

**THE HERMES OF PRAXITELES
AND THE VENUS GENETRIX:
EXPERIMENTS IN RESTORING THE
COLOR OF GREEK SCULPTURE**

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The Hermes of Praxiteles and the Venus Genetrix: Experiments in Restoring the color of Greek sculpture by Joseph Lindon Smith

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JOSEPH LINDON SMITH

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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS.

THE HERMES OF PRAXITELES

AND

THE VENUS GENETRIX.

EXPERIMENTS IN RESTORING THE COLOR OF
GREEK SCULPTURE.

By **JOSEPH LINDON SMITH.**

DESCRIBED AND EXPLAINED BY

EDWARD ROBINSON,

Curator of Classical Antiquities.



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The present attempt to reproduce the effect of color employed by the Greeks in their marble sculpture was the outgrowth of an exhibition held last year in the Museum of Fine Arts, in which the endeavor was made to place before the public such materials as were available illustrating the data upon which our knowledge of this very important subject is based. Those who attended that exhibition will remember that it was composed principally of plates, water-colors, and colored photographs, showing traces of color as they appear to-day upon such marbles and terra-cottas as retain them to any considerable extent, and that these were supplemented by a few original objects from our own collections on which these traces could be studied at first hand. To give the conclusions to be deduced from these materials a somewhat concrete form, upon a modest scale, casts of two Greek heads — those of the Hermes of Praxiteles and the Venus de' Medici — were painted by Mr. Charles E. Mills in what he and I believed to be at least an approximate restoration of the original color-scheme, our chief aim being to note the distinction which the Greeks maintained in the color of the flesh between their male and female figures, as shown abundantly in the other objects exhibited.

The interest aroused in the subject by that exhibition, and the desire for further knowledge of it, were so widespread and so frequently manifested, even in the more distant parts of the United States, that it seemed decidedly worth while to continue the experiments this year upon a larger and more ambitious scale. Thanks to the generosity of a few friends of the Museum who have contributed to the expenses of the undertaking, it has been possible to do this. While in Europe last summer I secured full-sized casts of the statues of the so-called Venus Genetrix in the Louvre, and the Hermes of Praxiteles, the latter with the missing parts restored by the late Professor Schaper, of Berlin. The reasons for which these two figures were selected will be explained in the proper place. Mr. Joseph Lindon Smith offered to undertake the difficult task of coloring them. His skill and his sensitive appreciation of all forms of antique art are too well known to visitors of the Museum to need any encomiums here, but no one who has not watched him day by day can form any idea of the patience and courage he has brought to this work, which has presented obstacles of the most unexpected and vexatious nature at almost every turn, with nothing but the most fragmentary data to rely upon for guidance. It has been labor in an entirely new field, one might almost say in the dark, and those who see only the results can hardly guess the number of experiments by which they have been attained, through a gradual process of evolution. The steadfastness of Mr. Smith's desire to carry his archaeological data to their logical conclusion, irrespective of modern ideas of color, has, combined with his taste, produced a result in the highest degree educational. I do not hesitate to say that all parts of this work for which he is responsible seem to me far more satisfactory than any attempts at the restoration of the color of Greek sculpture which I have seen in Europe.

That the Greeks did paint their marble sculptures is now generally admitted, though the extent to which colors were applied is still a subject of dispute. For my own

opinions on the matter, and the reasons for them, I should like to refer the reader to an article written for the *Century Magazine* two years ago, which has not yet seen the light. I regret extremely that it should not have preceded our two exhibitions illustrating the subject, instead of following them, but this cannot now be helped; and, as its appearance is now promised in the April number, it would be unadvisable to repeat at the present time the arguments there brought forward. The propositions which I endeavored to prove, however, I may venture to quote, as it is upon these that the present experiments are based:—

1. That, from the beginning of their art of sculpture through its whole course, it was the practice of the Greeks, and following them the Romans, to paint their marble statues and reliefs.

2. That this application of color was not restricted to certain details, but covered the entire surface of the marble, both nude parts and draperies, with the possible exception of portions where the natural color of the marble served its purpose in the general scheme.

3. That the colors used were not merely tints, but real body colors, the aim of which was to imitate nature in the matter of color just so far as the sculpture itself did in that of form,—that is, with a conventional idealization or generalization by which the unpleasant features of realism were avoided.

Assuming that these propositions were proved in the article alluded to, the next step was to give them practical illustration. This, as already remarked, was attempted in the case of the head, in last year's exhibition; but Mr. Smith and myself wished to see whether, by collecting all the data within our reach, and piecing these together, we could reconstruct a complete scheme for the coloring of a male and a female statue, showing the treatment of draperies as well as of flesh, and at least suggesting the extent to which certain details not at all indicated in the modelling—such as borders, for example—were elaborated in color, this being one of the most surprising revelations of the discoveries of recent years. The statues unearthed on the Akropolis since 1882, and the marvel-

lous sarcophagi from Sidon, show how little of what the Greeks put into their sculpture is left us in the remains which retain no more than the form, chiselled in white marble; and, imperfect though our knowledge may yet be, it is time we put it to some use. The first experiments must inevitably be faulty, but, if these do no more than inspire better ones, they will have served their purpose, so that we may finally hope to see just what the Greeks saw when they looked upon one of their immortal creations fresh from its sculptor's studio.

It should be stated here that similar experiments have been made elsewhere within the last few years, and notably at Dresden, where the interest of Professor Treu, director of the sculptural collections, has led to several valuable exhibitions of well-known works of sculpture with conjectural restorations of their colors, done by Dresden artists under his direction. A similar exhibition was opened this winter at the Art Institute of Chicago, under the charge of Professor Alfred Emerson, the curator of classical antiquities. It would be going too far from our present purpose to describe or discuss these various exhibitions, more especially because Mr. Smith has not seen any of them, and therefore in his interpretation of the remains of color upon which his restorations are based, he has not been influenced by the experiments or theories of others. This is important to note, because, in a subject where instinct must be the only guide long beyond the point where a knowledge of facts has ceased to be of any service, if different artists arrive independently at the same, or approximately the same results, their experiments will have the greater value.

To carry out our purpose as fully as we desired, it was necessary to have, first, a female figure, considerably draped, with two garments if possible, for the sake of showing a variety of color, yet with sufficient of the body exposed to give a satisfactory idea of the flesh-color elsewhere than in the face. It was, moreover, obviously desirable to have a figure as complete, and with as little modern restoration, as possible. The so-called Venus Genetrix of the Louvre seemed to answer all these requirements quite satisfac-

torily. Her drapery offered extremely interesting material for study, because of the contrast in texture between the outer and inner garment; and the unusually thin and clinging quality of the latter, so well expressed in the sculpture, would demonstrate admirably—in the matter of drapery—whether the addition of color heightened or diminished the effect of the modelling. The statue has undergone but little restoration, the only modern parts of any consequence being the neck, the left hand and wrist, with the apple, and the fingers of the right hand with the corner of the mantle held by them.*

In contrast to this we wished to show a nude male figure, of the athlete type; and the Hermes was selected partly because its celebrity would give the experiment an added interest, and partly because, being the most exquisitely modelled of all known statues, it would prove, better than any other, whether form and color are inevitably antagonistic to each other in sculpture,—whether, in other words, the introduction of the one necessarily involves a sacrifice of the other.

If we accept Reinach's theory as to the Venus Genetrix, namely, that it represents a type which, in the form in which we see it, originated with Praxiteles, or some other Athenian sculptor of his time, having been modified from an earlier and more severe work,† then both statues chosen belong to the same school and epoch,—about the middle of the fourth century, B. C.; and in colors and designs we have aimed to illustrate, as far as our knowledge would permit, the characteristics of that period.

What may be called first-class testimony regarding the period in question, that is, traces of color left upon the marbles which date from that time, is extremely rare. A scrap here and there enables us to make comparison with the evidence of earlier and later periods, and in this way

* The best description of the statue is by S. Reinach, "La Vénus drapée au Louvre," in the *Gazette Archéologique*, 1887, pp. 250 ff. and 271 ff. It is briefly described in the *Catalogue of Casts of our Museum*, Part III., No. 545.

† *Ubi supra*, p. 281.