Conservation treatment of a winged victory figure from the Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp, Belgium

Aurélie Isebaert
aurelisebaert@gmail.com

The renovation of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp necessitated the restoration of this marble sculpture. This larger than life sculpture (approx. 1.90 x 1.10 x 0.70 m) was dirty and parts were broken off, making it unfit for exhibition. Now it has been treated, it can be exhibited once more.

Christian Daniel Rauch
In the 19th Century, the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, Belgium, collected contemporary art works and displayed them in the Academy’s Museum. The Museum commission approached professors of the Academy as well as several foreign artists, and in 1854 they contacted the then famous German sculptor Christian Daniel Rauch (1777-1857) to donate one of his marble sculptures.

Victory
Rauch proposed to make a victory figure, his most popular subject. He meant to copy one of the six Victoria sculptures he made in 1841 for the Walhalla in Regensburg, Germany, which would have been almost routine for his studio. Rauch passed away in 1857 before beginning the statue, but the Museum was still eager to have one of his works. Hugo Hagen (1818-1871), one of Rauch’s assistants, was assigned to finish all Rauch’s projects, and the commission agreed that he would also sculpt this particular statue.

Unfortunately, Hagen’s studio burnt down around 1861. The sculpture was not damaged by the fire, but soot had settled on the white marble. Hagen cleaned the marble with ‘chlor’ (presumably bleach), resulting in a more yellow-coloured marble, and the Academy was more than pleased with this special colour when the sculpture finally arrived in 1863.

The object as documentation of treatments
Before the conservation treatment started in late 2010, the sculpture was not only extremely dirty from dust accumulation, but it also showed signs of several conservation treatments, performed at different times. To complete the history of the statue, each conservation material was analyzed. This would indicate not only which materials were used, but also when each treatment was performed; for example, some adhesives were used more often in a particular period. Five different samples (< 2 mm²) were analyzed with Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy at the Rijksdienst Cultureel Erfgoed in the Netherlands. Forty scans were made per sample with a resolution of 4 cm⁻¹. Archival research and photographs helped to further date the treatments.

Decisions in conservation treatment
The cleaning had to be done carefully, since the yellowish effect made by the soot and bleach was not to be removed; although the yellowish appearance was unintentionally created, it had become a part of the sculpture, which was never displayed purely white.

Another reason for careful and methodical cleaning was because the sculptor used different finishing techniques to express the difference in texture between skin, clothes and base of the statue, and dirt adhered much more to the rough base and clothing than to the skin. Because of this, different methods were used so as to give the statue the same tone.

Taking into account the nature of the dirt, the following cleaning methods were used where needed: diatomaceous earth, Vulpex Liquid Soap and a gel of ammonium bicarbonate, Tylose MH300P and distilled water. Adhesives from former conservation treatments were removed where necessary with an adjusted micro-emulsion gel. New pinholes had to be drilled to attach the broken parts with glass fibre rods and epoxy resin. A solution of Paraloid™ B72 was used as barrier between the epoxy resin and the marble.

The Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp commissioned the conservation treatment of this sculpture (inv.nr. 1539). It was carried out as a masters project by the author at the Stone & Polychrome Objects Studio of Conservation Studies, Artesis University College.