A STUDY OF THE POLYCHROMED WOOD FIGURE OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST LOCATED AT DINGLI PARISH CHURCH, MALTA.

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Study carried out under the University of Malta, Faculty of the Built Environment.

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INTRODUCTION

This study involves a medieval wooden polychrome sculpture of St John the Baptist, presumed to have been brought to Malta in the 16th century by the Knights of St John. The statue is probably the only surviving example of freestanding late Gothic wooden polychrome sculpture in Malta. The present appearance of some works of art, including but of the present statue, is different from the one they were made, and therefore what the artist or patrons had intended. In most cases, the aesthetic appearance of polychrome sculptures was changed at a later date, which change often happened more than once. Such renovations adapted the statues to the different tastes of the later periods and were often carried out without any documentation. As a result the original polychromy of many sculptural surfaces remains unclear. Over the ages the statue of St John the Baptist went through a number of undocumented restoration interventions. A main intervention the polychromy was covered with a dark brown coating, which transformed the statue into a monochrome sculpture. Beneath the present dark coating there are hints of polychromy on the statue, which indicate that it was gilded and painted.

The study aimed to obtain an in-depth understanding of the statue through documentation, the monitoring of its surrounding environment and by carrying out a number of diagnostic investigations in order to:

- Understand better the structure of the statue, and its polychromy.
- Shed further light on the statue in the context of the history and techniques of the medieval period.
- Describe additions and alterations, which were a result of both natural origin and human interventions.
- Determine the statue’s state of conservation.

METHODOLOGY

A systematic methodology involved close observations of the statue aided by visible light, ultraviolet light, infrared radiation and X-ray radiography. Samples (Table 1) were taken in order to study the stratigraphy of different areas of the statue and to characterize its constituent materials by means of different analytical methods. An environmental monitoring campaign was also carried out inside the sanctuary in order to monitor relative humidity and temperature fluctuations.

HISTORY

• The statue may have an association with the Gran Caraccio San’Anna possibly being one of the cult statues that adorned the ship’s chapel.
• In 1466 Hugh Braun reported that the statue was “covered with armorial graffito”.[1]
• In the 1960s artist and restorer Oscar Testa studied the statue against insect infestation[4].
• To date, no detailed description of the statue before the dark coating application, nor when the coating was applied.

RESULTS

Environmental monitoring was carried out inside the sanctuary for a period of seven months. Relative humidity (RH) and temperature (T) were monitored by means of a HOBO SD20 data logger [5].

CONCLUSION

The construction technique of the statue conforms to the medieval approach to wood carving. The statue is made of eight parts, the main body was carved from a wooden trunk, the back was hollowed out and the cavity covered with a wooden panel. From the investigations carried out, it was also possible, to a certain extent, to visualize the statue’s original appearance. The original polychromy consisted of vermilion/oil black, ochre, minium, ferrum, copper green, bone white and lead white. Burnished gold was also found in certain areas of the statue. The statue has undergone many interventions. The wooden support is not tall and the structural integrity of the figure is complete, with the only major loss of original form in the right hand and staff, both of which are probably not original to the sculpture. In turn the polychromy of the sculpture, which once defined the form of the artefact, is not in a good state of conservation considering the extensive use of gesso and the fact that the polychromed surface has been totally concealed with the dark brown coating, giving a wrong perception of the original appearance of the statue. Hypotheses were presented in the discussion relating to this main restoration intervention. The most plausible one was that the brown coating was possibly applied to make the statue look like it was made out of bronze.

It is believed that this study will provide valuable information to art historical studies on the statue and most of all be of invaluable help when establishing a future sustainable conservation methodology.

REFERENCES

[3] The authors used to paint glyphs was adapted from Ferrante, (2003) St. CIMS. unpublished Dissertation of the University of Malta.

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