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Features

“The Unbearable Whiteness of Whiteness”

By Jennifer Stager

Gustav Klimt. *The Virgin*, 1913; oil on canvas; 74 3/4 x 78 3/4 in. National Gallery Prague, Inv. 04512 © 2017 National Gallery in Prague. Courtesy of Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

“The Unbearable Whiteness of Whiteness”

By [Jennifer Stager](#) January 16, 2018

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Amidst the expected, punning advertisements for data companies lining the drive into San Francisco, one passes a lone cultural billboard depicting Klimt’s *The Virgin* (1913). The image advertises *Klimt & Rodin: An Artistic Encounter* at the Legion of Honor. Below the image of entwined pale, female flesh against a tapestry of vibrant color are the words: “Gives off seriously sexual vibes,” excerpted from [a review in San Francisco Magazine](#). *Klimt & Rodin* showcases the two male artists’ interest in depicting the white female subject, an art historical mainstay since the splash of Praxiteles’s naked *Aphrodite of Knidos*. Vibrant colors and gilt dominate the non-figural spaces of Klimt’s canvases, but not the subjects’ bodies, which are rendered in light flesh tones, highlighted with pale yellows and pinks. Rodin’s sculptures, in contrast, are hewn from monochrome materials—marble, bronze, clay—with no surface treatments. If the “seriously sexual vibes” advertised on the billboard come from the expected space of white

female (and feminized) subjectivity, the “artistic encounter” on display is one of medium—of painting’s uncontested polychrome in contrast to the insistent monochrome of modern sculpture.

Monochrome distances the beholder from the sexuality of the naked sculptural body by effacing the disturbing plurality of polychrome.¹ The monochrome gaze of the sculpture, either smoothly blank, or drilled to suggest the depths of a pupil, further reduces potential plurality.² Monochrome not only protects a beholder from seeing sex too publically, but also insulates the beholder from seeing race. Race, gender, and sexuality always intersect, yet vision, the beholding position, and the art object itself are all positioned as white, cisgendered, and male unless explicitly marked otherwise.³ Sculpture’s materiality need not mimic real flesh tones, and yet art’s potential refusal of realism becomes a form of aesthetic erasure. The singularity of monochrome subsumes the diversity of colors; it is plurality itself that is feared, for it undermines white exceptionalism.

This fall I asked students in my art history class at City College of San Francisco to color-in a page from *Pigments of Your Imagination*, a [printable coloring book](#) of line drawings of ancient Greek and Roman sculpture designed in 2017 by teen artists at Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). The project emerged in the wake of public outcry over a BBC cartoon depicting a Black Roman soldier and classicists, including Mary Beard [supporting the BBC’s depiction](#) and a Hyperallergic [article by Sarah Bond](#) that links the erasure of color in ancient Mediterranean art and the contemporary use of (monochrome) Greek, Roman, and Italian Renaissance images by white supremacist groups. In class, we had discussed the erasure of color in ancient Mediterranean art, despite the reality that most surfaces, including flesh, of ancient marble sculptures were painted, and that bronze sculptures also deployed many colors in different metals and patinas.



Modern painted resin cast of plaster copy from British Museum originals, nos. 124553 and 124550, Semitic Museum nos. 1890.7.18 & 1902.15.18; Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq) Northwest palace, Room B, Slab 7-6 (top) Assyrian, mid-late 9th century BC. Courtesy Semitic Museum, Harvard University. Photo: Adam Aja.

The coloring book's line drawings mimic the traditional way in which antiquities were, and continue to be, reproduced in academic books—a practice which, like casts, prints, and black and white photography, edits colors out of the art historical narrative. *Pigments*, however, invited readers to color these drawings and to change their outward appearance. With no parameters for *how* to color in the self-selected image, the majority of my class chose a Crayola version of whiteness (peach, light orange, light tan). They defaulted to the whiteness of sculpture, even in an exercise explicitly designed to disrupt it.

With the increasingly visual dimension of our digital communications, colors in emojis become significant. The default yellow flesh gave way to a set of six skin tones ranging from Klimt's whiteness to dark brown. Emojis, which only added different skin tone options in 2015, make racial diversity visible in a limited way. These options emerged in part because the yellow, while unrealistic, reads as a kind of whiteness. Tajja Isen wrote eloquently in September about rethinking the canon in ["Tiny White People Took Over My Brain."](#) Just as a literary character is most often presumed white, so in visual language does the hegemony of western art keep whiteness in the default position.



Reconstruction Study I of the Treu Head, 2014. Courtesy of Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

In discussion of the *Pigments* assignment, students emphasized the ongoing lack of diversity in Hollywood as a factor in how they reconstruct classical antiquity, citing Russel Crowe in *Gladiator* or Charlton Heston in *Ben-Hur*. [The ongoing struggle to diversify the box office](#) contributes to a whitewashed picture of Mediterranean antiquity that also informs the making and reception of subsequent art.

A recent cover for *The Envelope*, the magazine of the *Los Angeles Times*, grouped six fair-haired, white actresses posing with the headline: “Actresses call for a change to the way many stories are told,” positioning them at the vanguard of change to the sexist Hollywood machine, despite the fact that the founder of the Me Too campaign was a Black woman.⁴ The public exposure of Harvey Weinstein’s predation and the amplification of Tarana Burke’s Me Too campaign in journalism and social media has exposed the need for systemic change in how women are treated at work and in society, while at the same time demonstrating how white voices are more easily heard. Viet Thanh Nguyen tweeted *The Envelope*’s cover image with the caption “the unbearable whiteness of whiteness,” summing up how blind society remains to intersectionality. Ironically (and sadly), the subjects of Klimt’s sensual paintings, and the upper echelons of female power-holders such as those pictured on *The Envelope*, have failed to embrace intersectional feminism, situating the possibility of success from leaning in to the existing white male capitalist power structure, rather than in burning it down. These power dynamics are not purely social, they are also an outgrowth of representational politics. Aesthetics—of monochrome sculpture, of film, of what remains of the ancient Mediterranean (classical) past—play a critical role in building or erasing intersectional politics.



Installation view of *Gods in Color: Polychromy in the Ancient World* at the Legion of Honor. Courtesy of Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Photo: Drew Altizer Photography.

At the Legion, just downstairs from the *Klimt & Rodin* exhibition, is the newest iteration of the landmark traveling exhibition, *Gods In Color: Polychromy in the Ancient World*, which reconstructs color on casts of ancient Mediterranean sculpture. Traveling since an inaugural exhibition in Munich in 2004, the initial furor over the reconstruction of colors on the surface of ancient Mediterranean sculptures—which had heretofore been taken as the underlying source for modern monochrome—revises a similar outcry on the topic in the mid-19th century. The exhibition’s success has ushered in something of a colorist turn in art exhibition, including the projection of colored lights onto the surface of the *Ara Pacis* in Rome and the Chartres cathedral, and digital video reconstructions installed adjacent to monochrome originals as in the British Museum. The radical notion that high-value, high-luster marble was fully painted, even for flesh, remains a subject of deep art historical discomfort. Despite the international attention that *Gods in Color* has drawn, the traditional narrative of western art maintains its commitment to monochrome, and through monochrome, to whiteness.

One important aspect to the exhibition is its iterative nature; these reconstructions are experimental, and the curators make that ongoing process of exploration visible, including a reconstruction a Roman head of a woman (“Treu” Head) with distinct colors on either side of her face, and multiple versions of the Peplos Kore shown next to each other. For all of this iterative exploration, however, the pendulum of pigment has not swung very far. Marble flesh might no longer remain the color of the marble itself, but on the emoji spectrum, no sculpture is given

anything far from peach, and a number of the flesh tones are the same pale pinks and yellows of Klimt's white women.

The unbearable whiteness of whiteness has been worked into an exhibition reconstructing color. An exception seems to be the new reconstructions of the Riace bronzes, two naked male bronze sculptures found in the ocean off of the coast of Reggio Calabria in 1972. The rarity of surviving ancient bronzes, and the Riace bronzes' late entrance into the canon of art history, means that while the two bronzes have achieved a degree of celebrity (especially in Italy where they have featured in telephone commercials, a 1980s pornographic graphic novel, and on countless aprons and assorted touristic collectables) they have not structurally altered the story of Greek art into which they have been fit.



Installation view of *Gods in Color: Polychromy in the Ancient World* at the Legion of Honor. Courtesy of Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

Based on 3D-printed versions of each sculpture and reconstructing the range of materials worked into the originals—silver teeth, finger, and toenails; copper lips and nipples; eyes inlaid with ivory, bone, and obsidian; and surrounded by bronze lashes—as well as their headgear and weapons, the Riace pair opens and anchors the version of *Gods in Color* on view at the Legion. The sheen of their bronze flesh reflects light coming in from a skylight above, capturing some of the original brilliance of many lost ancient bronzes. Embracing the standard narrative of naturalism, the exhibition implies that reconstructed flesh tones bear some resemblance to

ancient Mediterranean life. The Riace warriors, however, stand apart from the painted marble sculptures through their materials—not because the bronze material is intended to signify someone of a race or ethnic group, but because when seen through the lens of Neoclassical and modern sculpture, we expect bronze to read identically to marble. Both assumptions are problematic—that sculpture from antiquity must always offer visual evidence of real bodies from the past, and simultaneously, that these ancient bodies must always present as categorically white. This dynamic is further complicated by the curatorial choice to present the two bronzes with slightly different patinas intended to conform to distinct ethnic groups—a golden hue for Riace B, whom they present as a mythical demi-god Thracian king, and a darker bronze for Riace A, whom they present as a Greek king.⁵ While these reconstructions insist that the color of sculptural flesh show race, they also join with the other reconstructions in the exhibition and the modern sculptures upstairs to assimilate different colors and materials to whiteness. The Riace bronzes do their work in much the same way Rodin's *The Age of Bronze* does, coopting bronze flesh into a default narrative of whiteness.



Statuette of Venus; rock crystal, 1st century BCE; 8.5 cm. JPGM inv. 78.AN.248. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Villa Collection, Malibu, California. Courtesy of J. Paul Getty Museum.

To assert that ancient art shows us a straightforward image of what ancient people looked like is naive. And yet, we must insist that art make room for the diversity of the ancient past, and that our contemporary interpretations of Mediterranean antiquity do not conform to manufactured genealogies. We seek to undermine the default status of whiteness by insisting that an art image represents direct evidence of past people. What we must instead work to undermine is the default position of whiteness even in art that is not, strictly speaking, representational, such as monochrome. This requires dismantling the triumvirate of painting-sculpture-architecture to allow many diverse media to rise to prominence; to continue to diversify and increase the number of power holders at museums and cultural institutions and in academia; and to pursue a truly intersectional feminism that recognizes the problems of male hegemony in the art world and systemic racism.

A crystal statuette of the Roman goddess Venus, now in the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, makes visible the self-reflexive possibilities of art objects, and the impact of a homogenous cultural workforce on how we receive them.⁶ The statuette takes on the flesh tones of the person holding it, drawing the beholder into the sculpture's iterative appearance. However, without changes to the larger cultural apparatus allowing for a plurality of hands to hold it, we fail to recognize the statuette's spectrum.

Klimt & Rodin: An Artistic Encounter *is on view through January 28, 2018 at Legion of Honor in San Francisco.*

Gods in Color: Polychromy in the Ancient World *was on view through January 7, 2017 at Legion of Honor in San Francisco.*

1. On plurality, colors, and impurity see David Batchelor, *Chromophobia* (London: Reaktion, 2001), 13.
2. See Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *The Blind Spot: An Essay on the Relations of Painting and Sculpture in the Modern Age* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2008).
3. See especially Charmaine Nelson, *The Color of Stone* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007) and *Representing the Black Female Subject in Western Art* (New York: Routledge, 2010).
4. Elena Howe, "Jessica Chastain and Saoirse Ronan Speak Their Minds, Along with Other Top Actresses," *Los Angeles Times*, December 21, 2017.
5. While the specific iconographic identities are not listed in the catalogue entries, the patinas are chemically and visibly distinct. In his presentation on the reconstruction of the Riace bronzes in the opening symposium for the exhibition, curator Vinzenz Brinkmann described this choice as intended to distinguish between the Thracian and the Greek kings. Vinzenz Brinkman (2017, October), "The Splendor of Classical Bronzes" in Renée Dreyfus (chair) "The Pervasiveness of Pigment in Antiquity," Symposium conducted in honor of the opening of the "Gods in Color: Polychromy in the Ancient World" at the Legion of Honor Museum, San Francisco.
6. Patrick R. Crowley, "Crystalline Aesthetics and the Classical Concept of the Medium," *West 86th: A Journal of Decorative Arts, Design History, and Material Culture* 23, no. 2 (Fall–Winter 2016): 237-245.