CEROPLASTICS

THE ART OF WAX

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THE WAX THAT NEVER WANED: THE LASTING LEGACIES OF DEGAS AND ROSSO, PIONEERS OF WAX IN SCULPTURE

In the past decades, there has been a substantial increase in the use of wax by contemporary artists, a tendency that has noticeably expanded the artistic language of the material and its expressive possibilities. Yet the origin of the multivalent ways in which wax is now employed in contemporary art remains unexamined. It seems important to go back in time to think about when and how wax lost its traditional role as a material used exclusively for meticulous modeling and shifted to today's far more fluid, flexible use. This shift relates directly to new ways in which these wax works engage with the spectator.

Two different strands of work in wax emerged as part of the birth of modern art in the late nineteenth century. One strand was initiated by Edgar Degas in Paris. With his groundbreaking *Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer*, (fig. 1 - p. 417) exhibited at the Sixth Impressionist exhibition in 1881, Degas relied on wax's traditional language of hyperrealism, but he revised it by audaciously placing his sculpture in an avant-garde art setting. The work was deemed by critics to be shocking—and shockingly modern. Another strand was the use of wax in works made by Medardo Rosso, also in Paris, in the following decade. Although Rosso and Degas are frequently compared for their use of wax in sculpture, it is important to establish that their approaches to wax were entirely different. Rosso completely revolutionized the way in which wax had been used and was understood. Rather than promoting wax's hyper-realistic qualities, he probed and experimented with its phenomenological identity as a material. He exploited its fluid, ductile, mobile, and transformative potential, eliciting a new poetic response from the viewer.

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Degas's *Little Fourteen-Year-Old Dancer* was the only sculpture that he exhibited during his lifetime. Combining the real and the artificial, Degas made a portrait of a young Belgian dancer named Marie Van Goethem, which he modeled in wax and then clothed with a real bodice, tutu, stockings, and ballet shoes. The sculpture wore a wig whose braided hair was tied with a green ribbon and she had another ribbon wrapped around her neck. The wax skin was tinted to resemble human flesh. With this work, Degas continued the centuries-old tradition of wax modeling. He drew on wax's renown as a material for portraiture, religious ex-votos, anatomical studies and the popular replicas of the Musée Grévin and Madame Tussauds. It is thought that his choices were influenced by the great interest generated by the wax portrait of Louis the XIV housed in Versailles during the 1880s. The Musée Retrospectif in Paris, inaugurated in 1864 with a section devoted solely to wax sculpture, might also have been on Degas' mind[1]

Degas' work was noteworthy because it boldly crossed the boundaries of wax working by becoming part of an exhibition of high modern art. He drew on wax's traditional employment to achieve hyperrealism, with its cold, fetish-like associations, but the setting was entirely unlike the traditional venues reserved for such works. The artist's inclusion of real clothes and hair was highly innovative and unsettling for this context. Degas' sculpture generated a mixture of repulsion and fascination similar to that elicited by wax works, but upon seeing the dancer, numerous critics of the time began to claim that wax was the only material that could capture the *vie moderne*. The critic Charles Ephrussi wrote of Degas' sculpture that, "this is a truly modern effort, an essay on realism in sculpture[2]." And Joris-Karl Huysmans wrote that "the work is the only true modern initiative that I know in sculpture[3]."

Degas' modern mode of hyperrealism can be considered the origins of numerous works by contemporary artists. Take, for example, Robert Gober's *Long-Haired Cheese* (1992-93). Gober uses real hair and a wax replica of cheese to create a work that reads as at once incredibly real and at the same time not real at all. The work does not leave us indifferent, but we do not want to eat or touch it. It ultimately repels.

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[1] For a full study, see KENDALL, ET AL. (2010). See also LINDSAY, ET AL. (2010).

[2] Cited in BOGGS (1988), p. 343.

[3] *Ibid.*

A similar effect is achieved in different terms in Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset's *Modern Moses* (2006). The artists recreate an ATM machine with a wax infant sleeping in a baby carrier at its feet. One would not expect to find these two symbols in a high cultural venue like a museum and so their existence provokes a sense of unease in the viewer. The cash machine, a sign of consumerism, and the forgotten child, are presented as a reminder of the religious tale of Moses, an allusion to abandonment or perhaps to a lost society. The viewer is at once invited and repelled, pulled in and pushed away.

A third example is Maurizio Cattelan's hyper-realistic wax sculpture of Adolphe Hitler, titled *Him* (2001), kneeling on the floor to pray like a small child. The artist co-opts traditional wax-working's use of human hair and a real suit, but adds polyester resin and pigment. In another work by Cattelan, *La Nona ora* (1999) a wax effigy of Pope John Paul II is seen struck down by a meteor and pinned to a red carpet. The work was vandalised for blasphemy when it was exhibited in Poland in 2001.

About 15 years after Degas' dancer, a completely different yet equally modern way to use wax emerged in the art of Medardo Rosso. Rosso's name is associated with his delicate, haunting, unheroic wax heads of women, children, the sick and the elderly. Wax, his signature material, lends an aura of mystery and fragility to his works that are unlike Degas' dancer. His sculptures, described as 'glimpses', are of figures caught in fleeting emotional states: his tired, sick, meditative, laughing, or melancholy subjects seem to be barely emerging or about to melt. Their power lies in the way wax is used to convey a sense of physical, emotional, or psychological instability. External light is engaged to intensify this effect by interacting delicately with the wax[4].

Rosso discovered wax as a final material for sculpture around 1895, after he moved from Milan to Paris. He likely knew of Degas' example and decided to steer away from his realism. Perhaps due to the visceral, tactile look of his works, which evoke fantasies of an artist's hands caressing soft wax and invite the viewer to actively participate by repeating the gesture, Rosso's process was misunderstood at the time and remains so today[5]. One critic imagined the joy of handling wax,

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[4] On Rosso's use of light in his art, see HECKER and SCHENKENBERG (2018).

[5] On Rosso and the complex associations with wax, tactility, and the hand, see HECKER (2008), pp. 131-53.

evoking the image of Rosso "let[ting] his fingers play at random over the wax, pulling out coruscating forms and creating glissanders of light[6]." Rosso, however, never touched the wax directly with his hands. Past studies of his technique contending that Rosso made a core or a base in plaster and then hand-modeled the wax onto the core have turned out to be incorrect.

An alternative theory was that Rosso made metal armatures and then modeled wax over them, much like Degas did with his dancer, but x-ray photographs of his waxes do not reveal any armatures[7]. Rosso actually hand-modeled his subjects in clay. He then cast his hollow clay models mechanically, first in plaster and later in wax, using flexible gelatin molds. The wax he used was not soft modeling wax but rather wax used for lost-wax casting. He first melted the wax until it was liquid, and then, either painted the liquid wax into the molds with a brush, or poured it into the molds, letting it cool. After it had hardened he would release it from the gelatin mold to obtain a finished sculptural object. Rosso's letters to foundries, in which he requested fresh gelatin for his molds, confirm this process. The bits of gelatin that were left stuck to his finished waxes further corroborate it. At a later stage, he enhanced the stability of the objects by either adding plaster into the finished hollow waxes or slathering it onto the backs of sculptures made in the form of masks. Rosso thus harnessed technology to make works that are eternally repeatable. The works, however, also signify a one of a kind, hand-modeled sculpture, despite the fact that this is not how they were made.

Conservator Derek Pullen first described this process in 1994[8]. I was able to prove this through a technical study that I began in 1999 together with Harry Cooper, then Curator of Modern Art at the Harvard University Art Museums, Henry Lie, then Director of Harvard's Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies, Francesca Bewer, then Research Curator, and Pullen, then Head of Sculpture Conservation at Tate Gallery, London. In our study and subsequent exhibition at Harvard University's Arthur M. Sackler Museum in 2003, *Medardo Rosso: Second Impressions*, which travelled to the Saint Louis Art Museum and The

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[6] Ashton (1959).

[7] For an in-depth study of Rosso's technique, see Cooper and Hecker (2003).

[8] See Pullen (1994), pp. 59-63.

Nasher Sculpture Center in 2004, we were able to provide a more accurate account of the artist's working procedure[9].

The Harvard study was an initial attempt to understand Rosso's process, but we were not yet ready to appreciate its subtleties. It was difficult for us at that time to make deeper comparisons between casts of the same subject because we had to rely on our memories and photographs as we travelled from place to place to see casts. More accurate technical methods such as digital scanning were still in their infancy, not portable, and cost-prohibitive. Because of the range of works we saw, no conclusive results emerged from the samples of wax we obtained from a few casts in order to analyze their composition. In 2014, in another study, we were able to sample numerous waxes and discovered a multitude of subtle differences in their composition and color: a great range of colors emerged due to different qualities of waxes and additives that we can now begin to account for and better understand[10].

Rosso's idea for making waxes most likely came from his experience with the *cire perdue* or lost-wax process for making bronzes. In Paris, he capitalized on his earlier experience in Italian foundries, where the lost-wax method was employed for bronze casting. This method had fallen out of use in Paris. As art historian Elisabeth Lebon has shown, most foundries in Paris used the sand-casting technique[11]. The historical significance of the fact that Rosso cast by *cire perdue* went unnoticed. *Cire perdue* bronzes became rare and desirable in fin de siècle Paris. Rosso thus used his experience to generate special excitement around his sculptures there. The word *cire* evoked the idea of something secret and desirable, while *perdue* suggested that Rosso had preserved or re-found something lost. The technique of bronze casting by *cire perdue* involved pouring molten metal into a mold created by a wax model, which then melted away. But instead of dissolving the model, Rosso preserved the 'lost' wax.

Rosso was able to use *cire perdue* for his bronzes and also to make waxes because, unlike most sculptors of his time, he cast many of his own works in Paris. This autonomous mode of production liberated him from commercial Parisian foundries and gave him control over the production and appearance of his casts. It allowed him to work with wax in

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[9] See note 7 above.

[10] http://www.peterfreemaninc.com/exhibitions/medardo-rosso_1/pressrelease/ (Accessed: June 30, 2018). Publication forthcoming.

[11] See LEBON (2012).

his sculptures. Making waxes from gelatin molds rendered his process more mobile, for he could work in any country, even in a hotel room, without having to rely on foundries. Finally, it gave him an opportunity to experiment with a range of styles and techniques, making his process a major aspect of his pursuit of a modern language for sculpture.

Rosso seemed to appreciate the liquid aspect of wax rather than its ability to be hand modeled. At the same time, his choice of wax, which captured the details of his fingers forming the surfaces of his clay model, resonated with the French-identified word *impression*, thereby allowing him to become known as the "Impressionist sculptor." Concomitantly, the fluid, dreamy quality of his waxes aligned his sculptures with Symbolism.

One remarkable example of Rosso's phenomenological use of wax is the iconic, mandorla-shaped wax *Madame X* (ca. 1896) (fig. 2 - p. 417). Although a masked portrait is alluded to by the title, the work's shape, the unusually thin and exaggeratedly elongated nose, the barely visible eyes and absent mouth are strongly reminiscent of a Cycladic female head. Almost as if to contradict its archetypical feminine quality, Rosso mounted this work leaning forward in a manner that recalls ancient phalluses. When illuminated, the sculpture creates an uneasy tactile relationship between surface and light, suggesting yet another ambiguity: *Madame X*'s various shades of wax become visible, creating the inviting effect of a soft piece of ancient amber. Yet our simultaneous recognition that the work is made of wax repels any sense of pleasant touch or desire to rub it.

In another masterpiece by Rosso, *Ecce puer*, the face of the child barely emerging or disappearing into the material is poetically intensified in casts made in wax. As critic Max Kozloff once wrote, "the blank, cream colored wax has a Mallarméan impact that anesthetizes the tactile sense, and vibrates more as a perception of the emotions, than it exists as an object having weight and substance separate from one's body. It keeps one at a distance, and freezes the moment before it is possible to return to earthly existence, and the near at hand ... the thought, let alone the experience of this work, is like a species of hypnosis, whose duration I can never dispel. I seem unable to recapture its materiality[12]."

Just as Degas' hyperrealism has been re-invented in contemporary art, so have Rosso's early intuitions about sculptural form and materials

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[12] Kozloff (1963), pp. 46-7.

on the verge of dissolution. These ideas would later find fuller engagement in the works of countless contemporary artists. A few examples are relevant in conclusion, in order to show how far and wide Rosso's legacy has gone. First, we note the artists who have favored wax in its elemental, 'poor' form. Joseph Beuys, for example, who privileged organic substances such as fat, honey, and gelatin, appreciated the ability of wax to hold a shape, to expand and contract, and to be transformed in the process of heating. Indeed, he equated its transmutations with the life force itself[13].

Another example is found in Arte Povera artists such as Mario Merz, In his sculptures of 1968 such as *Che Fare?* (What to Do?) and *Solitario Solidale* (Solitary Solidarity), the words of the titles, spelt out in neon and electrical wire, were embedded in lumps of rough yellow beeswax placed in aluminum casserole dishes. In his *Lingotto* (Lingot) of the same year he displayed a 'lingot' of beeswax on a steel structure with bundles of brushwood behind it. Luciano Fabro, in a work called *Tu,* used red sealing wax to create an egg that he hung from the ceiling and stamped with an erotic symbol. All these works play with references to poor vs. rich, modern vs. ancient, and humble vs. luxurious materials[14].

This is not unlike Jannis Kounellis's use of unshaped wax together with sheets of lead, or with iron mesh, wire, and ground coffee (for example, in *Untitled* of 1984). It also resembles Marisa Merz's candle that looks like a fountain of melted wax, or her small, softly modeled wax heads, referring to simple gestures that take place in the domestic sphere. One critic likened her melting wax fountain to her idea of "the spontaneous value of creation, its constant flow beyond the limits of conventions[15]." Her use of wax has been said to express an art-historical kinship with the sculptural heads of Rosso[16].

More examples can be found in Wolfgang Laib's beeswax sculptures, from his *Pollen* works to his *Wax Room*. In some of the Wax Rooms, Laib melted approximately 440 pounds of beeswax at a constant temperature to achieve a uniform golden hue. He used tools such as a spatula,

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[13] SUQUET (1995), pp. 148-62, especially p. 154, ADAMS (1998). BEUYS and HARLAN (2004). See also ADAMS (1995), pp. 187-214.

[14] See HECKER (2013), pp. 13-38.

[15] PASINI (1994), p. 109.

[16] It should be noted, however, that while Marisa Merz's wax sculptures are modeled by hand, Medardo Rosso's were cast serially from gelatin molds.

spackle knife, electric heat gun, and warm iron to apply the wax on the walls and ceiling of an intimate space. The finished room is lined with fragrant beeswax and illuminated by a single bare light bulb.

Anish Kapoor's *Svayambh* (Self-Generated, 2007), is another work that appreciates wax's viscous quality. A 40-ton block of wax mounted on rails and a cannon firing lumps of the material at a gallery wall were the centerpieces of his show at the Royal Academy in London. Five rooms were taken up by *Svayambh*. The huge block of red wax moved very slowly on rails, leaving a residue in its wake. At 3 meters tall and 2 1/2 wide, the block was too big to fit easily through the doors, so it deposited wax on the frames as it squeezed out. "It's as if it's skinning itself as it goes through the doors[17]," Kapoor said. Continuing the waxy theme, another work, *Shooting into the Corner*, consisted of an air-powered cannon firing pellets of the material into the corner of a room at regular intervals, gradually building up a sculpture that grew and changed over the course of the exhibition.

Finally, there are Urs Fischer's dissolving wax replicas of *The Rape of the Sabine* (2011). Fischer has expressed a deep interest in the works of Rosso[18]. At the Venice Biennale, he lit the wax sculpture and each day it dissolved until it completely melted. To his sculpture Fischer added a wax spectator, which also gradually melted and ultimately disappeared like the artwork, thereby suggesting an identification between material and spectator that Rosso could have only dreamed of.

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[17] "Anish Kapoor's 40-ton block of wax is centrepiece of Royal Academy Show," *The Telegraph*, 29 May 2009, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/5400198/Anish-Kapoors-40-ton-block-of-wax-is-centrepiece-of-Royal-Academy-show.html (Accessed: June 30, 2018).

[18] See FISCHER (2012), pp. 84-85.

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