the 20th century.

However, since the 1980s, thanks to the development of new methods of scientific analysis and the work of scholars such as Vinzenz Brinkmann and Ulrike Koch-Brinkmann, the bias about white marble sculptures has been changing. As research has progressed, it has become increasingly clear that polychromy was not only present but also common among ancient Greek and Roman sculptures. The fact that Greek and Roman artists normally decorated their sculptures with vivid colors is now widely acknowledged.

Brinkmann and Koch-Brinkmann have gathered sufficient evidence of the colorful past of many sculptures. They have also created new, colored versions of some of these great works of art, both to benefit research and to enlighten the public. These colorful recreations have been displayed in an exhibition called Gods in Color, which has traveled to over 20 different cities around the world and has expanded the understanding of millions of museum visitors since 2008. The colorful replicas are displayed next to white plaster versions made to look like the marble originals, and in some cases the originals themselves. The contrast has provided an eye-opening experience for the public, challenging artistic biases and deeply rooted misconceptions.

Brinkmann believes that we need to transform our eyes into objective tools in order to overcome widespread misconceptions. There is an important lesson to be learned from this story. Shouldn't we pause to ask ourselves if some of our long-held beliefs are the results of stereotypes and biases? Perhaps there is more to the world than meets the eye.