

In search for lost colours

Challenge accepted.

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The National Archaeological Museum of Naples has adopted in its most recent history and post Cultural Ministry Reform (2015) a series of innovative strategies, whose physical and digital purpose is focusing on a conscious, inclusive, and responsible approach. The Museum's choices respond to the need for specific devices to be welcoming and satisfying, in today's globalized and dynamic society. Due to recent technological improvements museums are helped in this hard responsibility, by a wide range of possibilities they can choose from (Soren, 2009).



Fig. 1. Lovatelli Venus (part.). Inv. 109608. National Archaeological Museum of Naples. (© Cristiana Barandoni)

In this perspective, the National Museum decided to set a cultural policy that considers individual, collective, physical, and economic dimensions as priorities. Without this approach to culture and communication it would not have been possible to develop “MannInColours”, a scientific project carried out in collaboration with the National Taiwan Normal University of Taipei. The project examines chromatic traces, sometimes imperceptible to the human eye but still existing, on sculptures, with the specific purpose to recover them visually; this will revolutionize the aesthetic perception to which these works have accustomed people for centuries (Jockey, 2014). From an educational and

pedagogic point of view MannInColours attempts to convey a fundamental cognitive message for a sustainable, philologically correct approach to Greek and Roman statuary to the general public: a coloured vision (Fig. 1).

This approach seeks to comprehend the nature of a painted ancient world opposing the common misbelief generated at the end of the Eighteenth century; we are accustomed to black and white traditional approaches (sketches, drawings, vintage photo), which prioritize descriptions of our ordinary visual experience of colour. Given this costume, we need to argue that the ancient colour vision does not constitutively involve the ability to see colours, in a natural and categorically committed sense (Davies, 2018): we know we are promoting a coloured idea that plays a relevant role against a worldwide perception of the monochromic one. The error of perception becomes even more marked when we apply our idea of a black and white past to contexts: environment in which large conceptual complexities already exist, almost completely lacks the context (i.e., ancient statuary collections in museums). This is the real critical point: on the one hand, scientific investigations tell us about a powerfully shaded ancient world, appearing on almost every surface, rarely in subtle tones (Fejfer, 2008; Ball, 2001); on the other, our cemented view of the classical period impulses perception to see a pale and white *past*. No surprises if any attempt to return the original appearance to archaeological artefacts in multiple forms (both materially painting copies of originals and virtually with augmented reality) is met with disbelief from the public (Jewell, 2013). How can museums exhibitions help to respect original colour appearance? What can they do to enhance awareness of colour? It is not only about a popular imagination of colour vision but it is how can they help publics “seeing the colours” (Chirimuuta and Kingdom, 2015), which means also shape, depth and motion? Colours in ancient times were not only superfluous decorative *rêverie* but played a *salient role in the classification of precious objects [...] the “value” of a colour to which add material, texture, and shape, was connected to iconography* (Brecoulaki, 2014). Colours were not casually selected since they mirrored social and financial status of the client whether he/she used his/her finances for public donations or for private wealth. For these reasons, it is essential to rethink the world of colour not only as a decorative accessory but as a means of communicating one’s social and cultural status. In ancient times colours were semiotic markers to mediate a socially and culturally constructed visual language (Skovmøller, 2015). The polychrome treatment enhanced the value of the sculpture (Blume, 2010).

With this awareness, the project was developed taking some aspects in great consideration; the only possible conclusion was planning varied actions to spread the right message, prioritizing principles, and missing connections, restoring original lacking context and colours. The approach to the study of ancient polychromy cannot ignore this: in every dissemination action carried out by the National Museum the relationship between object and message addressed to public is a huge and pressing priority. Thus far the *experience* aims to mend this tear by combining the most modern virtual technologies offered by the NTPU to understand the meanings of the codes underlying the choice of one colour rather than another. Digital media, whose use is becoming increasingly widespread in museum communication and teaching practices, can be considered a useful experimentation, suitable

for this specific purpose. In 2017 a congress in Bordeaux¹ upraised the problem of how and why it is worth the reconstruction of ancient polychromy in terms of research and dissemination: these urgencies appear more and more frequently in this field. It certainly entails awareness by scholars who now also take into consideration the “social” aspect of the museum, guaranteeing access to their research also for a public of non-experts; in general, it means that researches in this field should embrace more than one single audience, spreading knowledge even among non-scientists.

No one complains (actually) about the use of digital media or virtual reality to help in understanding, but it is missing is the method to employ it to reproduce ancient colours: a method has still to be identified (if existing). There is no questioning about physical reproduction since a lot of virtuous examples inhabit some of the most important museums in the world. At Ny Carlsberg for example, alongside original sculptures, on the surface of which colours are almost imperceptible to an untrained eye, plaster copies have been placed, reproducing (or copying?) the originals quite faithfully. We are still dealing with copies and modern colours applied on different surfaces (marble against plaster), not to mention the myriad of brushes. And the nuances? Are we sure that colours completely covered the surfaces, or is a close link with painting and its glazes more plausible? If these are just some of the key issues in the physical reproduction of colour, of a hugely different nature and complexity are those that concern their reproduction using digital media. But it worth a try. In addition to a complex choice, it is also a question of ethics and responsibility towards visitors, to whom these experimentations are addressed.

This paper however provides only a fragment of the more general question on the reoccurrence of colour in the context of the artistic productions of the ancient world. Statuary, indeed, should be examined in relation to architecture, for a plenary vision, to understanding sculpture’s positioning related to environment. Obviously, lacking a wide-ranging vision, we can only aspire to a partial half-finished reconstruction; sculptures were only one of the tools through which propaganda was made: meanings, ambitions, socio-cultural and political messages of the clients were communicated through multiple arts and crafts, so it was through architecture. Starting from this assumption, to try and reconstruct the original, coloured appearance, it is necessary that a method is established which takes into consideration not only the material object but the context within it was sited.

Two of the numerous cases to be examined in this perspective, are the Lovatelli and Bikini Venuses, for both of which we can reconstruct many phases of the ancient excavations leading to their discoveries; rebuilding context is enabled by a discreet presence of archival documents, allowing philological study to be transformed into exhibitions as staging point of a restoration *experience*. Circumventing this step would mean museums conferring to public false notions and vision of the past, especially considering their need to educate to a philologically and historically truthful context; the reconstruction (if possible) of original archaeological context as a *conditio sine qua non* for proper training and communication strategies is the only way for people visiting museums to understand what meant to paint sculptures and architecture.

¹ “Restituer les couleurs: Le rôle de la restitution dans les recherches sur la polychromie en sculpture, architecture et peinture murale” (Bordeaux, 29 novembre-1er décembre 2017)

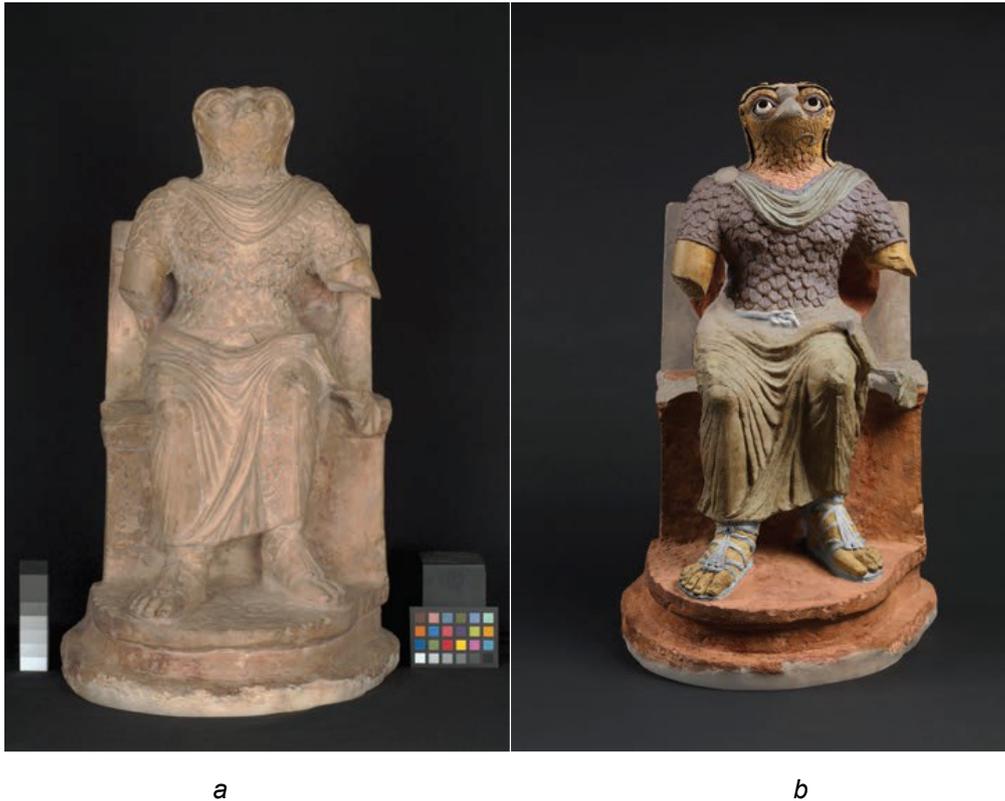


Fig. 2. a) Limestone sculpture of Horus from Roman Egypt. EA51100 (Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum); b) A colour reconstruction based on pigment analysis suggests how the statue originally may have looked. (Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum). Source: <https://blog.britishmuseum.org/pigment-and-power-dressing-in-roman-egypt/>

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