Book Review

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Polychrome Sculpture: Meaning, Form, Conservation, Johannes Taubert, edited with a new introduction by Michele D. Marincola, Los Angeles, Getty Conservation Institute, 2016, 216 pp., (hardback). ISBN 978-1- 60606-433-7

This important new translation, edited and introduced by Michele D. Marincola, translated by Carola Schulman and published by the Getty Conservation Institute, enables the English-speaking world to access a core text on polychrome sculpture for the first time from a body of literature which to this day remains largely in German. Johannes Taubert (1922–1975) was a leading conservator and art historian and head of the Bayerisches Landesamt für Denkmalpflege (Bavarian State Department for the Preservation of Monuments). The German edition of this book, Farbige Skulpturen: Bedeutung, Fassung, Restaurierung, was originally published in 1978, three years after his death, with a revised version coming out in 1983. As recognised in reviews at the time, including that by art historian Michael Baxandall, Farbige Skulpturen was important for its interdisciplinary study of northern European medieval to Baroque sculpture, integrating technical information and art historical argument in a way that was both new for its time and prescient for the future. As Baxandall stated: 'Taubert's writings are of great interest to students of sculpture in general: it seems desirable that this book should enter into the general art-historical literature and not be left on the specialist conservation shelf. In effect, the collection makes up the most suggestive and lively discussion of German polychrome sculpture, and for that matter also of the aesthetic problem of the surface working of sculpture, to appear for some time.' 1 As Baxandall implies, the book was not conceived as a systematic history of polychrome sculpture techniques and aesthetics. Instead, it compiles Taubert's lifetime's work of articles and lectures, incorporating case studies of conservation treatments from the 1960s and 1970s and including collaborative work undertaken with colleagues and co-authors such as Gesine Taubert, Karl-Werner Bachmann, Fritz Buchenrieder and Eike Oellermann. The book is in two parts. The first section deals with art historical matters in a broadly chronological manner, covering, for example, the original polychromy of Romanesque sculptures, reliquaries in sculpture, the unity of form and colour in Gothic sculpture, and the surface of so-called unpainted late Gothic wooden sculpture, amongst other wide-ranging and interesting topics. These discussions are invariably grounded in the close examination of objects, usually as occurring during conservation treatment—the time at which the most detailed observations are likely to be made. The second part of the book is focussed more on technical studies as well as the concerns and decision making of conservation. This begins with broader topics such as the conservation of wood, and the restoration of sculptures and late Gothic altarpiece shrines, before moving on to case studies. The case studies centre on major treatments such as the restoration of the Crucifix by Ignaz Günther in Altmannstein and that of Friedrich Hertin's Nördlingen altarpiece of 1462. These treatments are typified by a newfound rigour in documentation, understanding of original materials and methods, and attention to the physicality of objects. Taubert's evidence-based approach reinterpreted both the aesthetics and function of painted and gilded sculpture in northern Europe. Perhaps most critical was his understanding of the role of polychomy in these sculptures. Taubert showed that this was not simply a decoration but an intrinsic part of the sculpture, an understanding which was essential knowledge to anyone intending to undertake the conservation of these works, but which had not always been recognised. Taubert was influenced by developments in paintings conservation in the 1960s and 1970s, or picture restoration as he termed it, as hitherto, he recognised that sculptures had been seen chiefly as plastic forms which had meant that:

‘polychrome sculptures are not nearly as carefully restored as paintings’ (p. 138). In the past, this attitude had led both to sculptures being repeatedly repainted and also to their being completely stripped of their paint. Taubert’s approach involved a meticulous and evidence-based approach to overpaint removal. In keeping with the-then contemporary attitudes in painting conservation, the original decorative layer held sway over all others, including historical early overpaint. Today, treatments would rarely go so far in the removal of historic repainting as is at times advocated by Taubert, as the inherent value of some subsequent restoration is more strongly recognised and the twin mantras of minimal intervention and reversibility hold more sway over contemporary Journal of the Institute of Conservation, 2017 Vol. 40, No. 3, 272–273, https://doi.org/10.1080/19455224.2017.1371424 decision-making. Nonetheless the thinking processes behind treatments and their careful documentation are thoroughly recognisable nearly 40 years on. There are other elements in the book which now feel dated. Polychrome sculpture conservation and technical study have both matured, especially in the area of analysis, and although there are too many contributions and contributors to name, the many works of Peter Tångeberg certainly deserve a mention. Both brocade patterns and the methods used to make them in relief have formed the basis of extensive studies in recent years, while the methods and materials of panel paintings and polychrome sculpture have been more deeply explored, usually on a case by case basis. Still lacking, though, is an overall, systematic look at the topic—a book Baxandall evidently craved in his review of Farbige Skulpturen and which Taubert expressed reservations about producing, preferring a meticulously described series of case studies as his vehicle for exploring the topic. It is this approach that has remained highly influential in conservation writing to this day, a field which is always wary of writing textbooks, lest they be copied by the lay practitioner. Despite demonstrating these signs of its age, there are two very good reasons to own this book. Firstly, it still holds relevance as a seminal text on the subject of polychrome sculpture—some ideas are dated—but it is to Taubert and his co-authors’ credit that it has not been surpassed by more recent works. Secondly, although naturally the literature on this subject has since expanded, this remains a notable and important book in terms of the history and development of conservation as a discipline. All those involved have therefore done the profession a great service in making this book available in English. It should also be mentioned that, for this edition, efforts have even been made in the substitution of colour for black and white illustrations where possible. Finally, I would like to make a plea to those involved in this important project to consider translating Peter Tångeberg’s 1986 Mittelalterliche Holzskulpturen und Altarschreine in Schwede (Medieval Wooden Sculpture and Altar Shrines in Sweden), another pivotal book in the understanding of the materials and techniques of polychrome sculptures and one I have pored over for many hours!

Note 1. Michael Baxandall, ‘Review of Farbige Skulpturen: Bedeutung, Fassung, Restaurierung by Johannes Taubert’, The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs 122, no. 925 (1980): 260–1.

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