

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers I*, 1885 – 1886 Oct 3, '85 to May 29, '86) The original is very badly faded.

Budget. Hooper Editor. March 27, 1886

An Experiment in Sculpture

A reaction to the horror of polychrome sculpture, that existed in the first half of this century has set in, and it has been earnestly asked, "should not the right color be recognized in our statuary." With a view to pushing this question before the public in order to elicit an expression of opinion, and in order to give sculptors upon whom it was irresistibly forcing itself an opportunity of working out their own ideas, an exhibit of works of this description was lately arranged at the National Gallery of Berlin at the insistence of Dr. Treu, Director of the Collection of Antiquities at Dresden whose pamphlet upon the subject has identified him as among the foremost in this controversy. – The fear of using color in plastic works of art is no doubt largely due to the influence of modern architecture which, rather from the conviction entertained by its originators, that its classic prototype lacked all colored ornamentation than from a want of sense of color in themselves has been planned and developed from the resources of form alone uncombined with color. – An error similar to this was perhaps the outward cause of the introduction of uncolored sculpture in the early time of the Renaissance; for before that period plastic art was perhaps without exception colored, though the coloring may have often been conventional rather than realistic. Modern archaeological and philological research has brought to light that the ancients universally applied color to their statuary, as well as to their architecture. Although no work of classic art has been preserved showing the style and extent of coloring practiced by them, in their plastic works, even that picture of a woman painting a statue, preserved in the remains of Bunjer giving no one very satisfactory evidence from which a proper conception can be formed, yet there are many things indicating often conventionality in this treatment rather than an attempt at realism.

The pupil and iris of the eye for instance, though generally painted were often represented by an inlaid stone, showing at once that the features of the eye were to be made prominent by a distinction in color, without making use of an exact portrayal. Frequently also, though more especially in the Roman time, hair and garments were made of different color marbles, indicating again rather than realistically representing the distinction in the parts and

material portrayed by color. We know, it is true, that the Greeks placed no such value on marble as a material as we do, and in their architectural forms ruthlessly painted it over; yet it is not likely that a master, in the chiseling of marble, like Praxiteles, for instance, would have concealed his workmanship, and robbed his material of its transcendency, that quality rendering it so excellent for representing the transparency of the flesh by covering it with a coat of paint. Yet he may, and probably did tint it; separating by color the hair from the flesh tints, and the complexion of his men from that of his women, without disturbing the emphasis of his art which as plastic representation lay in the production of beauty in form, to which the use of color should be kept subservient. To a limited extent the practice of tinting however in monochrome has passed down to us; for the Florentine sculptors of the fifteenth century, like ours of today, imparted a warmer tone to their marble by treatment with wax.

The demand for color is natural. On the broad mass of the people the classic works of sculpture have made no impression, and unquestionably many of those who are accustomed to give matters of art more thought than is awakened by casual and trenchant observation, will remember that it was long before they saw that the world's standards of beauty of form were more than stone.

The Catholic Church, that has understood so well how to awaken the imagination and feelings of its votaries has ever recognized the superiority of colored over uncolored sculpture. Its ecclesiastical statuary has therefore always been colored. The same desire for color in plastic works made the Rococo porcelain figures of Dresden so popular however out of harmony the insipid shepherds and shepherdesses were with the time, when the ascendancy of the aesthetic pursuits and votaries of classic civilization were greatest in architecture and the other branches of art.

This latest demand for color is with us becoming more pronounced and outspoken, our entire interior decoration is changing in harmony with it, and the fire-place, that most prominent architectural feature of the American room is no longer set off by a frigid white marble mantelpiece; but is heightened in its genial (*sic*) by a frame-work of carved wood, and brilliantly colored tiling. In even the exteriors of our dwellings, though subject to the destructive influence of a forbidding climate, are assuming a gayer appearance; the tedious brown stone of New York, and the austere grey and brown of our own city giving way to bright colored brick and tile, and the

fancifully marked stone of once despised quarries. And in the older countries with an experienced ceramic industry, works of plastic art in harmonious and durable colors are beginning to relieve the monotony of the tedious monochrome façades.

But to return to the higher forms of plastic art (a term, by the way, which has never been well defined) how is the question of coloring to be approached in connection with it? Is the ultimate aim to achieve realistic effects, and can such be attained at all? This question can only be answered through a consideration of the province of plastic art. This is the fixing in firm and durable material the symmetric beauty and rounded proportions of animated bodies, especially of the human figure in rest and rhythmic action. Whatever acquires its art value, not from form, but from color, illumination, perspective, is not a fit subject for plastic representation. Landscape for instance lies out of its scope, for sculpture is the art of fashioning relatively simple but complete forms, uninfluenced by the elements that can not be embodied in shape.

We know from experience that from many effects the portrayal of the pure form in the purest, that is, white marble, completely fills the requirement. At bottom, therefore, color does not seem essential. But neither is it absolutely necessary to architecture or the pictorial arts. No one would assert that these are dependent on color, and would lose their importance without it. But that these could retain their fullest value, and achieve their greatest effects without it is out of the question, and is very doubtful with their sister art of sculpture. For like painting it finds its models in warm-tinted Nature alone, were form and color, being inseparable, it cannot be argued that the principle of plastic representation is averse to the combination of its subjects with color, especially if the color is instrumental in bringing into prominence those slight but important shades of form that are so easily lost in a transparent white with its confusing reflections.

The sculptor works the surface of his marble to suit the nature of the surface he's portraying. The flesh of the female figure is smoothed, and left with a soft, velvety finish; that of the man is roughened, to give it a tough and hardy appearance; the hair and the texture of the garment is indicated in its proper character. But place the figure on a pedestal, or view the work if it be a large one from the proper distance to get the full effect of its sweeping lines and this essential detail is lost. To this difficulty Nature offers a simple solution, – the use of color.

This need not, nay should not be realistic, lest it overstep its bounds of serving the form alone, but using a conventionality allied to that in the mechanical preparation of the surface, achieve the same effects in a more decided and natural way. But for the manner of this coloring, no rules can be given from a theoretical standpoint alone. These must be determined by the right feeling of the artist and his success in empirical experiment for they will differ as widely as the subjects his art can portray. Here, however, lies the great difficulty for us, taught for ages that the highest achievements of plastic art must be uncolored, from force of instinct ours are designed so, and when the already finished work is colored, it becomes a patchwork. With the now colorless details of the antique, and those of the Renaissance, planned without color before them, those of our artists who have attempted the new departure have groped aimlessly, have tottered, and many have fallen.

The exhibit in Berlin was not a success, though a few, but very few indeed, seemed to be on the right track, and one can not help smiling at the pointed truth of a French critic's remark, that here again the will-o'-the-wisp of the deluded artists that sought laurels in a field that none dreamed so difficult, was the irrepressible speculating German professor.

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