



LAYERED PAINTING

How to analyse and illustrate this ancient technique

Layered painting was used in Egypt since the 16th century BC. White, yellow, red, green, blue and black were painted in alternating layers of even thickness to create a special colour effect. The final colour shade of the top layer was thus influenced by the layers below (fig. 1). However, a complex six-colour technique was only used for high-prestige projects (Nagel 2007, 219).

The colonisation of Asia Minor and the Near East enriched cultural exchange. Driven by the Egyptian impulses, the ancient Greek wanted to replace not only the geometrization of bodies in their art, but also the symbolic use of colours (Michałowski 1970, 62). Layered painting was therefore a technique of imitating nature. Nevertheless, the practice of depicting women in lighter colours and men in darker colours was still continued.

Until the 4th century BC, mainly layered painting was used, because mixed colours were considered dirtier and more discoloured until that time (Lepik-Kopaczyńska 1963, 69). This changed with the introduction of light and shadow painting, which required a technique with colour gradations. With the Classical period, the aesthetic colour norm changed due to new combination possibilities through mixed colours, which greatly enlarge the colour palette and were combined with layer painting.

Around 400 BC, Hippocrates formulated his theory that the undertone of the skin reflects a person's character. In Hellenistic period, therefore, layered painting became essential for the representation of skin tones. Further new techniques such as brush and tempera encaustic, which could be combined with oil, now also made it possible to influence the thickness of the layers, from impasto, which provides texture, to the thinnest glaze (Robertson 1959, 172).

To better illustrate the polychromy of ancient sculpture through contemporary colour reconstructions, a look at the history and development of ancient painting and the application of the corresponding painting techniques is essential. Contemporary approaches to colour reconstruction require consideration of the particular characteristics of the artistic idea of the respective epoch as well as the teaching of the relevant specialist knowledge. A thorough account of the process can help the viewer understand that the final model is a hypothetical reconstruction and not an authentic historical object (Mann 2022, 196). One method of documenting the different steps of the process today is the use of digital tools that can illustrate experiments as well as variations. Through this approach to colour reconstruction, the final model (fig. 2) can be used as a teaching tool that conveys the respective Zeitgeist and taste in art.



Fig. 2. Hypothetical color reconstruction of Venus de Milo in three steps, K. Mann

Dr Katharina Ute Mann
<https://katharina-ute-mann.jimdofree.com/>
k.u.mann@gmx.de
[#venusdemiloaroundtheworld](https://www.instagram.com/venusdemiloaroundtheworld)

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Fig. 1. Hypothetical colorization of the portrait of a pharaoh (ÄM 20496), K. Mann