

Revival and Invention

Sculpture through its Material Histories

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Introduction

Sculpture has long been the more marginal field relative to painting, treated as a specialism, a subject apart, rather than one that is integral to the history of art. This situation has begun to change markedly over the past twenty years or so, perhaps at least partly because of shifts in contemporary practices, which have given sculpture a newly configured place within wider, more loosely-defined approaches. The history of sculpture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is one that is marked, if anything, by the disappearance of works that may be defined as 'sculpture' with any clarity, while at the same time evidencing a trans-disciplinarity within which few works are made that do not evoke some kind of 'sculptural' aspect.

Materials have been central to this. For the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, sculpture's perceived conventionality was inextricably bound up with its objecthood, which in turn was innately defined by materials. The desire for the reinvention of a sculpture for the modern age, as articulated, for instance, by Umberto Boccioni's 1912 *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture*, was ultimately based on a rejection of sculpture's material traditions ('It is necessary to destroy the pretended nobility, entirely literary and traditional, of marble and bronze, and to deny squarely that one must use a single material for a sculptural ensemble').¹

Although Boccioni's own proclaimed attempts to create a model for sculpture that would break new ground were ultimately contradicted by their material transformation into bronze for the modern museum, the resonance of the ideas and assumptions about 'material conventions' left a long shadow, not least because they tended to remain *a priori*, as a means to an end largely left unquestioned. While art writing concerned with more recent and contemporary art has invariably explored its material significance (as per Joseph Beuys, for instance, or Carl Andre or Richard Serra, to name just a few obvious examples),² sculpture's earlier historical

practices were until recently left mostly untouched by these preoccupations, despite such momentous interventions as, notably, Michael Baxandall's *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (1980), Hugh Honour's earlier, ground-breaking series of articles 'Canova's Studio Practice' (1972), and, in the French-speaking world, the monumental *Sculpture, méthode et vocabulaire* by Marie-Thérèse Baudry (1978).³

Shifting decisively away from Platonic approaches, the objective of such studies was not simply to bring questions about materials back into the fold of the history of art, but, above all, to show that these questions, by their very nature, are analytically rich, and unavoidable for a holistic understanding of sculpture. But it is perhaps only in the past two decades or so, with studies such as Nicholas Penny's exhaustive survey *The Materials of Sculpture* (1993), or Thomas Raff's incisive, but as yet untranslated for an English-language readership, *Die Sprache der Materialien* (1994),⁴ that the implications of 'ordinary' material traditions – bronze, in particular, but also wax, wood, marbles – have been brought to the fore, becoming subject to similarly intensive and productive analyses extending across a range of art historical methodologies.

This book forms part of this ongoing endeavour: to arrive at an understanding of sculptural objects and trends in sculptural practice by working through an analysis of that which is most fundamental, empirical and matter-of-fact about sculpture: the material of which it is made. Given that sculpture is always made of materials, it may seem nonsensical to assemble a volume addressing seemingly disparate subjects and periods – from antiquity through the Renaissance and the Fin de Siècle, on works and trades variously associated with marble, bronze, ivory, wax, clay or plaster. But in making the materials of sculpture the common thread, these essays, in their different subjects and methodologies, converge on a singular preoccupation: to prioritize a way of looking and an approach to sculpture that acknowledges materials and materiality as central, from which meanings and implications emanate that can only be recognized through this process.

In this book, the analysis of sculpture's forms, images, methods, patronage and dissemination, radiates out from attention to materials. The essays range from looking at ways in which creativity is both constrained and inspired by material limitations, the desire to extend and exceed what seems materially possible; they examine origin and availability not only in

terms of giving rise to technical expertise and specialisms, but also in terms of how they underpin national identity and political zeal; and they show the ways in which inherent qualities, such as hardness or colour, become embedded in cultural codes at different periods.

The conference that formed the basis of this book, a three-day international colloquium in Brussels in 2005, organized collaboratively by the ULB and the Henry Moore Institute, was much more wide-ranging in scope than was possible to reflect in this book. In particular, while a number of valuable contributions on twentieth-century and contemporary art were given at the conference (including Jessica Ullrich's paper on contemporary wax sculpture, Dominic Rahtz's analysis of Carl Andre's metal floor works, and the materials of Arte Povera by Nicholas Cullinan), the present volume ends with the nineteenth century, so as to concentrate precisely on case-studies around materials that have been considered as 'traditional' for sculpture. The book opens with two historiographic essays, which trace the role that considerations of materials have played in the evaluation of different periods of art history. Michael Cole traces a historiography of the study of materials over the past two decades: while focusing on Renaissance scholarship, his essay provides a useful introduction to the chapters that follow, in setting out some of the ways in which the methods of art history have shaped and influenced the field. Following on, Carol Matusch demonstrates the extent to which materials are taken for granted in perceptions of classical sculpture: that, paradoxically, while the estimation of classical works is almost wholly grounded in a material hierarchy (bronze versus marble), the absence of more detailed considerations of how these materials function in relation to ancient culture has led to contradictions or blind-spots in the scholarship.

The remaining essays are arranged chronologically up to the end of the nineteenth century, but beyond the time-line, the reader will also encounter thematic discussions, in particular those that touch on perceptions of a hierarchical order of materials. The notion that the 'noble' materials of marble and bronze were more highly regarded than wax or terracotta is an analytical model that stands up well to examination, but the essays show that not only are there special exceptions, but that hierarchies cannot be applied universally and that they evolved in specific ways at specific moments. From this point of view, Maarten Delbeke's article on Giacomo Vivio's notional

wax relief shows that, in the sixteenth century, wax was considered ideal for representation as much on an artistic as on a theological level, while it is usually regarded as a material at the margins of sculptural practice, for example in the process of making a bronze, or in the production of specialized items, such as ex-votos or death-masks. Malcolm Baker, in a similar way, shows that in eighteenth-century sculpture, materials historically regarded as inferior or cheaper, or related only to technical processes (such as plaster and clay), were seen very differently by eighteenth-century audiences, and were often valued as works in their own right. On the other hand, materials have their own codes at different moments, and are thus capable of causing variations in the generic view associated with them. Fabio Barry rightly explains how marble, which is often defined rather generically as a singular material in the antique world, esteemed for its remarkable range of different types, each of which had the capacity of inflecting different readings. White marble, Barry argues, was not simply white, but depending on marble-types, ranged in degrees of whiteness which expressed meaning in subtly differentiated ways.

If we allow ourselves to anticipate conclusions to be drawn from this book, we would stress the diversity of sculptural techniques and their bearing upon the perception of the materials used. As Martin Hirsch's examination of fifteenth-century Bavarian clay sculptures, or Sébastien Clerbois' chapter on colonial Belgian ivories, show, the choice of material can often be explicitly linked to economic and political circumstances; in the case of ivory looted from the Congo, sculpture became a vehicle for political imperatives. Other essays focusing on technical developments, show that the use of particular materials is often codified by a highly-complex system of cultural or symbolic conventions, which determine perception. As Emilie Passignat shows, style can determine material practice: the stylistic convention of the *figura serpentinata* was at the origin of a systemized practical approach to wax- and terracotta-modelling among the Italian Mannerist sculptors. Adding to the complexity of the relationship between materials and styles, Philippe Malgouyres explains pertinently that, in the case of sculptures made from coloured stones in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there was a confrontation between sculptor and material in which the material had a sort of autonomy: its qualities could be seen as

intrinsically aesthetic and resonant, corresponding to the innate qualities of the stone, which the sculptors took into account. As these chapters show, materials are never inert. On the contrary, their use has a significance, or often a range of significances, governed by constraints, hierarchies and symbolic frameworks which, when combined, become highly complex and constitute a moment when, rather than being a means to an end, the material takes centre-stage in the work's significance.

It becomes apparent that a consideration of materials can enable us to break away from traditional interpretations and methodologies, such as those that take iconography as their starting point. Catherine Chevillot's chapter on nineteenth-century *mouleurs* (mould-makers), a convoluted history long-avoided by scholars of nineteenth-century sculpture, sheds new light on the plaster industry, revealing the fact that 'plaster' (not unlike marble), was developed in many forms and degrees of fineness, and that its many specialized trades evolved around and alongside developments in sculptural practice.

Since the conference took place in 2005, much new research and many new publications have appeared in the field (the bibliography, which includes selected references from the essays, as well as further reading, reflects this). This book builds upon and contributes to this burgeoning interest, and we hope it will encourage further research on the many issues it raises, both in terms of the specific materials addressed, but also, equally importantly, in terms of the methodologies it presents in the study of sculpture.

Notes

- 1 Umberto Boccioni, 'Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture', 1912, reprinted in Jon Wood, Alex Potts and David Hulks, eds, *Modern Sculpture Reader*, Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 2006.
- 2 Alex Potts, 'Tactility: The Interrogation of Medium in Art of the 1960s', *Art History* 27 (2), 2004, pp. 282–304.

- 3 Michael Baxandall, *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany*, New Haven CT and London: Yale University Press, 1980; Hugh Honour, 'Canova's Studio Practice, I: The Early Years' and 'Canova's Studio Practice, II: 1792–1822', *Burlington Magazine* CXIV, 1972; Marie-Thérèse Baudry, *Sculpture, méthode et vocabulaire*, Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1978.
- 4 Nicholas Penny, *The Materials of Sculpture*, New Haven CT and London: Yale University Press, 1993; Thomas Raff, *Die Sprache der Materialien: Anleitung zu einer Ikonologie der Werkstoffe*, Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1994.