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Varietas delectat: towards a classification of mixed-media sculpture in the Middle Ages

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Sculpture in the Middle Ages inherited from Antiquity a “free and easy” use of different media (or mixed media) in various combinations which we will define here as *polimateric (or polymateric) technique* (from the Greek *polys* = various and the Latin *material* = material).¹ These categories can add a necessary clarification to the field of artistic production in the Middle Ages which, because of its very heterogeneous nature, has never been studied by scholars in all its complex media. These categories reflect an important aspect of the medieval approach to art -- that the use of materials chosen to create a sculpture was never accidental, but was determined by specific and conscious purposes. These include a wish to decorate the work of art (in the name of *varietas*) and to accentuate the polychromy, to heighten the realism of the figure, to ennoble the figure, to reuse materials from Antiquity, to convey symbolic meaning, and more. The fragility that is inherent in some kinds of work produced by the polimateric technique can mean that relatively few examples of those kinds have survived, but those which have should be analyzed in terms of types.

Therefore, this essay will explore the different kinds of polimateric techniques found in sculpture from the Middle Ages. These include *polimateric sculpture by superimposition*, *polimateric sculpture by insertion*, *polimateric by juxtaposition*, and perhaps a fourth category which combines previous categories. These typologies of sculpture, ordered according to the ways

¹ The use of various materials in a single sculpture in Antiquity is certified by physical evidence and literary sources, such as *The description of Greece* by Pausanias (V, 11, 1-2).
in which the materials were combined, coexist over the course of centuries and often appear in the same work. Each category will be defined and discussed, suggesting that art historians become more aware of the kinds of mixed-media sculpture used in the medieval period.

**Category 1: polimateric sculpture by superimposition**

The first category is *polimateric sculpture by superimposition*, where the presence of some of the multiple materials is hidden or at least obscured. Its most common appearance is in the use of polychromy, where The basic sculptural form is rendered in a single material, but finished in paint. The polychromy of different media (marble, stone, bronze, wood) was widely diffused in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. As a “second skin,” it was indistinguishable from the form of the work, commonly assuming a mimetic and illusionistic manner, which transforms the base material into “indifferent material.” When classifying mixed-media sculpture in the Middle Ages, a

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polychromed sculpture which hides the underlying material can be considered polimateric sculpture by superimposition.

Other kinds of polimateric sculpture by superimposition include wooden sculptures covered with metal plate or cladding, such as the Ottonian monumental crosses in gold and silver in S. Michele in Pavia and in the Cathedral of Vercelli. 4 If polychromy acted as a painted second skin on sculptures, heightening the realism of the figure, the second, metallic skin here makes the objects more precious materially, enhancing their value and ennobling the pieces. Even though the underlying material is hidden, it still maintains its own form, more or less. Another example of this, where metal which covers the object over a layer of mastic supported by a simple wooden structure is the Romanesque crucifix found the Cathedral of Casale Monserrato (c. 1170). Originally located in the Cathedral of Alessandria, it is refinished in metal. 5

The same practice was also used for gold objects, such as the reliquary of Saint Candidus, from the same time period, conserved in the Treasury of the Swiss Abbey of Saint Maurice D’Agaune (1165) 6 in which the modeling of the metal coating is predetermined by a detailed carving of walnut underneath, (fig. 1) or in the later bust of Saint Yrieix (Limoges, 1200-1240) now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Made of silver (partially gilded), filigree, rock crystal, precious stones, and glass – it all has the form of the core of finely sculpted wood. 7

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5 Adriano Peroni, Il crocifisso monumentale del Sant’Evasio di Casale: per una nuova lettura, in Arte e carte nella diocesi di Casale, eds. A. Casagrande , G. Parodi (Gros, 2007), pp. 174-199.


7 Henk van Os, The way to heaven: relic veneration in the Middle Ages (Baarn: de Prom, 2000), pp. 98-101, figs. 110, 112.
Category 2 - Polimateric sculpture by insertion

The presence of materials with a predominantly ornamental function set into the surface of a sculpture, without compromising the basic design and identity of the work, characterizes the second category, that of polimateric sculpture by insertion. This typology of sculpture features simultaneous visibility of various materials. In this category we include, above all, goldsmith work, “polytechnic” par excellence, often characterized by the use of different media in quantities -- sometimes overdone -- in the name of varietas, which was an important element of the medieval aesthetic. To the medieval mind, the richness of materials increased the effectiveness of the images.
with high devotional content, such as the reliquary statue of Saint Foy of Conques-en-Rouergue (Treasury of the Abbey), to which the sick thronged hoping to be healed. Ste. Foy’s form is basically a Carolingian structure with a layer of gold and gilt silver covering the wood core. This was enriched over two centuries by the addition of other precious materials. Here the use of mixed-media meets the phenomenon of reuse of spoliate materials (the head is from Antiquity).

Objects can be classified as polimateric sculpture by insertion when they transpose other materials into the techniques of metalwork, as in the case of the marble tombstone known as the Stone of Aldo (Milan, Civiche Raccolte di Arte Antica del Castello Sforzesco, 7th century). The Stone’s cloisonné border presents a rough and functional treatment that allowed for better adhesion of the stucco and other inlaid elements made of marble or glass paste that completed the original decoration. This can also be seen in the wood Madonna of Acuto in the National Museum of Palazzo di Venezia in Rome, ornate with cabochons in different colors. (fig. 2)

The polimateric sculpture by insertion can also be seen in decorative architecture in the West as demonstrated, for example, in the ferrules in stucco of the Tempietto di Santa Maria in Valle a Cividale, enriched by glass ampullae, or in the East, as seen in Istanbul. The latter is exemplified by the marble fragments full of gems or the alveolar forms filled with polychromed

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**Figure 2** Madonna di Acuto, early 13th century, painted walnut with cabochons. National Museum of Palazzo di Venezia, Rome. Photo: author.
Figure 3 Column, Church of Saint Polyeuktos, early 6th century, marble Proconnesio with pieces of precious marbles and glass. Archeological Museum, Istanbul. Photo: author.

materials, still visible among the remains of the edifice at Boukoleon. In the sixth century, a column made for the sumptuous Church of Saint Polyeuktos (now in the Archeological Museum, Istanbul), adorned with pieces of precious marbles and pieces of glass. (fig. 3)

And we can also classify certain Byzantine bronze doors as polimateric sculpture by insertion, whose sections bear figures were engraved with a burin, creating grooves then filled with strands of silver, copper, enamel and niello, through a metallurgical technique generally similar to stone.


sculpture with mastic encrustation. This was an artistic phenomenon completely autonomous with respect to the decorative techniques used for metal, widely used in the Mediterranean during the Middle Ages. Stone sculpture with mastic encrustation is based on engraving of marble or stone and the realization of alveolar forms according to accepted practice, followed by filling these spaces with black and mastic\(^{17}\) (such as the amber marble slab with the Deposition of Christ in the Parma Cathedral signed by Benedetto Antelami (1178).\(^{18}\) (fig. 4)

![Figure 4](https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal/vol3/iss2/8)

**Figure 4** Benedetto Antelami, *Deposition of Christ*, 1178, marble. Parma Cathedral. Photo: author

**Category 3 – Polimateric by juxtaposition**

We can discern a kind of sculpture defined as *polimateric by juxtaposition* which presents various components all in full view, but in this instance, each component has a role in the description of the image; that is, they do not simply appear on the base design without changing it, but, on the contrary, with their extrinsic qualities, compose the design. This type of sculpture is


\(^{18}\) *Corpus...*, pp. 334-335.
realized through a simultaneous mixture of heterogeneous materials, either from different qualities of the same material, such as the wall *sectilia* in Hagia Sophia in Instanbul\(^{19}\) or the Romanesque cosmatesque decorations.\(^{20}\) The principal function and effect of this mixture of flat planes is polychromy,\(^{21}\) an expression of the sensibility for color that appeared in the early Middle Ages, particularly the Migration Period.\(^{22}\)

In other cases, the simultaneous mixture of different materials is made by distributing forms in space and is therefore structural. This occurs in various compositions of several figures, as seen in the lunette of the central portal of the facade of Orvieto Cathedral,\(^{23}\) (fig. 5) where six bronze angels support a bronze curtain, pulled open to reveal the marble Virgin with Child (Museum dell’Opera del Duomo),\(^{24}\) or in the funerary monument of Philip II (the Bold) of Burgundy (Musée des Beaux Arts, Dijon), created in 1381 by Claus Sluter.\(^{25}\) Composed of black Dinant marble,


white Tonnerre stone (partially painted and gilt), and alabaster from Grenoble (fig. 6), it is characterized by a conception of great complexity. This decorative intricacy is echoed in the Well of Moses (Chartreuse de Champmol, Dijon, 1395-1402) by the same artist, where the prophets were carved in great detail, then painted in lively colors and richly decorated with different materials. In other cases, different materials were used to compose the same figure, such as the Sedes Sapientiae of Orcival (Puy-de-Dôme, second half of the 12th century), where the face and the hands in wood emerge from the metal covering, (fig. 7) or in the rare example from the late Middle Ages of an ex-

Figure 5 Lorenzo Maitani, Façade of Orvieto Cathedral, early 14th century, marble and bronze. Photo: author.

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Figure 6 Claus Sluter, *Funerary monument of Philip II of Burgundy*, 1381, Dinant marble, Tonnerre stone, and alabaster from Grenoble. Musée des Beaux Arts, Dijon. Photo: author.

Figure 7 *Sedes Sapientiae*, second half of 12th century, wood and metal covering. Church of Notre Dame, Orcival. Photo: author.
voto in wax, the Count Leonardo von Gorz (Innsbruck, Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum, c. 1470) whose wooden face and hands emerge from the underlying structure.29

Category 4?

An interesting object that can be simultaneously classified in all typologies of polimateric sculpture that we have so far considered is the Herimannkreuz30 (Erbischöfliches Diözesanmuseum, Cologne, c. 1056), (fig. 8a,b) so-named because commissioned by the Archbishop Herimann of Cologne, grandson of Otto II, as affirms the inscription legible on the upper part of the cross Herimannus Arciepiscopus me fieri iussit. His “portrait” is indeed twice repeated on the verso of the cross, where he is depicted on the vertical plank and kneeling at the feet of the Madonna, on the lower part, together with Ida, his sister and Abbess of Santa Maria in Capitolo. The Herimannkreuz (41 x 28 cm) is wood covered by gilt copper and bronze (polimateric by superimposition) and presents examples of insertions of precious stones (polimateric by insertion). On the verso at the juncture of the cross is a piece of rock crystal, on the recto is a carved lapis lazuli head where Christ’s should be, embedded in a cranium of bronze (polimateric sculpture by juxtaposition). This is a small Roman head from the first century, a female face, perhaps of the Empress Livia, wife of Augustus.31 The insertion of a rare and precious piece from Antiquity at the intersection of the arms of the cross was not an unusual practice in the production of Ottonian crosses with gemstones and had the function of rendering more precious, of ennobling, underlining, and drawing attention to the


point which is symbolically most important to the work. Two more examples may be cited, the Heinrichskreuz (Staatliches Museum Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Kunstgewerbemuseum, Berlin, first half of the eleventh century) and the Cross of Lothar II (Domschatzkammer, Aachen, c. 1000): In neither, the spoliate head inserted (the first is a young follower of Bacchus, the second is the Emperor Augustus) has no direct connection to the crucifix. In the Herimannkreuz the head also lacks a contemporary connection to the crucifix, or even Christian symbolism, but the iconographic irrelevance is countered by the strong symbolic congruity of the material from which it is made and its color, as well as its precious character. For every material and every color had a semantic meaning, that is to say, an iconology of material and color. Lapis lazuli was, during the Middle Ages, considered a type of non-transparent sapphire, as noted by Alberto Magnus (1193/1206-1280) in *De mineralibus*. The sapphire, a precious stone of powerful symbolic meaning since Antiquity, was discussed in the Old Testament as having a direct link with God and with the Celestial Spheres. In the Book of Exodus (24.10), God is envisioned with his feet

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resting on a slab of sapphire, whose color recalls the Heavens; in Exodus (28.18), the sapphire is one of the stones found on the breastplate of the High Priest Aaron; in the Song of Songs (5.14) the body of the bridegroom, later interpreted as Christ, is described as being composed of ivory and sapphire; Ezekiel (1.26 and 10.1) described the throne of God as being made of sapphire. Later commentators, such as Origen (185–254) and Saint Jerome (347–420), explored the symbolism of the sapphire and its connection with the color of the Heavens, making it one of the signs of Heavenly Life promised by God, in conformity with the contents of Paul’s letter to the Philippians (3.20). Even Gregory the Great (540-604), contrasted the sapphire, symbol of the Heavenly Sphere with the sardonic, symbol of the Earthly Sphere.\(^{36}\)

Therefore, the lapis lazuli set in the head of the crucifix of Herimannkruenz, noteworthy for its blue color against a gold background, could not but point to the Heavenly Sphere in which the Heavenly Father lives and this symbolizes his closeness to the dying Christ, as a chromatic sign of the divine nature of Jesus, in conformity with the second article of the Credo. In this case, the polimateric quality is not only intended for aesthetic ends, but is also tied to the transmission of symbolism. Its implications must have arrived with force and clarity by taking such an extraordinary form, because the work of God is characterized most exactly by those admirabiles mixturae\(^ {37} \) which amazed and disturbed, but also induced profound reflection. The “game” of using and mixing materials and colors according to expressive semantic meanings and values which they


produced extended beyond the Middle Ages, as demonstrated by the bizarre bust of Tiberius commissioned from the goldsmith Antonio Gentili da Faenza by Ferdinando I Medici in 1580 (now in the Museo degli Argenti in Palazzo Pitti, Florence) (fig. 9), whose face is actually a portrait of Augustus from Roman Art of the first century, splendidly rendered in an intense and divine turquoise. This success was due to the effectiveness of mixed media. Ultimately, mixed media in the art of the Middle Ages went beyond a collection of lovely materials intermingled for aesthetic effect; they drew upon deep sources of symbolism of media which significantly enhanced their meanings and functions.


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