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Coloured Medieval Sculpture: Blue, Red, and Gold Between East and West

Silvia Pedone – Paola Antonella Andreuccetti

Abstract

This paper presents a synoptic analysis of the technical procedures, perceptual and aesthetic features, and the symbolic implications of the use of colour in medieval sculpture between East and West, with particular reference to blue and gold, which have long enjoyed a rather special status, as it is well known. The scope of investigation will be limited to a particular class of objects in marble or stone which had decorative and liturgical functions within ecclesiastical buildings, such as, for example, ambos, portals, altars, slabs, etc. The polychromy of such objects has so far been insufficiently considered, although it is relevant for their multi-layered interaction with the sacred space and with the lived experience of the «users». Taking into

account the studies devoted to medieval painted sculpture in the Latin West, our contribution aims at a comparative analysis encompassing different but co-existing geographic areas, traditions and cultural contexts, widening the gaze to the Byzantine world, and highlighting functional, semantic and aesthetic aspects of polychromy. In this way it is possible to observe a number of differences that depend on local factors and contingent material conditions, but also some converging elements which, precisely for this reason, should be investigated against the background of a broader problematic perspective.

Keywords: Byzantium, Medieval sculpture, gold, materiality, symbolism of colour

Introduction

At the origin of the research presented here lies the convergence of two parallel studies centred on the identification of occurrences and the understanding of the use of polychromy in medieval sculpture¹. From these different paths emerged a common discourse, which aimed at tracing similarities and distinctions in the use of polychromy in sculpture while pinpointing analogies in procedures, practices and functions. Supplementing this comparative approach is the exploration of iconographic and textual sources, which, in a way, corroborate the findings of our investigation and hint at what we might call the «dual nature» of colour, blending both a «physical» perceptual and a «cultural» dimension. The former aspect

allows us to grasp the «original» perception of the object and thereby attempt to reconstruct the visual strategies and experiences (aesthetic, religious or more broadly cultural) that the object embodies and facilitates.

In the following, we will discuss instances that demonstrate the simultaneous use of gold, with its multiple symbolic meanings, and blue pigment, sometimes also associated with red pigment. This combination constitutes a fortunate chromatic triad, which embraces all areas of the visual culture of the Eastern and Western Middle Ages, ranging from miniatures and fabrics to painted images and beyond². These three pigments are constantly found together,

¹ For a summary of our research conducted so far on these issues see: Andreuccetti 2008; Andreuccetti 2013, 71–85; Andreuccetti – Lazzareschi Cervelli 2009; Andreuccetti – Bindani 2016. For the different artistic techniques that make up the use of polychromy in the *pars orientalis* of the Roman Empire, as well as on

what we could call a Byzantine colour culture, see Pedone 2012; Pedone 2015; Pedone 2016; Pedone 2021a and most recently Pedone 2022.

² Gage 1999, 68–76.

and even though there may be variances in materials and techniques, they are almost never completely replaced by other colour combinations. Such a «chromatic success», so to speak, despite its variable mani-

festations, naturally depends on a number of factors, most appreciably the wide circulation and trade of raw materials³.

The Bright Parable of Colour in Byzantium

Polychromy in sculpture is a phenomenon which, although widely taken for granted today, has not received – at least in the Byzantine context – a specific and exhaustive treatment that considers both the remarkable material evidence, present diachronically across the Byzantine millennium, and the numerous technical variants associated with employing polychromy on carved surfaces⁴.

In contrast to Western developments, where figurative statuary presents a wide spectrum of chromatic possibilities in line with ancient expressions of Roman sculptural traditions, in Byzantium we find polychromy only in the Tetrarchic and Late Antique periods. The most noteworthy examples are the precious bas-relief discovered recently in a suburb of the city of Nicomedia (now Izmit, Turkey)⁵, along with instances from Late Antiquity and early Christianity, which have been extensively studied (Fig. 1)⁶. The subsequent phases – the Justinian and Middle Byzantine periods – coincide with a more marked preference for ornamental sculpture, architectural ornamentation, or ornaments on liturgical furnishings (capitals, jambs, altar rails, iconostasis, proskynetaria, marble icons, and more). Polychromy is present in these contexts, serving non-mimetic purposes, to bring out the two-dimensional visual aspect and the contrast between the background and the ornamental design. Notably, instances of «contamination» between different artistic techniques enhanced the effects of *poikilia*⁷. It should therefore be noted that in

Byzantine sculpture there are very different forms of colour use, which are not restricted to the application of pigments on the support but also include the techniques of coloured mastics, niello, marble incrustations, or even mixed forms (Fig. 2)⁸.

If C. Connor's proposition holds true that in Byzantium «colour was not an end in itself, a mere form of decoration, but an essential expressive device that gave enhanced value and meaning to any crafted object⁹», it raises the question of whether this distinctive function should be linked to a deeper rationale. In other words, if colour is what provides value without being an end on its own, then where does the value of colour originate from?

Here we can immediately summon the testimony of an authoritative figure, Basil of Caesarea, who, in his *Homiliae in Hexaemeron* (2, 7), admitted that «[s]uch is also the beauty of gold, which it owes not to the happy mingling of its parts, but only to its beautiful colour which has a charm attractive to the eyes¹⁰». It is apparent that Basil was cognizant of the potential for this statement to appear tautological (gold is beautiful because of the beauty of its colour), yet he seemed to believe that this was as far as one could delve. Even with regard to light, in the eyes of God Himself, gold «was beautiful» (Genesis 1, 4) and «reason delegates judgment to the eyes; it has nothing to say that the senses have not already testified before». Undoubtedly, as H. Kessler recalled with the same forceful rhetoric, gold «assaults the senses¹¹». However, Basil, in

³ The supply of pigments presents an interesting area of study for examining the phenomenon of colour in sculpture: Pedone 2021a, 2021b and 2022. Analogies with research focused on Byzantine textile workshops can offer insights into the circulation, production, and trading of coloured pigments (cfr. Laiou 2002, *passim*; Laiou – Morrison 2007).

⁴ See Pedone 2021a for a summary of the studies on colour in Byzantium and various reflections on the field of Byzantine sculpture.

⁵ The reliefs pertaining to a terraced area designated for worship came to light during excavations carried out in 2001, 2009, and 2016 in the district of Çukurbağ (Izmit); see: Zeyrek – Özbay 2006, 280–291; Ağtürk 2018.

⁶ Liverani 2009; Liverani 2014b.

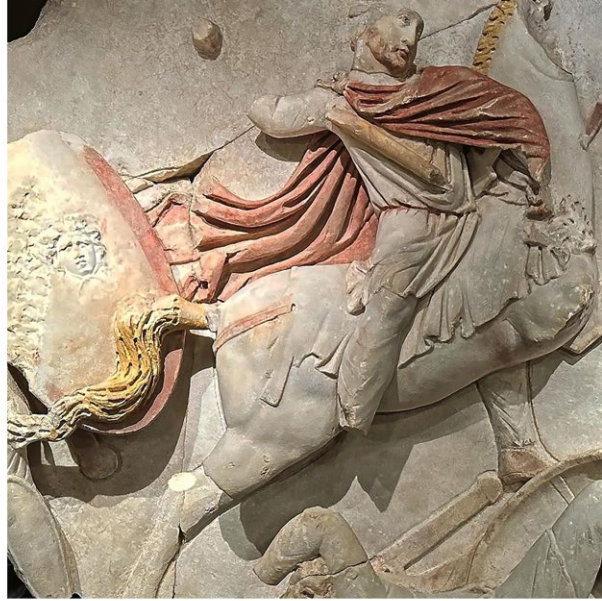
⁷ Pedone 2021; Pedone 2022, 89–114.

⁸ Pedone 2022, 89–114.

⁹ Connor 1998, 77.

¹⁰ Another passage also states: «[...] If beauty in bodies results from symmetry of parts, and the harmonious appearance of colours, how in a simple and homogeneous essence like light, can this idea of beauty be preserved? Would not the symmetry in light be less shown in its parts than in the pleasure and delight at the sight of it?», Basil of Caesarea, *Homiliae in Hexaemeron* (2, 7); translation: Jackson et al. 1895, 241.

¹¹ Kessler 2004, 30.



1 Izmit (Nicomedia), Archaeological Museum, relief fragments, end of 3rd cent. A.D.

the *Homiliae* (7, 4), warned against the risk that an attraction for gold ends up making us prisoners and causes us to allow our wrists to be tied, as long as the fetters and chains are themselves made of gold¹².

Perhaps gold corrupts, but it does not let itself be corrupted. This is certainly one of those rare qualities which, in addition to its seductive aspect, determined its «brilliant» career, especially in Byzantium. Pliny indeed already observed that «the insane pas-

sion of mortals» for the precious metal should not only depend on its luster, given that silver does not shine less and is even *clarior*¹³. But gold, uniquely, does not age or show the signs of time, without losing its ductility and malleability.

Gold perfectly embodies the ambivalence between the worldly and otherworldly dimensions that permeates medieval aesthetics and art. This ambivalence is not limited to Byzantium, as suggested by the

¹² Basil of Caesarea, *Homily to the rich* (PG 31, c. 289): «Gold settings clasp the costliest of gems; some they make into frontlets for their foreheads and some into necklaces; they weave some into belts, while still more encircles their hands and feet. Indeed,

those who love gold do not mind being bound with manacles, so long as their chains are of gold.» (Translation: Schroeder 2009, 48).

¹³ Plin. nat. 33, 19, 9; translation: Bostock – Riley 1857, 96.



Colored pigments applied on marble surface



Colored mastics: champlévé technique



Niello and incision



Marble incrustation



Mixed technique

2 Summary of the different uses of polychromy in Byzantine sculpture

famous considerations of a patron like Suger, the renowned abbot of San Denis. In the 12th cent., while choosing the humble path of monastic life, Suger recognized in the splendour of gold an authentic source of aesthetic pleasure¹⁴, even more than being a means of giving glory to God and ascending from material goods to immaterial ones¹⁵.

This ambivalence or multifaceted nature of gold, this kind of ontological *poikilia* that stretches beyond form and delves into pure abstraction, is certainly at the origin of the no less multiform cult that was bestowed on gold in Byzantine artistic and cultural practice. Simultaneously, the «colour» gold, precisely because of its luminous chromatic distinctiveness, can and indeed has always been employed in representational pictorial settings, where it has assumed in specific circumstances different functional, and sometimes controversial, values¹⁶.

Within the realm of pictorial art, gold's inherent duality as a medium for representing space and light, both worldly or otherworldly, and as a precious and in a certain way self-referential material, maintains a characteristic and enduring polarity. Gold is not simply one colour among others on the artist's palette; it is not only used to represent or imitate light. It is a source of light, albeit indirectly, making it an ideal symbol of a higher light with which God Himself is identified (as the *Epistle of St. John* says, 1. John 1, 5). This notion readily echoes the «reflections» mirroring the metaphysical principles of Neoplatonic philosophy that had so much success in Byzantium.

It was precisely the light metaphor which played a focal role in the use and interpretation of gold in Byzantine art, as is attested by the same ancient sources, which often drew on hyperbolic and superlative rhetoric. This rhetoric has rekindled consider-

¹⁴ Panofsky 1946.

¹⁵ Pejic 1992; Janes 1998; Krämer 2002, 72–103; Rico 2003.

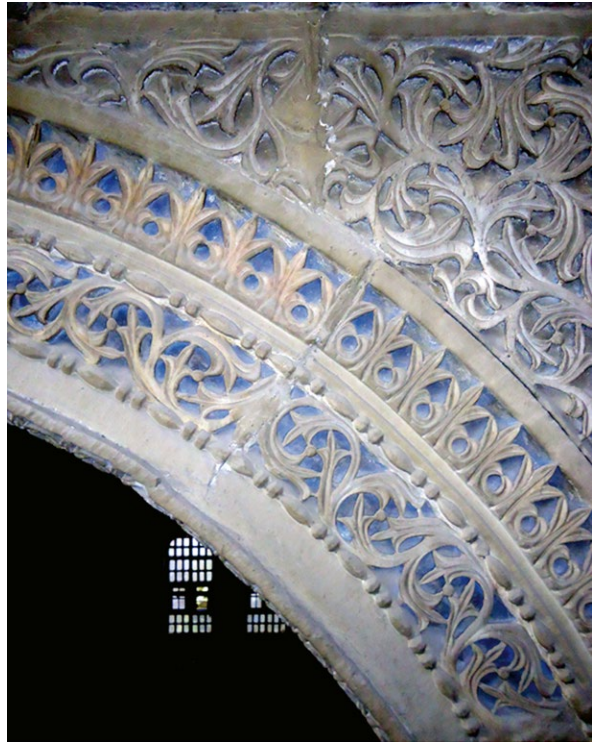
¹⁶ Gage 1993. See also Pedone 2022.

able and growing interest among scholars and specialists, to the extent that it created an almost sensorial and emotionally engaged participation on the part of the viewer immersed in the luminous and numinous atmosphere of a golden space. Not surprisingly, the central case study for this type of exegetical exercise was the Hagia Sophia.

But the aforementioned combination of gold and blue is also found in the Justinian church. During a recent inspection from the scaffolding of the naos, I was able to closely observe a substantial part of the 6th cent. sculptural decoration and verify the presence of blue/azure pigments under the marble wall covering (Fig. 3). Similar traces can be found on the great capitals of the naos and in the arches¹⁷. We can envision the potential effect of such a combination by looking at the pages of the London codex (Add Ms 5111) of the *Tables of Canons*, which dates to the end of the 6th and 7th cent. (Fig. 4). Regarding the presence of gold, ample documentary evidence remains. For example, we have records from Paul the Silentiary on the decoration of the reliefs on the large capitals, and the report of the Skylitzes on the restoration of gilding subsequent to a generous donation from the Emperor Romanos III Argyros (1028–1034)¹⁸, or Michael of Thessalonica's description drawn up in the 12th cent.¹⁹. These accounts not only evoke the original appearance of the building but also document the ongoing efforts to preserve and restore the colouration of the surfaces.

Another noteworthy example of this chromatic harmony is found in another interesting Constantinopolitan construction site known as Küçükyalı, where I participated in excavations from 2016 to 2017²⁰. This excavation focused on the monastery founded by Patriarch Ignatius on the Asian coast of the city. The rich sculptural decoration of the katholikon preserves in the backdrops of the frames the precious blue pigment, which was probably associated with the gilding of the heart-shaped leaves (Fig. 5)²¹.

Even within examples from the Middle Byzantine period, one can trace a consistent trend utilizing these three colours to accentuate ornamental decoration, favouring a two-dimensional and non-mimetic reading of the decorative pattern. This practice can



3 Istanbul, Hagia Sophia. Detail of the polychromy on the bottom of the carved decoration within the naos

be observed, for instance, in the marble decoration of the Hosios Lukas complex in Phocis²² (Fig. 6), as well as in the Middle Byzantine cornices from Amorium in Phrygia, located in Asia Minor²³.

A further example of polychromy can be observed in the furnishings of the northern church of the monastery of Sebaste, dating back to the 10th cent. Here, the *cloisonné* technique featuring coloured pastes is combined with the gilding of the clypei adorned with depictions of saints and Eastern church fathers, emulating jewellery and enamels (Fig. 7)²⁴.

During the Komnenian and Palaeologan periods, a freer and more expansive use of polychromy emerged, reflecting trends also seen in the West due to the renewed popularity of figurative relief sculpture. The fragments of archivolts, now preserved in Murano but probably originating from Constantinople, serve as a poignant illustration of this develop-

17 Pedone 2021a. See also Barsanti 2016.

18 Fobelli 2005, 133 f. As reported by Cedrenus, Romanos III decorated the capitals with gold and silver: «Hoc ipso anno mundi 6539, indictione 14, [...] exornavit etiam capita columnarum magni templi et Blachernensis auro atque argento». See Cedren. 2, 497.

19 Mango – Parker 1960. Michael of Thessalonica had been *protekdikos* of the church of Thessalonica and, subsequently,

deacon of the Saint Sophia. He was entrusted with the office of rector of the patriarchal academy of Constantinople.

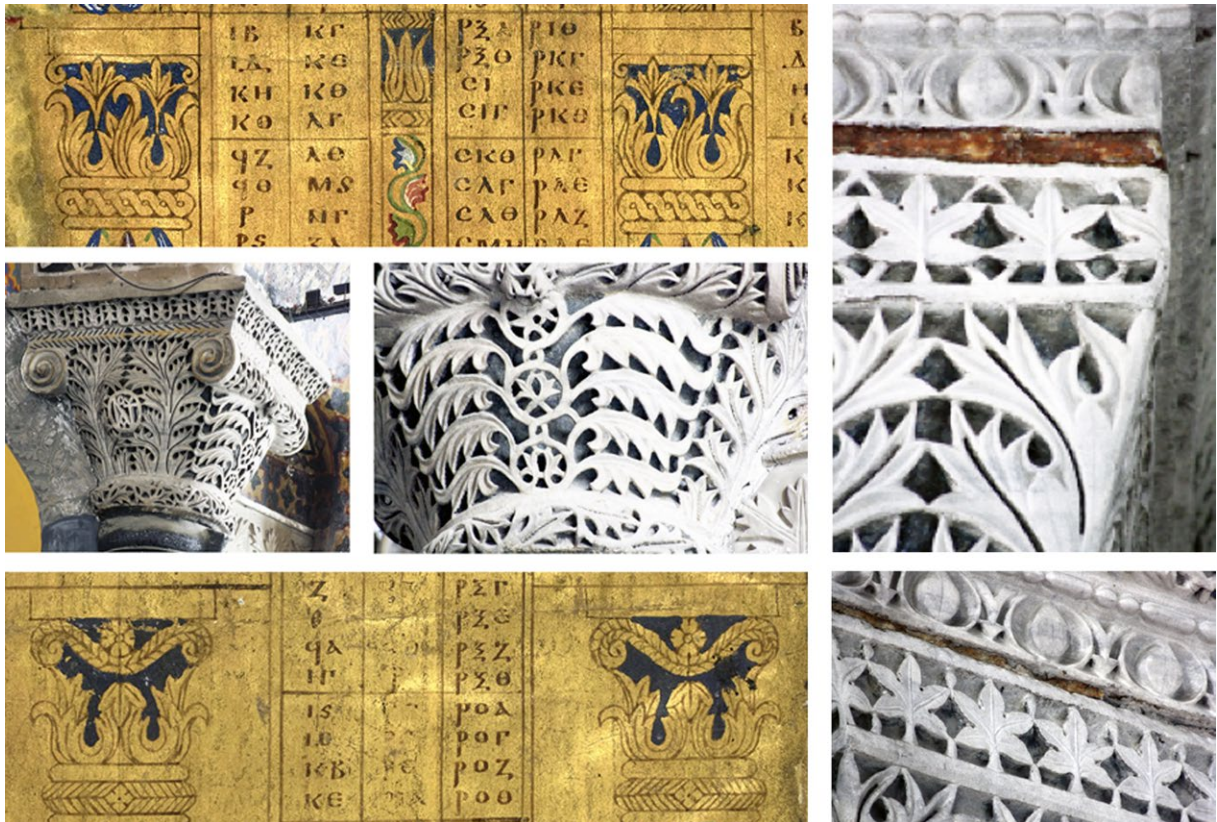
20 Pedone 2019. On the excavation see Ricci 2019 (with previous bibliography).

21 Pedone 2019; Pedone 2022.

22 Boura 1980; Pedone 2006.

23 Ivison – Hendrix 2003, 119–128.

24 Barsanti 2007; Barsanti 2008; Pedone 2021a.



4 Istanbul, Hagia Sophia. Detail of the capitals in comparison with the Tables of the Canons of Add Ms5111 (London, British Library), late 6th-7th cent. A.D.



5 Istanbul, Küçükyalı. Detail of the frame of the Middle Byzantine church of the monastery of Satyros

COLOURED MEDIEVAL SCULPTURE: BLUE, RED, AND GOLD BETWEEN EAST AND WEST



6 Hosios Loukas. Details of the sculpted decoration of the templon and the capitals of the church of Panaghia and Katholikon



7 Afyon, Archaeological Museum. Details of the templon from the Basilica of Sebaste in Phrygia; comparison with an enameled medallion for the chromatic effects



8 Examples of colouring of the sculptures of late-Byzantine buildings: 12th cent. A.D. from the Kariye Camii in Istanbul and capital in work in the Parekklesion of the Theotokos Pammakaristos in Istanbul

ment²⁵. In the late stage of Byzantine art, the decoration of frames and capitals was systematized and expanded to encompass larger and more coordinated ornamental ensembles. Examples of this development include the Chora (Kariye Camii) and the *parekklesion* of the Theotokos Pammakaristos (Fethiye Camii; Fig. 8), as well as the painted capital of the church of St. Nicholas Orphan of Thessalonica, where

distinct decorative effects contribute to overcome the conventional boundaries between sculpture and painting, merging into a continuum. This fusion is so pronounced that it suggests a re-evaluation of the specific craft skills practices within these individual contexts²⁶.

[S.P.]

Similarities and Differences in Western Medieval Cases

In turning the discussion to the medieval West, we can evoke a captivating image from the renowned Chigi manuscript, once owned by Pope Alexander VII, which transmits the Acts of the Apostles, the Pauline, and canonical letters (Fig. 9)²⁷. This manuscript – an ideal *trait d'union* in our discussion – was created by the hand of two different artists in the Odigitria monastery in Constantinople, at the end of the 14th cent.

The initial section of the codex, containing the «Acts of the Apostles», opens with an aniconic miniature featuring a central floral clipeate cross, accentuated by dominant blue and red hues against a back-

drop of gold. In this composition, gold, enhanced by the presence of blue, symbolizes light – a mystical symbol and expression of an inexpressible reality, as well as a means of access to divinity. The function of the miniature is akin to providing «access» to the book's contents, just like the portals of medieval cathedrals ushering one into the sacred space. The gold and azure within the miniature, like the colours of the portals, express the approach to the divine, preparing the reader to gather himself in contemplation. As the soul catches the light, it grasps God «since this light comes from Him, or rather it is Himself²⁸». The

²⁵ Barsanti 2014.

²⁶ Pedone 2022.

²⁷ BAV, Mss. Chig. R.V.29, 14th cent., f. 1. The manuscript is made by two copyists – Iosaf, monk, and Iohannes – indicated by the names shown in the margin (f. 247v. and f. 236v). From the hand-

written indications it is possible to derive, in addition to the place of origin, also the date of drafting of the Pentacostarion (1394).

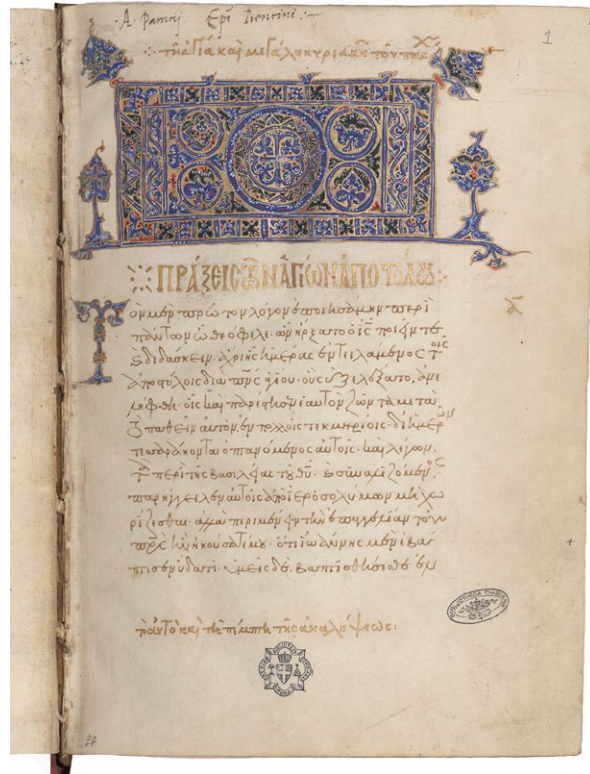
²⁸ Plot. Enn. 5, 3, 17: «Thus, the unilluminated soul, bereft of god, is without light. When she is illuminated, she has what she sought, and this is the soul's true goal: to make contact with that light and to see it by itself» (translation: Gerson 2018, 575).

symbolism of light, a substantial element of medieval religious thought²⁹, utilizes these three colours (red-blue-gold) as an analogy to the splendour of God, an emanation of the divine, as exemplified in various Byzantine mosaics which use the three colours to evoke the light that envelops Christ³⁰.

At the perceptual level, a pronounced appreciation for the qualities of gold, which bring delight to the eye, even more so when combined with blue, is suggested by patristic sources. Not only do we see the aforementioned sentiments expressed by Basil, but also those of Gregory of Nyssa, who states that «if blue combines with gold, its brightness is enhanced³¹». In short, the image served an emotional purpose, stimulating the souls and minds of the faithful towards devotion by guiding them from the material to the immaterial worlds³².

In the symbolic-allegorical vision of the universe, which was typical of medieval sensibility, everything refers to something higher and everything reveals the manifestation of God. G. Durand formulated the *Rationale Divinorum Officiorum* based on this symbolic framework³³. Within this work, Durand presented a mystical, allegorical, and moral interpretation of the liturgy, dealing with the church, its ornamentation, liturgical vestments and much more. In a sort of restitution of the church building as a Heavenly Jerusalem on earth, the decoration of the medieval church was carefully planned to include various focal points, of which the portal was the initiatory element. «The door of the church is in fact Christ», Durand writes, drawing from the Gospel where the Lord declares: «I am the door³⁴».

As the medieval faithful approached the church, they were welcomed by Christ, who was often evoked by the sculptural decoration and its colours. In the lunette above the main portal of the Cathedral of San Lorenzo in Genoa, for example, Christ is represented in glory, surrounded by the symbols of the evangelists, reflecting the vision of divine splendour as inaugurated by Ezekiel's prophecy (Fig. 10)³⁵. The reconstruction of the original polychromy showcases the use of two different pigments for the backdrops of



9 Mss Chigi R.V.29, BAV

the lunette and the mandorla. Azurite, set in contact with the white Apuan marble, creates a light background without naturalistic features at the bottom of the lunette, while the ultramarine blue, exhibiting a saturated and darker hue, symbolizes the inaccessible light that surrounds the Lord. The two blue pigments have no naturalistic value but perform a theological function³⁶.

In this case, the colouration does not affect the projecting parts but only the background surface of the lunette. The blue, in addition to complying with a code of representation and symbolic conventions, serves a functional purpose. The visual contrast enhances the depiction of the candid Christ, who appears to radiate light, intensified by the dynamic interplay of the dark blue background and the arrange-

29 Enciclopedia dell'Arte Medievale (1997) 25–35 s. v. Luce (G. Federici Vescovini).

30 Gage 1993, 58–61. See also Marchionibus 2012, 18.

31 Greg. Nyss., *De deitate adversus Evagrium* (PG 46, 544 C [6], 545 A [7]): «Do you see the lovely sight of a roof over our heads where gold subtly appears with graven work? Such gold is outstanding in that it is completely visible to our sight with many facets in dark blue. What, then, is the dark blue which the artisan has incorporated? It seems to me that the gold is more radiant when offset by other colours. Thus if the dark blue combines with

gold, its brightness is enhanced» (translation by the author [P. A. A.]). For a significant collection of sources see: Bordino 2010, 115.

32 Belting 1981. For a bibliographic summary: Enciclopedia dell'Arte Medievale (1996) 335–342 s. v. Immagine (J. Baschet).

33 Durand 2001, 21.

34 Durand 2001, 21.

35 The image is inspired by the vision of Yahweh described in Ezekiel 1, 4–28 and the description of the eschatological Glory of Christ as per Revelation 4, 1–11.

36 See Liverani 2014a.

ment of the white stones in the archivolt, culminating in an expansive radiant effect³⁷. Further, the metaphor of light is affirmed by Christ's own words found in the open book which he holds, stating: «Ego sum lux mundi».

Alongside azurite and ultramarine, cinnabar is utilized to depict the fire in the martyrdom scene of St. Lawrence, while red lead colours the edge of the mandorla and the cushion on the throne where Christ is seated. Traces of gilding can also be observed on the arched decoration of the crowning band of the scene³⁸. Just as in painting, in sculpture the portrayal of pivotal elements in the depicted scene is entrusted to the most precious colours of the Middle Ages following gold – namely ultramarine and cinnabar.

A similar absence of colour in the figure of Christ is also found in Lucca, in the lunette of the central portal of the Cathedral of San Martino (Fig. 11). Analytical examinations conducted on the relief confirm the lack of polychromy in this section, rendering it white. The scene features the representation of «Christ in majesty», yet, as in some other cases, the decorative scheme of the Lucca portal intertwines with the theme of the Ascension.

Through an optical microscope analysis of collected samples, it is revealed that ultramarine blue serves as the primary pigment used in all the sculptural decorations, notably present in the extensive background at the base of the lunette, while azurite is applied to the garments of the angels. Additionally, traces of a yellow ochre film also form an imitation diamond inlay along the frame of the mandorla³⁹. The findings from an optical microscope analysis of a colour sample taken from the bottom of the lunette reveals a red underlayer of cinnabar beneath the blue, composed of ultramarine mixed with lead white and azurite. The star shapes impressed onto the background are clearly visible, suggesting an interpretation of a celestial vault.

Additional traces of blue are found in correspondence with the frame to create a rhombus decoration, perhaps an imitation of a polychrome impasto inlay. This embellishment extends beneath the lunette and the acanthus leaf decoration of the entablature,

framing the adjacent tiles. Once again, the theme of light appears to be evoked through the candour of the figure of Christ. The light generated by his presence radiates and floods the figures close to Him, like the angels, making their garments turn a light blue⁴⁰.

In a hypothetical reconstruction, which is still to be investigated in more depth, we might consider the lunette in an intense ultramarine blue, adorned with stars, with the central figure of Christ left colourless. The mandorla could potentially be rendered in gold (although, until now, no traces have been found), and the angels in garments of a lighter blue, which stand out from the background. All elements would be integrated into the blue decoration so as to create a great theophany of light, standing as a metaphor of salvation in the encounter with God as Light.

The use of blue as a prevalent background colour in Greek sculpture from the 6th cent. B.C. onwards is well-documented in recent studies⁴¹. But what is interesting to remember is the association of this colour with the figure of the emperor, as John Chrysostom recalls⁴². The close correlation between Imperial art and Christian art, established by Constantine, where the emperor was viewed as the earthly counterpart to Christ, facilitated the extension of this colour to Christological representations. Particularly, in the scenes of majesty, Christ was often envisioned the heavenly emperor⁴³. It is probable that the continuous employment of a blue background in the plastic arts gradually accrued symbolic significance bound to theological narratives, where blue-azure carried semantic connotations. Even today, akin to ancient times, the blue-azure backdrop serves as a tool to accentuate the sculptural figures in various artworks, but its significance has evolved with the rise of Christianity, imbuing it with fresh layers of meaning.

Even when the blue background is adopted in mosaics and frescoes, alongside the presence of gold defining the background of the narrative, the introduction of blue that appears at the base of the sculptural works does not seem to make way for the precious metal. Rather, a comparative examination of colours utilized in various Tuscan artworks underscored the

37 Di Fabio 2014, 137.

38 Billi 2017, 65 f.

39 The first data from the scientific analyses were obtained by M. Spampinato: cfr. Andreuccetti 2023.

40 An authoritative precedent is the apsidal mosaic of the Monastery of Santa Caterina in Sinai, where in the scene of the Transfiguration the light emanating from the mandorla of Christ becomes whiter as it moves away from its source and, investing the apostles, transforms their garments into blue. See Weitzmann 1965; Weitzmann 1966; Miziolek 1990.

41 Walter-Karydi 2004. See also Jockey 2018, *passim*.

42 Joh. Chrys., in 1 Cor. 10, 1 hom., 4 (PG. 51, 247): «What then is «shadow», and what is «truth»? Come, and let's focus our discussion on the portraits that artists paint. You've often seen an imperial portrait cast in bright blue color, and then the artist draws white sketch marks around it and makes the shape of an imperial figure, an imperial throne, horses and bodyguards alongside him, and his enemies bound and placed below him» (translation: Mitchell 2022, 331).

43 Bordino 2010, 265–274.



10 Genoa, Cathedral of San Lorenzo. Portal

transition from gold, prevalent in contemporary paintings, to blue pigments in similar marble altarpieces. This shift can be observed in creations by artists like Tino di Camaino and the production from

workshops like the Riccomanni, exemplified in works such as the San Pantaleone triptych in the church of Pieve a Elici in Massarosa dating back to 1470⁴⁴. This observation, warranting further investigation, sug-

44 See Andreuccetti (in press).



11 Lucca, Cathedral of San Martino. Portal

gests a distinction in colour application according to the base material: the preference for gold leaf in the tables replaces azurite or ultramarine blue in stone altarpieces. Thus, stone altarpieces may be akin to the gold backgrounds in painting, characterized as «blue backgrounds».

In these individual case studies, the prevalence of the blue and gold combination stands out. However, the perspective shifts when considering all the objects that make up the furnishings of the church building together.

The medieval church experienced the acting-out of a symbolic drama through the liturgy. Honorius of Autun compared the celebrant to a «tragic author who represents, in the theatre of the Church, the actions of contending characters before the people through gestures⁴⁵». The church with its liturgy unfolds a narrative that uses the furnishings as a meticulous scenography. The colours and materials that make up these works play an integral role of this scenography, conceived as a unity. The colours and materials mentioned by Durand, in the chapter of his already-mentioned work dedicated to the «church

and its parts», are gold, silver, copper, hyacinth and purple, cochineal, red and violet and scarlet purple and fine linen. In essence, these colours encompass shades of blue and red, in addition to metals. Unlike other colours mentioned elsewhere in the text, they do not carry specific meanings. However, the emblematic representation of a church that appears on the title page of the homilies of the life of the Virgin, attributed to the monk James of the Kokkinobaphos monastery dating back to the second quarter of the 12th cent., suggests a propensity towards the symbolic use of these colours.

Various examples from works created at different periods with diverse artistic techniques attest to the continued use of the gold-blue-red chromatic tripartition. These instances range from the scroll of the *exultet* 2 of the Museo dell'Opera Primaziale in Pisa, of Capuan origin dating between 1059 and 1071, depicting an ambo, to the frontal from the church of San Pietro Consavia in Asti, dated between the late 13th and the early 14th cent. (Fig. 12).

There is also the frescoed scene from Giotto's workshop around 1313, in the lower basilica of Assisi,

45 See Verdon 2017, 98.



12 Manuscript Vt. Gr. 1162, BAV; Pisa, Museo dell'Opera Primaziale, *exultet* 2 and comparison with the frontal of the Civic Museum of Sant'Anastasio in Asti



13 Assisi, Lower Basilica of San Francesco. Presentation in the Temple

showcasing a marble ark painted with the three colours red, blue, and gold in the central axis of the depiction (Fig. 13). The scene illustrates a passage from Luke's Gospel, the encounter between humanity, represented by Simeon and Anna, and the divine, Christ the Lord. Central to the story is Christ who appears on

the front of the ark, in the centre of the scene, represented in gold on a blue background, as in the previous frontal. Additionally, the three colours are found in the decorative parts of some funeral sculptures such as *The Tomb of St. Eulalia*, created by Lupo di Francesco in the first half of the 14th cent. for the



14 Barcelona, Cathedral. Tomb of St. Eulalia

cathedral of Barcelona. Here, the four capitals supporting the arch exhibit gold predominance in the upper frame's acanthus leaf decoration. Red and blue are designated to mark the variations in relief depth across the composition (Fig. 14).

In the Metropolitan Museum⁴⁶, another capital originating from Southern Italy and dating between the 12th and 13th cent. showcases fragments of a blue colour in the depths, with the pigment identified as natural ultramarine blue. This precious pigment is also found on some leaves of the acanthus ornamentation, alongside traces of a red colour that is perhaps later.

In the Baroncelli sepulcher, built by Giovanni di Balduccio in the 14th cent. for the Baroncelli Chapel in Santa Croce, Florence, there is an interesting inversion of chromatic values in the depiction of the trees of life constituting the monument's frame. The blue background prevails over the gold, which highlights only specific details of the carving, and over



15 Florence, Basilica of Santa Croce. Baroncelli Sepulcher

⁴⁶ Castelnuovo-Tedesco – Soutanian 2010, 58–60.

the red, which serves as the background of the central decoration (Fig. 15).

This brief overview of different works reveals a sense of continuity that has persisted from the early

Middle Ages, maintaining its influence in the consistent use of the chromatic combination of blue-red-gold and blue-gold, albeit with subtle variations.

[P. A. A.]

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