

# A material that “Lends itself to fine interpretations”. The status of plaster in Marino Marini’s Oeuvre.

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## Abstract

The purpose of this paper aims to clarify the use of plaster in Marini’s artistic practice, both when the plaster is a unique piece, and when it is in relation with other materials. Even if Marini often used plaster in a ‘traditional’ way to make casts suitable for the translations to bronze or other materials, these sculptures are very often considered by the artist not only as translation tools and ‘mediation’ between the idea and the final plastic artwork, or academic exercise. For the artist, sculptures in plaster are also works with a proper autonomy that can render them final and definitive, as is evident from sculptures such as *Piccola Pomona* or *Danzatrice*, both made in the 1940s.

## Keywords

Sculpture, Plaster, Italian art, Venice Biennale, Art criticism, Portrait, Marino Marini

## Introduction

Born in Pistoia (Italy), in 1901, Marino Marini was a sculptor, painter and printmaker. Commencing in 1917, he attended the Fine Arts Academy in Florence and later moved, in 1929, to Milan to teach Sculpture at the Villa Reale Art School in Monza. In 1943, due to the war, he moved with his wife to Canton of Ticino, where he was in contact with many artists such as Alberto Giacometti, Fritz Wotruba, and Germaine Richier, to name a few. He is particularly known for his series of sculptures representing Horses and Horsemen, *Pomone* (female nudes) and Jugglers. During his career, Marini presented his works in many important occasions such as the Rome Quadriennale, the Venice Biennale, as well as in many solo shows in museums and art galleries both in Europe and in America. He died in 1980 in Viareggio (Italy).

“The unpolished wood, and more the plaster, this unpleasant material that, when does not harden and noble itself, such as in the case of stucco, causes immediate tactile sensations intolerable to many people, like the velvet or the peach peel: these are the favorite materials of Marino’s sculpture. A sculpture that, in fact, most of the time does not gain added value if translated in bronze” (Brandi, 1976, p. 184, translation my own). With these significant words, in 1950, the Italian art historian Cesare Brandi described accurately Marini’s interest for plaster, a material commonly considered as humble. Plaster, traditionally held as medium and unvalued, has not been accepted as a fine art material and suitable for the creation of complete artworks.

Despite Marini frequently use of plaster in a ‘conventional’ way to make casts suitable for the translations to bronze or other materials (and even in this case the plaster assumes, after the casting, the status of proper artwork), he also conceived and made – since the 1920s – sculptures only in plaster. This demonstrates that he considered that material not

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only as a step towards the creation of a bronze, a ‘mediation’ between the first artistic idea and the final plastic artwork, or as an academic exercise, but also as a medium with a proper autonomy, able to render final sculptures.

Marini’s case is not an isolated one, and it could be easily located in the context of the growing interest around the material experimentation and aesthetic innovation that characterizes 20th Century Art, starting of course from the avant-garde movements.

Considering, for instance, two great sculptors, contemporary to Marini, Henry Moore and Jacques Lipchitz, we can easily understand how the plaster played a central part in their production. Moore, in fact, said: “These are not plaster casts; they are plaster originals [...] they are the actual works that one has done with one’s own hands” (Feldam, 2015); in a similar way, Lipchitz affirmed: “The plaster is the basis of my inspiration, it really represents my only original work and my most precious possessions” (Gabbriellini, 2013, p. 56).

As we can understand from these statements, both artists focused their attention on the idea of the material’s originality. The artists are fully aware of the changes that occur in their sculpture once cast from plaster to bronze, and for this reason the plaster becomes the most direct testimony of the creative process, the evidence of the artist’s touch. This immediacy must have been very important for Marini too, who asserted that “it is necessary to preserve the emotion which (sic) generates an image. My sculpture starts from an impression, often instantaneous, whose impact I try to preserve” (Marini cited in Guzzetti, 2017, p. 211).

### **1. The absence of hierarchy: Marini’s approach to materials**

To better understand the role that plaster assumes in Marini’s career, we first have to frame, in a more general sense, the artist’s engagement with different materials.

Browsing the sculptor’s general catalogue (Carandente, 1998) – in which, incidentally, the very first sculpture is exactly a plaster<sup>1</sup> – confirms his trend to use such a wide variety of materials without any kind of hierarchy. The artist himself stated at times, maybe in a bit simplistic way, that he had no preferences for a particular material in an absolute sense (Marini, 1972, p. VI). This statement is not to be intended in a negative sense, as an indifference towards the choice of materials. On the contrary, it should be understood as a declaration of interest in the peculiar characteristics of each one.

The use of many media is a form of constant experimentation and free research for the artist, and it is usually impossible to recognize a precise determination to use a specific material for a specific theme or subject, in a very different way, for example, from the Henry Moore’s doctrine of the ‘Truth to materials’.

If we consider, for instance, the case of the portraits of the sculptor Fausto Melotti (made by Marini around 1937), this issue becomes clearer. The same subject is portrayed by Marino

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<sup>1</sup> Marino Marini, *Testa femminile*, c. 1920, plaster, 91,5 x 60 x 46 cm, single piece, Marino Marini Foundation, Palazzo del Tau, Pistoia, Italy.

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six times<sup>2</sup>, in five different materials which involves subtle differences: two bronze versions, one in wax, one in stone, one in terracotta, probably lost (a photographic reproduction of which was recently found and published - see Maglione, 2021, pp. 137-144) and one in polychrome plaster. It is therefore evident how, for Marini, there is not an inseparable relation between the form of art and the material, but the same shape can be investigated, in a way, through more than one material.

From a technical perspective, Marini’s plasters differ in technical and material versatility. The different ways in which the plaster can be worked (casting, shaped and added or carved) is one of the reasons why the artist chose it so frequently over the course of his entire career. If Marini usually used an indirect technique, deriving the plaster from a clay model and obtaining in this way a compact and smooth surface, there were occasions, not so rare, in which the artist modelled directly the plaster, starting from a base, around an internal support structure in iron or wood<sup>3</sup>. In this second case, the result is a rough surface, sometimes stressed by the contrasting *chiaroscuro* effects of some pictures of the time.

## **2. A matter of surface: polychrome plasters**

Plaster could also be easily colored by pigments, and this was a relevant option for the sculptor. As Marini stated, “I have always had the need to paint” (Carandente, 1998, p. 15) and more significantly, “I have never begun a sculpture without first investigating its essence pictorially” (Carandente, 1998, p. 15), as if to signify, as stated by critics, that painting and color studies have always been a spontaneous and innate need for the artist.

In Marini’s production, we recognize a great number of polychrome plasters in which the chromatic interventions are declined in different ways by the artist<sup>4</sup>. In certain cases, the polychromy creates a pictorial and ‘atmospheric’ effect, which invades the bodies’ surface creating an anti-naturalistic effect (fig. 1); in others, sculptural bodies are crossed by clean and, in a way, plastic lines which highlight volumes and dimensions (fig. 2). This distinction, between the plastic line and the atmospheric line, had already been suggested in 1942 by Luciano Anceschi regarding Marino’s drawings (Anceschi, 1942, n.p.), frequently enriched by addition of colors. The correlation between the drawing and the sculptural practice is not accidental; for many reasons, in fact, plaster works relate well with Marino’s drawing practice. When we consider, for instance, the imaginative originality and the immediateness

<sup>2</sup> Marino Marini, *Ritratto dello scultore Fausto Melotti*, 1937, bronze, 35x34,5x23 cm, Giuliano Gori Collection–Fattoria di Celle, Santomato (PT), Italy; *Ritratto dello scultore Fausto Melotti*, 1937, bronze, 27,4 x 14,9 x 21,7 cm, Marino Marini Foundation, Palazzo del Tau, Pistoia, Italy; *Ritratto dello scultore Fausto Melotti*, 1937, wax, h 36,7 cm, Museo Marino Marini, Firenze, Italy; *Testa (Ritratto dello scultore Fausto Melotti)*, stone, sculpture shown at the Biennale di Venezia in 1938; [*Ritratto dello scultore Fausto Melotti*], terracotta, [1937], published in «Il Bargello» anno XII, n. 16, February 11, 1940, p. 3; *Ritratto dello scultore Fausto Melotti*, 1937, polychrome plaster, 28,6 x 15,8 x 21,9 cm, Palazzo del Tau, Pistoia, Italy.

<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to the conservator Filippo Tattini for this information and other insights on Marini’s artistic technique.

<sup>4</sup> About the theme of the polychromy in Marino’s oeuvre also see Guzzetti, 2012, pp. 108-125.

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in creativity typical of the plaster, as stated by Moore and Lipchitz, it is clear how such aspects can be undoubtedly attributed also to the Marini’s drawings.

Moreover, the most attentive critics have always agreed that Marino’s drawings, similarly to the plasters, have a great artistic value which cannot be reduced to a mere preparatory work (Anceschi, 1942, cited in Patti, 2005, p. 29).

Lastly, from a more pragmatic perspective, both paper and plaster are common and inexpensive materials, and that makes them particularly suited to be chosen by the artist during critical periods, like the war period.

Resuming the question of color, cases in which the plaster remains pure, without color interventions, or cases in which we have just delicate pigments additions are not rare too. In the first instance, the artist exploits the ‘crudeness’ of the cold white to carry out images particularly expressive, if we think for example of works such as *Arcangelo*<sup>5</sup>, a figure completely pervaded by a sense of sadness, according to the artist’s own words (Marini 1972, p. III). In the second one, Marini included few realistic details, such as rings on the fingers or necklaces, only in the case they do not weaken or discolor the original emotion but, on the contrary, if they are able to confirm the first impact experienced by the artist, as he himself stated (Soby, 1950, n.p.).

Finally, in the case of the plasters with patina and as pointed out by conservators (Giuffredi, 2006, p. 23), Marini used different techniques and materials, sometimes mutually incompatible, mixing them without specific codified rules, and this often leads to conservative problems. The effects obtained are various, and sometimes are linked to a determination to reproduce effects of surface like that of the ancient works. The fascination that ancient visual artistic sources – from Etruscan to Egyptian sculptures, for instance – had exercised over the artist is now well known to the scholars (Farinella, 2017, pp. 62-85). Regarding this issue, it can be highlighted the significant case of a sculpture in patinated plaster that, not by chance, represented also a classical theme, a Victory<sup>6</sup>.

Sometimes, even the bronzes allude to the ancient world thanks to the plaster. It was a common practice for the artist, in fact, to intentionally leave a patina obtained letting spots of plaster adhere to the finished bronze casting (*ART. Talented Tuscan*, 1950, cited in Guzzetti, 2017, p. 212).

Strictly related to the color issue is the importance of the treatment that Marini gave to surfaces as was pointed out in 1944 by Gianfranco Contini (Contini, 1944, n.p.), who considered Marini “un poète de surfaces”, but also by other critics such as Lamberto Vitali and Giuseppe Marchiori (Marchiori, 1953, p. 29). By using plaster, Marini was able to render visual and tactile qualities clear in every piece. Marini scratched, dug the surface of the

<sup>5</sup> Marino Marini, *Arcangelo*, 1943, plaster, 31,5 x 48 x 39 cm, Museo Marino Marini, Firenze, Italy.

<sup>6</sup> Marino Marini, *Vittoria*, 1928, plaster with patina, 69,3 x 22,8 x 15,5 cm, Museo Marino Marini, Firenze, Italy.

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**Figure 1** – Marino Marini, *Piccola Pomona*, 1944, polychrome plaster, 59,5 x 24 x 13,5, Museo Marino Marini, Firenze, Italy.

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sculptures in a very ‘expressionistic’ sense. The works *Portrait of Maria Pedrazzini*, 1943, and *Portrait of Madame Grandjean*, 1945, are suitable examples of this practice.

This kind of surface treatment is much easier to obtain in plaster works than in marble or in bronze ones. The polished surfaces of the bronze create a series of reflections interfering with the plasticity of the work, making a formal reading of these compact forms and their internal relations difficult for to be precepted by the viewer. As stated by Brandi in 1950, the bronze surface ‘attracts’ (reflects) the outside world in the sculpture, but at the same time ‘disrupts’ the compactness of the plastic volumes (Brandi, 1976, p. 184).

### **3. The significance of Marini’s plasters through the historic exhibitions**

One of the best testing grounds to understand the importance of the plaster for Marini are the exhibitions.

Since his early career, Marini showed plasters in the most important exhibitions, along with artworks in other materials as well as unique pieces in the show.

In 1936, for instance, the artist took part at the Venice Biennale with nine sculptures among which the *Cavaliere*, 1936 (*XX Biennale di Venezia*, exh. catalogue, 1936, p. 132). This work is a plaster, and its importance in Marini’s artistic path is remarkable. It can be considered, in fact, the first example, the prototype, in a way, of the series *Cavalli e Cavalieri* (*Horses and riders*) one of the most famous and significant sculpture cycle realized by Marini from the mid 1930s until the end of his career. Hence, we can assume that the first time ever an exemplar of the series was presented to the public was on this occasion, with a plaster work.

Once again in the context of the Venice Biennale, in 1948 (*XXIV Biennale di Venezia*, exh. catalogue, 1948, p. 108), four out of six sculptures displayed by Marini were plasters<sup>7</sup>. Among these, were also presented the *Gentiluomo a cavallo* and *Cavaliere*, variations and developments of the theme of horses and riders, and a female figure called *Pomona*.

It is clear that Marini usually entrusted his public image to plaster sculptures, and this is probably not a coincidence. If we consider for example a late statement of the artist, referred to an exhibition held in Basel in 1944<sup>8</sup>, an exhibition where the artist displayed only plasters, Marini was fully aware of the great impact of the ensemble, impact that came from a kind of sensitivity of the material, finished and painted, as the artist himself remembered (Marini, 1998, pp. 27-28).

<sup>7</sup> In reality, the issue is more complex than disclosed. Even if, in fact, in the catalogue are mentioned just six sculptures, according to the notifications cards stored in the Historical Archive of the Venice Biennale (ASAC), Marini presented seven sculptures (the six in the catalogue plus another *Cavaliere*). The issue is currently subject of analysis by the author.

<sup>8</sup> *Vier ausländische Bildhauer in der Schweiz. Arnold d’Altri, Marino Marini, Germaine Richier, Fritz Wotruba*, Kunstmuseum Basel, 1944. For the exhibition see also Mocchi, 2021.



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**Figure 2** –Marino Marini, *Danzatrice*, 1949, polychrome plaster, 177,3 x 57 x 40,5, Museo Marino Marini, Firenze, Italy.

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#### **4. One and multiple: the problem of the series**

Although studies and exhibitions dedicated to Marino Marini have been flourishing in recent years, with excellent results, the systematic analysis of the artist's works is still at an early stage, and the general catalogue of his sculpture, unfortunately, presents some gaps and inaccuracies. The situation is particularly problematic regarding the materials, because the critics usually did not distinguish the version, and the material, of Marini's sculptures.

In the case of 1938 Biennale, for instance, Marini presented one of the Melotti portraits already mentioned, but critics usually do not recognize which version was on display, confusing the stone, that was actually presented in the exhibition, with the plaster or with one of the bronze versions.

Similarly, in the late case of the portrait of Georg Heise, from 1961, critics have not identified which of the two existing plasters, both in Italy, one in Milan and one in Pistoia (Fabi Chiara, 2015, p. 92), was exhibited on the occasion of the Marini's solo show held in Zurich in 1962 (*Marino Marini*, exh. catalogue, 1962, p. 29). However, considering that scholars have accepted, since 1973, that from the Milanese plaster derives the only version in bronze of the sculpture (Fabi, 2015, p. 92), now at the Hamburg Kunsthalle, and considering the caption of the sculpture in the 1962 catalogue (*in arbeit für die Kunsthalle Hamburg*), we can assume that in that occasion was presented the plaster now in Milan.

#### **Conclusion**

The foregoing discussion has attempted to analyze how Marini dealt with the choice of the material in his artist practice, without any hierarchy and overcoming the division between humble and noble materials. The plaster, in this sense, is an emblematic case: though traditionally considered as a 'unpretentious' material, the artist did not fail to show plasters in crucial exhibitions throughout his entire career.

The multidisciplinary approach and the integration of the archival research and the technical studies, the dialogue between art historians and restorers can lead to very significant results, also to recognize the precise identity of each version of sculpture and to give back them the place they deserve in the artist's career.

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