

EDITED BY ANNA ANGUSSOLA AND ANDREAS GRÜNER

The NATURE *of* ART

Pliny the Elder on Materials

BREPOLS

2020

Edited by Anna Anguissola and Andreas Grüner

The NATURE
of ART

Pliny the Elder on Materials

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Irving Lavin

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Contents

- 8 Editorial note and abbreviations
- 10 INTRODUCTION
- Anna Anguissola and Andreas Grüner**
- 11 Nature and Culture in the *Natural History*
- 22 PROPERTIES
- Courtney Roby**
- 23 Parasite, Infused: Pliny on Leeches
- Annette Haug**
- 35 Silver and Obsidian: Shine and Reflection
- Julian Schreyer**
- 42 Pliny on the Sensory Qualities of Tin
- Verity Platt**
- 51 Beeswax: The Natural History of an Archetypal Medium
- Nadia J. Koch**
- 65 *Caeruleum* and the Pigments of Greek Painting: A Comedy of Mistaken Identity
- Simona Rinaldi**
- 74 The Renaissance Reception of Pliny's *Atramentum*
- 90 PROCESSES
- Giovan Battista Fianza**
- 91 Wood and Architecture: Pliny's Legacy in the Treatises of Alberti and Cataneo
- Clarissa Blume-Jung**
- 100 *Ganosis* and *Kosmesis* in Pliny's *Natural History*.
On the Polishing of Marble Sculptures with Wax
- Emily Margaret Cook**
- 112 Pliny the Elder in the Workshop of Zenodorus
and the Materiality of Facture in the *Natural History*
- Elena Calandra**
- 126 Material Substitutions. The Second Life of the Aphrodite *anadyomene*

Anna Anguissola

- 132 The Materiality of Creation. Integrity, Deception, and the Process of Art

Felix Henke

- 145 *Gypsum*, the Invention of Bronze Casting, and the Triumph of Form

Maria Luisa Catoni

- 157 Parian Marble and «Quella che si fa per forza di levare»

Nikolaus Dietrich

- 171 «Ex uno lapide» and the Meaning of Monolithic Sculpture in the *Natural History*

180 **VALUES**

Massimiliano Papini

- 181 *Pretia* and *auctoritas rerum*. Evaluation of Materials and Artefacts in Books 33-37

Hilary Becker

- 194 Grading for Colour: Pliny's Hierarchy of Pigment Quality

Mathilde Bert

- 201 Plinian Monochromy in Renaissance Italy

Stefano Rocchi

- 217 Corinthian Bronzes and Vases from Pliny the Elder to Pliny the Younger
(In the Light of a Passage by Cicero)

Lucia Faedo

- 224 Gilding. Art and Technique, Vision and Morals

Paolo Coen

- 236 Pliny, Stones in the *Natural History*, and their Re-use in the *Trattato*
of Antonio Averlino, called Filarete (1462-1465)

Patrick R. Crowley

- 246 Factitious Gems and the Matter of Facts in Pliny's *Natural History*

260 **SEMANTICS**

Michael Squire

- 261 «Veritas repraesentata»? Zeuxis, Parrhasius, and the Nature
of Pictorial Representation in Pliny's *Natural History*

Jörn Lang

- 277 Purple Stones. Pliny on Amethysts

Maria Elisa Micheli

288 Agate: Fortunes and Misfortunes

Alexander Heinemann

298 Skin and Bone. Lala of Cyzicus and the Softness of Ivory

Carlo Berardi

319 Flawless Transparency: On Rock Crystal and its Fortune in the Middle Ages

330 **POSTFACE**

Irving Lavin

331 Pliny's History of Materials and its Readers:
From «ex uno lapide» to Bernini's *figura serpentinata*

334 **PLATES**

362 **INDICES**

363 Index of passages from the *Natural History*

367 Index of Greek and Latin sources

370 Index of relevant names and places

372 List of contributors

Pliny's History of Materials and its Readers From «ex uno lapide» to Bernini's *figura serpentinata*

In a study published some twenty years ago («*Ex Uno Lapide: The Renaissance Sculptor's Tour de Force*», in M. WINNER, B. ANDREAE, C. PIETRANGELI [ed. by], *Il cortile delle statue. Der Statuenhof des Belvedere im Vatikan*, Mainz am Rhein, 1998, pp. 191-210), I sought to show that a passage in the Elder Pliny's *Natural History* praising extravagantly the ability of certain sculptors to create monumental, complicated, indeed multi-figured works from a single block of marble, «ex uno lapide», played a crucial role in establishing the reputation and self-definition of Renaissance sculptors. Pliny uses the phrase to describe the achievements of three sculptors who created the famous group of Laocoön and his two sons struggling and intertwined with two enormous serpents sent by Poseidon to avenge their betrayal of the Trojan horse. Single block sculptures were the norm in the Middle Ages and acquired a moral and professional status for Renaissance artists who sought to equal or surpass in emulation of their ancient progenitors. The emblematic ideal of Pliny's judgment became a critical challenge in 1506 when a magnificent monumental group of the titanic anguish of Laocoön and his sons was discovered in the Baths of Titus (Fig. 1). Among the first to examine the discovery of a sculpture that Pliny had praised in the highest terms was Michelangelo who, fresh from carving his monumental, monolithic figure of David, pronounced it a miracle of art. In fact, it was noted immediately that the sculpture consisted of several pieces fitted together in seams that were practically invisible. Either Pliny was deceived, it was said, or he wanted to deceive others, to make the work more admirable. For it was impossible to make stable three statues of just stature, interlocked in a single stone, with many, and so admirable groups of serpents, without any sort of instruments. Of course the phrase «ex uno lapide» may have other meanings: 'of a single kind of stone', for example, which would allow for, but not entail multiple figures or the use of splints and stents.

Nevertheless, despite the ambiguities between fact versus meaning, the primary sense, sanctioned by both Aristotle and Plato (as has been articulated by Winckelmann in the *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, 1776), predominated in the early Renaissance, especially in the thought and work of Michelangelo. His attitude was most movingly expressed in the opening quatrain of his most famous sonnet: «Non ha l'ottimo artista alcun concetto / c'un marmo solo in sé non circonscriva / col suo superchio, e solo a quello arriva / la man che ubbidisce all'intelletto». The idea is most graphically expressed by Vasari in the description of Michelangelo's working procedure in his biography of the artist:

Ma quattro prigionieri bozzati, che possano insegnare a cavare dei marmi le figure con un modo sicuro da non istorpiare i sassi; che il modo è questo: che se e' si pigliassi una figura di cera o d'altra materia dura, e si mettessi a diacere in una conca d'acqua, la quale acqua, essendo per sua natura nella sua sommità piana e pari, alzando la detta

figura a poco a poco del pari, così vengono a scoprirsi prima le parti più rilevate, ed a nascondersi i fondi, cioè le parti più basse della figura tanto che nel fine ella così viene scoperta tutta. Nel medesimo modo si devono cavare con lo scarpello le figure dei marmi; prima scoprendo le parti più rilevate, e di mano in mano le più basse.

The integrity of the block became more than a matter of procedure, however, more even than an aesthetic ideal; it became a veritable ethical imperative, a testimony not only to the bravura of the artist but also to his personal integrity. For Vasari, patching a work of stone sculpture by adding pieces was a «most vile and ugly thing and greatly to be blamed» («cosa villissima e brutta e di grandissimo biasimo»). With respect to composing a figure (or figures), he recommended an animated, twisting, flame-like pose, which he called *serpentinata*, perhaps in reference to the *Laocoön*. Michelangelo vied on his own terms with the *Laocoön* in the four-figured composition of the Pietà for his own tomb, where the zig-zag dynamic of Christ's body would have been greatly enhanced by the missing left leg. Thenceforth, in the sixteenth century the *figura serpentinata*, with multiple, valid views became a new ideal for sculptures truly in motion, in-the-round, and self-contained. Giovanni Bologna famously declared that a free-standing figure should have forty equally valid views, which he demonstrated in the tightly compacted vertically interlacing three-figured group of the *Rape of the Sabine* in the Loggia dei Lanzi in Florence (1583).

I think that Rudolph Wittkower in his magisterial monograph on the sculpture of Bernini (*Gian Lorenzo Bernini: The Sculptor of the Roman Baroque*, London, 1955), was the first to observe that Bernini early in his career returned to the dominant frontal view that characterised classical sculpture, which he studied assiduously from his earliest youth. The break with Mannerist tradition was radical and permanent, for it provided a more focused and powerful dramatic effect. This effect depended not only on the vivid depiction of the figures in action, but also on his adaptation and transformation of the Mannerist *figura serpentinata* itself. The effect is evident in Bernini's *David*, whose powerful upward swing climbs from lower right to lean far over the base to the left, and suddenly turns back to the right at the head with the famous tight-lipped squint. The sculpture now stands in the middle of the room but was originally set against the wall. Perhaps the most crucial, central, and most dangerous passage in the work is the sling, the device with which the young David, brilliantly and divinely inspired, was able to dispatch the Philistine giant from a safe distance. It might be said that the entire statue was designed to give its due to the simple tool used by the shepherd in pasturing his flock. For the first time in the history of art, this seemingly minor detail appears as the absolutely fundamental key to the divine inspiration that motivated the young shepherd David's achievement. The sling conspicuously displays a strut in the middle (which has evidently been broken and repaired or replaced). And it might be said too, that the unabashed strut made possible Bernini's utter abandonment of the *uno lapide* tradition.

In subsequent years the frontal *figura serpentinata* became Bernini's virtual trademark, increasingly bold, dynamic, and expressive of the life and vitality of an immediate action. The *serpentinata* is the embodiment of divine inspiration in the figure of Daniel saved by an angel from the lion's den in the Chigi chapel in S. Maria del Popolo, Rome. Something between a picture and a sculpture, the figure admits of no frontal plane and the angel seems to respond to Daniel's devotion from the space above and outside the niche. It can be said, I think, that the increasingly bold serpentine movement together with the splicing together of multiple pieces

in over-life sized works helped him escape the prison of the single block. In the gigantic figure of Saint Longinus in St. Peter's, consisting of four pieces, the blind centurion's liling rhythm and outstretched arms imitate the glorious triumph of the Cross on which he pierced Christ's side and was converted, his sight restored. Bernini began to challenge the isolationist ideal of Mannerism early on but his alternate solution appears full-blown in a newly discovered drawing of a tomb monument from Bernini's workshop in the Princeton University Art Museum (Fig. 2): the sculpture faces the spectator directly for maximum impact, while also enhancing its effect with a vigorous twisting movement in the frontal plane. This splendid display of grace and high energy would have appeared in heavenly light in a drawing by Bernini of 1657 that depicts an explosive Archangel Michael swooping down from heaven to bestow the Keys of Saint Peter and the Papal tiara on the Papal throne of Saint Peter in the apse of St. Peter's. Considering this project's location as the central focus in the largest church in Christendom, the figure would have been a truly brilliant, gigantic climax.

The underlying theme we have been tracing had a lasting legacy. Hogarth in the mid-eighteenth century composed a treatise, the *Analysis of Beauty*, illustrated by two deliberately popular and simple-minded engravings, in one of which a central feature was what he called the «serpentine line of beauty» (Fig. 3). Finally, the theme appears as far afield as the Hopi Indian nation in Arizona, which was celebrated for its annual ritual snake dance. A shaman enacted with a live rattlesnake a prayer to the great rain god, that is, the thunder, lightning, and rain. Aby Warburg (1866-1929) was the scion of the great Warburg banking family and founder of the famous Warburg library and institute of *Kulturwissenschaft* and the modern discipline of the study of symbols, that is, of iconology. Warburg had developed a debilitating psychological problem and retired to a famous Swiss sanatorium in Kreuzlingen. He had heard of the Hopi ritual and in 1886 determined to go to the Hopi settlement and see for himself. He asked a number of the young tribesmen to make a picture of what they had experienced at the dance ceremony. Several of them drew pictures of the clouds and rain, while others drew compositions of wavy serpentine arrows that suggested in an abstract way lightning striking from the clouds to the earth: in other words, symbols that were traditional in the tribe's self-representation. When Warburg returned to the sanatorium and gave a lecture about his experience, the physicians declared him fit to go home. To the English edition of the book in which he published this lecture, he added an immortal couplet that epitomized his entire *Kulturwissenschaftliche* philosophy: «It is a lesson from an old book: the kinship of Athens and Oraibi» («Es ist ein altes Buch zu blattern, / Athen-Oraibi, alles Vettern»).



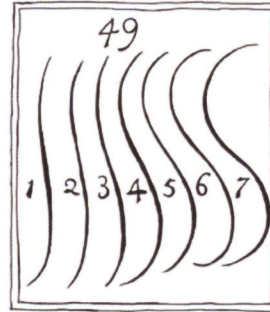
◆ Fig. 1

Group of *Laocoön*, ca. 40-20 BCE, marble, 242 cm. Città del Vaticano, Museo Pio-Clementino, Cortile Ottagono, no.1509 (© Creative Commons)



◆ Fig. 2

GIAN LORENZO BERNINI (workshop of), *Design for the Tomb Monument of a Military Officer*, ca. 1670, pen and brown ink with brush and gray wash on cream laid paper, Princeton University Art Museum, Gift of Charles Scribner III (© Princeton University Art Museum)



◆ Fig. 3

WILLIAM HOGARTH, *The Analysis of Beauty*, London, 1753, p. 49