The Burrell Collection’s Crucifixion with Virgin and Five Saints: A case study of medieval polychromy

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Methodology

The purpose of this study is to consider the history and significance of medieval polychrome sculpture as related to this object and to take note of its physical condition prior to conservation scientists’ analysis of its polychromy. The research for this study falls into two broad categories: “Gothic Sculpture,” pertinent to the history of medieval polychromy and various topics relevant to the Crucifixion sculpture’s attribution, and “Technical Concerns,” covering the production and significance of medieval polychrome sculpture and observations noted in the Crucifixion sculpture’s surface examination.

Introduction

As the Burrell Collection plans to redisplay its galleries, the long-held “histories” of certain objects are coming under scrutiny. The Crucifixion with Virgin and Five Saints sculpture is one such example: its present wall text describes the polychrome (painted) limestone panel as a late fifteenth-century Burgundian altarpiece. While no record cites the source of this attribution, it may have stemmed from a previous curator’s interpretation of information offered by the object’s dealer, M&R Stora. Given the outstanding quality of its polychromy, curators are keen to make it a highlight of the future Colour Gallery, but will reconsider its attribution.

Gothic Sculpture

Though medieval stone sculpture is often associated with whiteness, the vibrant colouring of the Crucifixion sculpture offers a more accurate idea of how such works were intended to look. Polychrome sculptures were commonly found in churches throughout the Middle Ages. Considered to help facilitate the faithful’s encounter with the divine, sculptures were painted so to heighten their life-likeness and their visibility in dimly-lit spaces.

Notably, the portrayal of the crucified Christ surrounded by saints in an unregistered, rectangular stone panel is consistent with stylistic trends seen on altarpieces produced from the fourteenth century on. Furthermore, iconographic similarities between this sculpture and known Gothic altarpieces legitimate its presentation as such.

Technical Concerns

In the case of sculptures whose origin is not known definitively, a clearer understanding of the manner in which they were prepared and painted will lend insight on their history. Polychroming processes varied, but it is likely that a limestone sculpture like this would have been primed with a gesso-like sealant of oil, lead white, and other pigments before receiving coats of paint and/or gilding. The presence of this layer is evidenced by raking tool marks scattered across the sculpture.

Paint losses reveal the existence of multiple layers of colour, suggesting that the sculpture may have been repainted. Notably, the orange and green surface discolorations likely conceal lower layers of paint and may indicate the (previous) presence of gilding.

Conclusions

The manner in which the Burrell Collection’s curators interpret Crucifixion with Virgin and Five Saints will essentially determine the object’s history. Comparisons of the sculpture to known altarpieces suggest that its long-held classification as such is reasonable—however, further investigation into the iconography of other types of medieval sculpture would assist in refining its possible identities.

Forthcoming technical analyses will enhance present understanding of the object, revealing insight on the work’s earlier colouration(s) and/or gilding. The findings of these studies, coupled with a greater understanding of painted religious sculpture’s historic significance, will offer museum goers and scholars valuable insight on this important material dimension of medieval Christian culture.

References


All of the above photographs were taken by Carter Lyon in January and March 2017.