

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 Ministry Reform a series of innovative strategies, whose physical and digital purpose is focusing on conscious, inclusive and responsible approach. The Museum's choices respond to the need to have specific devices welcoming and satisfying today's globalized and dynamic society; thanks to recent technological improvements museums are helped in this hard responsibility, thanks to the wide range of possibilities to choose from [Soren 2009]. 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 carry out Mann-In-Colours, 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 and will aim at a visual recovery that will revolutionize the aesthetic perception to which these works have accustomed people for centuries [Jockey 2014]. From educational and pedagogic point of view MannInColours attempts to relate to general public a fundamental cognitive message for a sustainable philologically correct approach to Greek and Roman statuary: a coloured vision (Fig. 1).

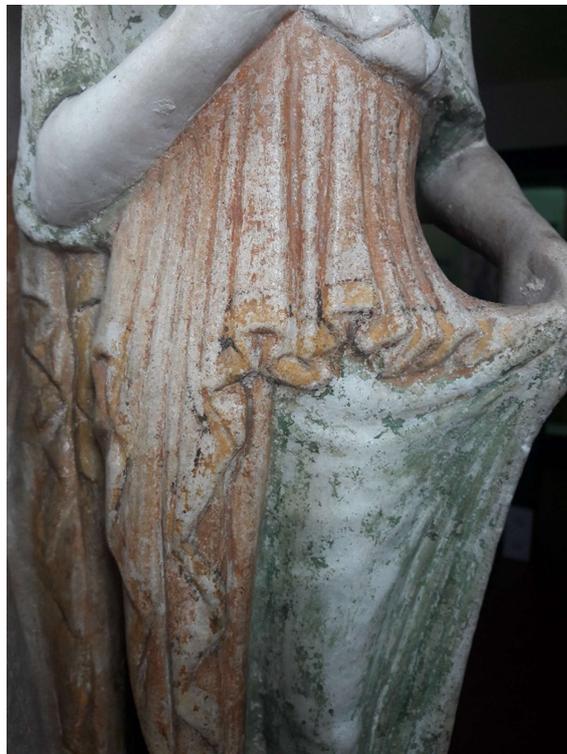


Fig. 1. Lovatelli Venus (part.). Inv. 109608. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. (© Cristiana Barandoni)

This approach seeks to comprehend the nature of a coloured ancient world opposed to black and white general traditional experiential approaches, which prioritize descriptions of our ordinary visual experience of colour. Given this scheme attained, 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 monochromic ones. All this dreamily applicable in an environment in which large conceptual complexities already exist, almost completely lacking the context (i.e. ancient statuary collections in museums). This is the real critical point: from one side the awareness, supported by vibrant colours traces and scientific investigations that tell us about an ancient world covered in colour, appearing on almost every surface, rarely in subtle tones [Fejfer 2008; Ball 2001]; on the other our cemented view of the classical period as pale and white, this is why any essay to return in multiple forms (both materially painting copies of originals or virtually with augmented

reality) original appearance to archaeological artefacts is met with disbelief from the public [Jewell 2013]. How museums displays can help to respect their original colour appearance? What can they do to enhance perception of colour? It's not only dealing about a popular imagination colour vision but 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*: colours weren't casually selected since they mirrored social and financial status of the client whether he used his finances for public donations or for private wealth [Brecoulaki 2014]. In ancient times colours took on a symbolic meaning, semiotic markers to mediate a socially and culturally constructed visual language [Skovmøller 2015]. The polychrome treatment enhanced the value of the sculpture [Blume 2010].

The logical conclusion is that we'd argue varied lines to spread the right message: principles and connections that today are vanished, lacking context and original 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 the object and the correct message that must be addressed to the public becomes very pressing, for us a 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. The digital media, whose use is becoming increasingly widespread in museum communication and teaching practices, can be considered a useful experimentation suitable for the purpose. In 2017 a congress in Bordeaux¹ upraised the problem of how and why it's worth the reconstruction of ancient polychromy in terms of research and dissemination: this term appears more and more frequently in this field and it means that since a while, academics are more concerned in understanding the potential of spreading knowledge even among non-scientists. None complains (actually) about the use of digital media or virtual reality to help in understanding, but it's missing is the methodological method to employ to reproduce ancient colours; no questioning about the material reproduction since a lot of virtuous examples inhabit some of the most important museums in the world (the Ny Carlsberg first). Here, 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 very different nature and complexity are those that concern their reproduction using the digital medium. In addition to a complex choice, it is also a question of ethics and responsibility towards visitors, to whom these experiments are addressed.

This paper however, on this occasion, addresses only a part, an aspect of the more general question on the reoccurrence of colour in the context of the artistic productions of the ancient world. In fact, statuary study should be extended to the architectural ones, for a plenary vision, thanks to which understanding sculpture's positioning related to environment. Obviously, lacking a wide-ranging vision, we can only aspire to a partial incomplete 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 original colours appearance, it is necessary that a method is established according to which, in our specific case, taking into consideration not only the material object but the context within which it was sited.

Here we confer the case, among others, of Lovatelli and Bikini Venuses, both of which we can reconstruct the principle phases of the ancient excavations leading to their discoveries; rebuilding context is enabled by a discreet presence of archival documents, allowing the philological modern vision and exhibitions as staging point of our *experience* that will be set up during the winter. Circumventing this step would mean museums

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)

conferring to public false notions and vision of the past, especially considering their need to educate to a philologically and historically truthful context that considers archaeological context as a *conditio sine qua non* for proper training and communication strategies

In planning our *experience*, we tried to answer at least a few of these questions.



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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