

# The (after)lives of the pseudo-sumptuous surfaces: the case of the Venetian Gothic and Renaissance wooden sculpture in the Adriatic

MATKO MARUŠIĆ Institute of Art History, Zagreb,  
Croatia

mmarusic@ipu.hr

## As (pós-)vidas das superfícies pseudo-sumptuosas: o caso da escultura em madeira veneziana gótica e renascentista no Adriático

### Abstract

This paper discusses the alterations to the surface of the 15th- and early-16th-century wooden sculpture, mostly executed by Venetian workshops for the clientele of the minor centres of the Adriatic region. It examines the cases of wooden statues that imitated metalwork via their glittering surfaces by considering both the place of such works in their time and their “afterlives”, given that their original appearance was regularly altered in the following centuries. The sparkling effect of the pseudo-sumptuous surfaces was replaced by polychromy covering the draperies in mimetic colours imbued with religious symbolism. The instances of the reverse approach are also considered, given that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, several late medieval artworks were repainted to mimic bronze or marble. These converging approaches to the surface of wooden sculpture tackle the issue of taste and the meaning of surface in the reception of sacred art in an extensive time frame.

### Resumo

Este artigo aborda as alterações da superfície da escultura em madeira do século XV e início do século XVI, executada maioritariamente por oficinas venezianas para a clientela dos centros menores da região do Adriático. Examina os casos de estátuas de madeira que imitam o trabalho em metal através das suas superfícies brilhantes, considerando tanto o lugar dessas obras no seu tempo como as suas “vidas posteriores”, dado que o seu aspeto original foi regularmente alterado nos séculos seguintes. O efeito cintilante das superfícies pseudo-sumptuosas foi substituído pela policromia que cobria os panejamentos com cores miméticas imbuídas de simbolismo religioso. Os casos de abordagem inversa também são considerados, porque nos séculos XVIII e XIX, várias obras de arte medievais tardias foram repintadas para imitar o bronze ou o mármore. Reflete também a questão do gosto e do significado da superfície na receção da arte sacra num período de tempo extenso.

### KEYWORDS

Wooden sculpture  
Venetian Renaissance  
sculpture  
Polychromy  
Pseudo-sumptuous surface  
15th century  
16th century

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Escultura em madeira  
Escultura renascentista  
veneziana  
Policromia  
Superfície pseudo-sumptuosa  
Século XV  
Século XVI

## Introduction

Understanding the original appearance of Medieval and Renaissance polychrome wooden sculpture is a challenging task, to be grasped only with the help of thorough technical research. As a general rule, the periodic application of newly painted layers to the surface of older statues has significantly altered the intended presentation of the formal qualities and the plasticity of saintly figures. Occasionally, such an approach has entirely tainted their visual quality [1, p. 11]. Indeed, the surface of religious objects carved in wood is no more than a thin layer of paint set atop the preparation, yet it is regularly treated as an illusionistic area mimicking other materials, primarily the most precious ones such as gold, silver or marble, and is therefore held in great esteem.

In many regions, this memorable effect of the richly folded draperies enlivened in gold has been a constant in the production of sacral art in wood made in different epochs. Still, the reception of late medieval pseudo-sumptuous surfaces in an extensive time- and geographical frame merits further investigation. For instance, Mattia Vinco, in a recent discussion of the wooden sculpture produced in early Renaissance Verona, remarked that the original gilded surface of the holy figures has rarely been altered in subsequent centuries. According to Vinco, the gilding was the prime reason for the high esteem in which their Veronese beholders held the simulacra of Virgin and Child for centuries [2, p. 35]. Yet the attitudes towards the surface of sacred art significantly varied from region to region, with nearly a total lack of comparative studies [3].

For example, the flattering surfaces of the holy figures preserved in the Eastern Adriatic area (discussed later in this paper) could have been cherished only by its first generation of viewers. As if, almost by rule, it was entirely obfuscated by the subsequent layers of paint. This short paper explores several such cases by analysing the various approaches to the surface of wooden sculptures preserved on the mostly insular territories of the Eastern Adriatic coast. In doing so, the paper aims to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the meaning of the surfaces of sculpture made from wood while simultaneously addressing the issues of taste and the expectations of beholders regarding the older sacral art in the Early Modern period, up until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The group of altarpieces and independent statues of saints that this paper investigates were mainly – if not exclusively – products of Venetian shops such as that of the Moronzzone family, Andrea da Murano and his brother, Girolamo, and Paolo Campsa and Giovanni da Malines, to name just the most versatile and the best-studied master carvers. Most customers of their *prêt-à-vendre* products were church authorities, confraternities or individuals from the minor centres of Venetian Stato da Mar. The procurement of the sculptures directly in Venice (or dispatched via sea from Venetian shops) has rarely left traces in the archival sources, resulting in the procurement process of sculptures remains largely unknown. Nevertheless, we can assume that in the local communities for which the works were destined, these “made in Venice” products were perceived as lavish and high-quality works of foreign carvers operating in the foremost centre of the region and, of course, the Mediterranean [4].

This sentiment was likely supported by the memorable visual effect of the surface, given that such works drew on the medieval tradition of altarpieces entirely covered in silver and gold. Within these premises, the paper will examine the (for the most part) unpublished technical data from the conservation-restoration work on selected fifteenth- and sixteenth-century objects both from significant towns and minor villages, namely Pula, Cres, Poreč, Zadar, Tisno and Kotor. The wooden artworks will be examined from an art-historical perspective and from three aspects: their original state, their state centuries after they were made, and their present state, as their original effect has often been restored in recent restoration campaigns.

## Silver altarpieces and their wooden counterparts

The development of the altarpiece as an independent genre of late medieval art has become much clearer thanks to art-historical and archival research [5]. However, the lines of evolution and chronology are far less specific in minor regions, where commissioners have preferred full-volume sculptures instead of paintings on panels until at least the mid-sixteenth century. In general terms, and judging by surviving artworks, the visual culture of late medieval Adriatic was varied. In the central and southern parts, the altars were graced equally by paintings on panels, carved altarpieces and independent full-volume sculpture, both in wood and stone, while the northern area primarily cherished sculptured works, regularly in wood.

A parallel line of the altarpiece typology can also be traced to an earlier period (the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries): the altar retables made of silver. Only a few examples survive, such as those from cathedrals of Split (late fourteenth century, preserved in fragments), Poreč (early 1450s), Kotor (mid-fifteenth-century) and Krk (1480s) [6-7]. That such a genre of sacral art was accessible to financially most adept commissioners and communities is corroborated by the archival sources for the churches in Dubrovnik, where such pieces adorned only the most important churches of the city such as the Cathedral, St. Blaise church and the Mendicant churches [8-9].

These silver altarpieces regularly displayed saintly figures in two registers, with the Virgin and Child as the central representation. Placed atop the altars under suffused natural light and within the proximity of flickering candlelight, these works would have likely had an extraordinary effect on their viewers. The sensation was most certainly supported by the awe the altarpieces inspired after their protective shutters were lifted, which occurred exclusively on the most solemn days of the church calendar. Most of the time, however, they remained covered.



**Figure 1.** Venetian workshop, Pula polyptych, the second half of the 15th century (Pula, St. Francis' Church).



For this paper, it is essential to note that the fifteenth-century woodcarving shops emulated the typology of silver altarpieces. The most completely preserved example of this is the so-called Pula polyptych (Figure 1), executed for the high altar of the Franciscan church in the second half of the fifteenth century, probably by a Venetian workshop or, as recently proposed by Ivan Matejčić, by Andrea da Murano and his shop [10, pp. 112, 115]. The gilding covers most of the object's surface and all the draperies of the holy figures except for Christ's perizoma in the upper central panel showing the *Imago pietatis*, which is painted in white. The present state of the Pula polyptych has been compromised by several restorations in its modern and recent history, which gave the porcelain-like appearance to the faces and the rather cold tone of the gilding. Moreover, the removal of the varnish resulted in pale skin colours, and the gilding was reconstructed. Nevertheless, the overall intended glittering appearance of the piece remains.



**Figure 2.** Paolo Campsa and Giovanni da Malines, Virgin and Child, late 15th century (Tisno, Church of the Holy Spirit).

The nexus between the production practices of goldsmiths and woodcarvers and the fluidity between these media is critical to the concerns of this paper. One of the key pieces of evidence of the collaboration in the years around 1500 (that is, several decades after the Pula polyptych) is the Virgin with Child from the main altar of the Parish church in Tisno, tentatively attributed to the woodcarving circle of Paolo Campsa, and dated to the very beginning of the sixteenth century (Figure 2) [11, pp. 112, 115]. The surface of this essentially wooden sculpture is encased in a thin silver revetment, and only the yellowish skin of the two holy figures is left visible. It has been presumed that the silver cover was not original, i.e., that it was added to the wooden core of the piece later, at an undetermined moment. Such a practice, characteristic of older and venerable icons painted on panels, was also widespread in Dalmatia, with numerous icons still retaining the silver revetment. Such so-called “additions”, which were regularly ex-voto offerings of pious individuals or groups, left only the skin on the faces of the Virgin and Child visible, as no alterations to the faces of holy figures were allowed [12, pp. 52-54].

The Tisno Madonna still awaits thorough investigation, yet scholars speculate that it was initially conceived with this silver cover on its surface [13]. Future technical research must corroborate or refute such a hypothesis, for the floral ornaments on the surface are impossible to date with certainty. If this were indeed the case, the object would be a rare transmedia accomplishment, which would not only mimic the precious material through the illusionistic drapery. In terms of chronology, moreover, this later example corroborates that the appeal for precious materials persisted well into the sixteenth century. However, while the glittering effect was retained on the Pula polyptych and the Tisno Madonna, most of the gilded wooden sculptures preserved on the Eastern Adriatic – to which this paper now turns – relatively soon changed their “skin”, even after several decades, that is, in the very first campaign of their “renewal”.

### The changing skin of wooden sculpture

The Early Modern alterations to the polychromy of Adriatic woodcarving have rarely been discussed as a topic in its own right. The results of the restoration work conducted through the twentieth century on wooden sculptures from the area have remained largely unpublished or even entirely unrecorded. Subsequent layers of paint have generally been eliminated, and no records of their dating and visual properties have survived. It is, therefore, hazardous to investigate the approaches to their surface if not through a combined conservation and archival investigation. A more recent approach pays considerable attention to the “long lives” of wooden sculpture, but – almost as a rule – the results remain unpublished.

Regarding the varied approaches to the surface of sacral art in wood, take, for example, the surviving relief figures from the early- to mid-fifteenth-century triptych from the town of Cres. The middle-sized altarpiece, whose frame is lost, is considered to be stylistically proximate to the woodcarving circles of the Moronzzone family of carvers, one of the most prosperous shops on the Eastern shore of the Adriatic (Figure 3) [14, 15, pp. 180-181]. Up to six layers of paint applied after the original one were determined in two conservation-restoration campaigns conducted through several decades: the first (in the late 1980s) involved only the central figure of Virgin and Child, while the second one (from 2006) concerned the side figures, Sts. Fabian and Sebastian [16].

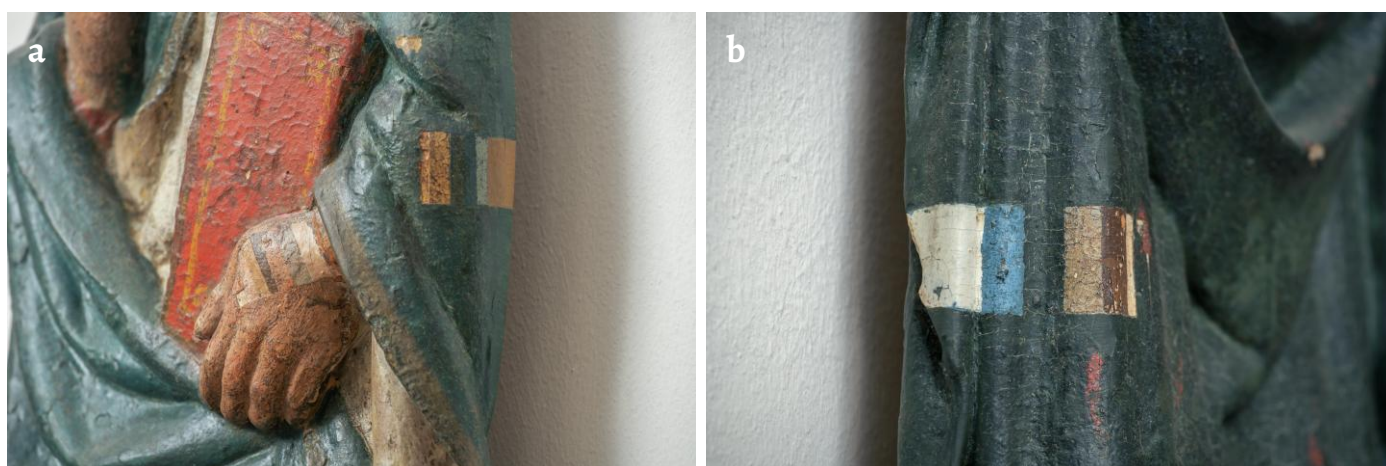
The draperies were initially gilded, but the gilding has survived only in traces except on the surface of the draperies of Virgin and Child. Therefore, the restorers presented the third consecutive layer of overpainting on the side figures. Probes of two earlier (and the subsequent) layers were left visible both on the draperies and the incarnate. The viewer can, therefore, surmise that, over time, the tone of the incarnate was also changed, albeit with no compelling impact on the visual qualities of the figures (Figure 4). On the contrary, the subsequent layers on the draperies – brown, green, blue, and white – significantly altered the intended visual



effect of the carver of the Cres triptych. The corresponding procedure of the alterations to the surface can be traced on several other relief sculptures, such as the Madonna and Child from Cres, signed by Andrea da Murano and dated by inscription to the 1470s (the last digit of the number is effaced). In that case, however, only the original gilding was presented in the 2009 conservation-restoration work [17].



**Figure 3.** Unknown Adriatic carver, Virgin and Child and Sts. Fabian and Sebastian, ca. 1425 (Cres, Church of Saint Mary the Great).



**Figure 4.** Stratigraphy of polychromy on the side figures of the Cres triptych: a) drapery and incarnate of St. Fabian; b) perizoma of St. Sebastian.

Gilded draperies were also characteristic of full-volume sculpture of the same period. Again, there is no need to look further than the sculptures of the same town. The recent technical investigation of the monumental simulacrum of St. Isidore, the patron saint of Cres, represented seated on the throne, revealed that its original surface was similarly gilded, rendered decisively more lavishly than the present reddish paint, applied probably during the first half of the twentieth century. The rich ornamental decoration on the mitre and the sleeves has been determined on the smaller portions of removed polychromy (Figure 5); the research was conducted by Nives Maksimović Vasev (Gilda d.o.o.).

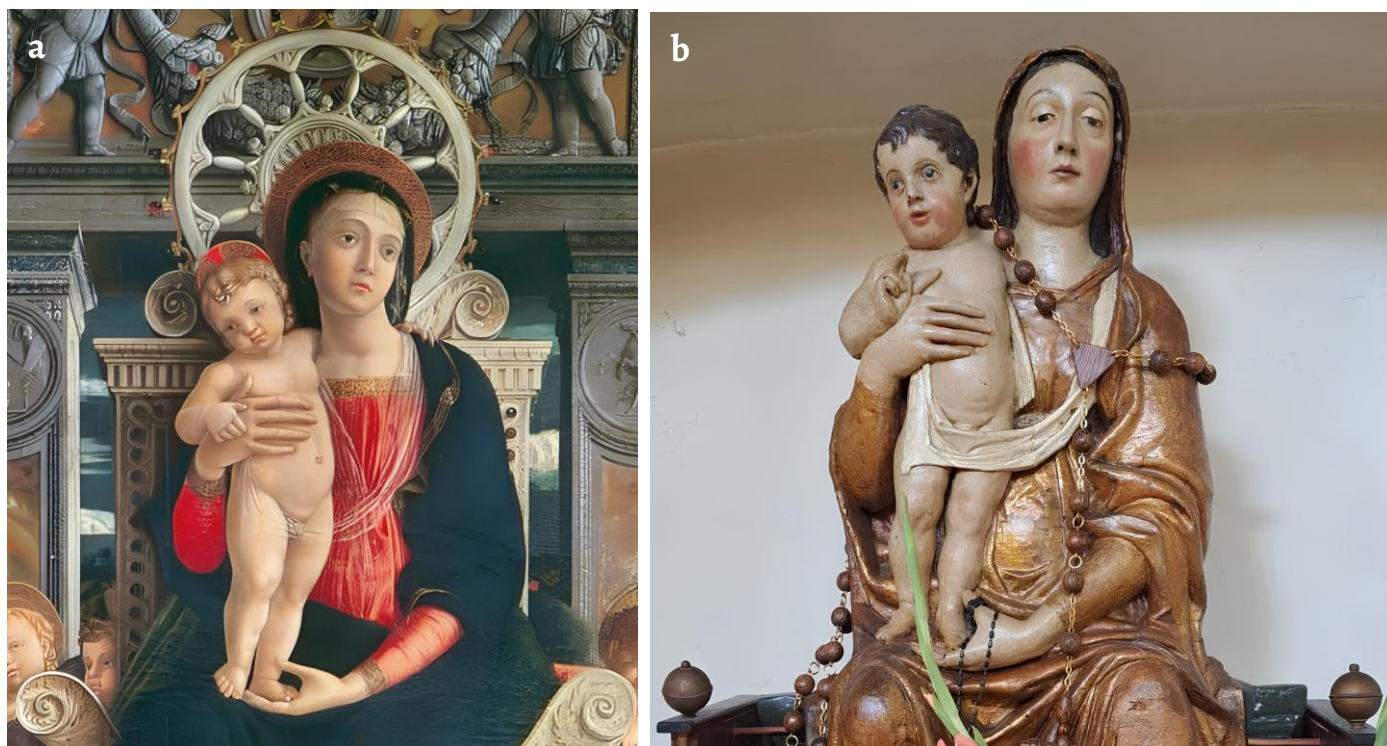


**Figure 5.** Unknown Adriatic carver, St. Isidore, last quarter of the 15th century (Cres, Church of St. Isidore).



The illusion of richer material was highly pertinent to the media of sculpture, as illustrated by the middle-sized Virgin and Child from Viganj (from the church of Our Lady of Rosary), probably dating from the last quarter of the fifteenth century. Scholars have argued that the pose of the Child, erected on the Virgin's lap holding a thin and transparent perizoma, whose end also serves as Mary's *peplum* with which she wipes the tears, is of Mantegnesque inspiration. The similarity to some of the most notable altarpieces painted by Andrea Mantegna, such as the San Zeno altarpiece for the homonymous church in Verona (finished in 1459), is telling in this respect (Figure 6) [18]. Numerous extant artworks attest to the circulation of compositions between the masters of different specialisations, and scholars largely agree that painted compositions were frequently translated into sculpture [19, 20, pp. 63-64]. Still, for the purposes of this paper, it is essential to underscore that in the said case, when the model was converted from two to three dimensions, the naturalistic treatment of drapery was replaced with gilding. In such a setting, the Viganj Madonna lost some of the main qualities of its "Renaissance" model.

The question of "style" is crucial in this regard, considering that by the middle of the sixteenth century, gilded surfaces of Venetian sculpture became much rarer than before. At least part of the reason why this effect of sculptures was changed in their first "renewal" lies in – generally speaking – a change of taste and different expectations of the appearance of sacral art. This can be further corroborated by sculptures not originally gilded, such as the Beautiful Madonna (*Schöne Madonna*) from Cres, produced in some central European workshop in the first decades of the fifteenth century. The circumstances of the sculpture's arrival to Cres are unknown, but it was the focus of an enduring cult until the late nineteenth century. Accordingly, it has been repainted no less than five times [21]. The Virgin's robe, as is characteristic to central European Beautiful Madonnas, was originally white on the outside, with a thin golden border running along the rich cascade folds dotted with lilies, and golden from the inside. The effect was not changed drastically in the first two repainting campaigns but was gradually annulled by the nineteenth century in favour of a decisively cooler pallet (Figure 7) [22].



**Figure 6.** Comparison of the composition of: a) Andrea Mantegna, San Zeno Altarpiece, 1456–1459 at Verona, San Zeno Church (detail of the central panel depicting Virgin and Child); and b) anonymous Venetian carver (?), Virgin and Child, late 15th century, at Viganj, Church of Our Lady of Rosary.





**Figure 7.** The chromatic pallet of the Beautiful Madonna from the Parish Office in Cres, early 15th century (the present state of the sculpture dates from 2008; it included the original white drapery dotted with lilies and post-medieval colouring of the cascade-like folds of the mantle in blue).

## Diverging approaches to polychromy: from wood to bronze

However, the afterlife of late medieval polychrome wooden sculpture in the Adriatic was not straightforward, as may be inferred from the cases analysed thus far. It had a peculiar twist, considering that the surface of several sculptures was altered in a reverse fashion. Some artworks of originally mimetic surfaces were repainted in such a way as to mimic precious materials. In such instances, the desired effect was rarely that of gold but rather bronze or marble: materials that were rarely mimicked at the time of the fabrication of sculptures. Among such instances, the older and venerable crucifixes can be singled out: the sizeable late-fourteenth-century crucifix from the Collegiate Church of Saint Mary in Kotor (Montenegro) and the adjacent figures of the mourners, Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist, which were added in the eighteenth century [23]. Although the sculptures were not initially gilded, they were transformed into objects made of bronze by new polychromy.

In the region under discussion, the practice in question was exclusive to monumental wooden crucifixes. There are also dozens of analogous cases in the Veneto region [24, p. 33]. There, it is presumed that the desire to possess “bronze” crucifixes was fuelled by the revered status of a specific devotional object: Donatello’s bronze crucifix for the Basilica of Sant’Antonio, executed in the 1440s. The crucifix changed several locations within the interior of the Basilica, and the loincloth was remodelled in the seventeenth century [25-26]. The more nuanced understanding of how the material of the fifteenth-century Paduan crucifix was emulated by dozens of crucifixes across Veneto, but also (possibly) in Istria and the Adriatic, mainly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, remains to be studied more thoroughly. Of course, the described change in taste, the shift from polychrome to monochrome, corresponds to the general trend of approach to the sculpture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries [27]. Admittedly, there was a practical side to this custom: new polychromy needed not to pay attention to the slightest detail to the rendering of the skin of Christ, wounds on the skin or the overall passion on the face.

The same was true for late medieval wooden sculptures covered in white to imitate marble or stone. The practice seems exclusive to the sculptures divorced from their original altar setting and employed as architectural sculptures. For example, the figures of the apostles executed in the 1420s for the choir screen of the Zadar Cathedral by Matteo Morozzone and gilded by Giovanni da Milano in 1431, were set atop the pilasters of its central nave of the Cathedral, probably in the eighteenth century [28]. Conservation research on sculptures is currently being conducted at the Croatian Conservation Institute. It has been determined that the sculptures were first repainted with a dark glaze, similar to the crucifixes already discussed, while several were repainted white: the new display of older sculptures required their appearance as statues made of stone and not polychromed figures [29, p. 63]. The same procedure was applied to other fifteenth-century sculptures, such as the sculptures of St. Jerome and St. Simeon, which originally adorned the high altar of the Franciscan church in Zadar. The pieces in question are exhibited in the Collection of the Friary; the statues were returned to their pristine appearance after the restoration campaign in 2006, so their alteration to a marble-like surface can only be captured through archival photographs [30, pp. 240-244].

## Conclusion

The interventions to the surface of sacral art in wood through the centuries can generally be understood as purely practical. Indeed, the renewal of the gilded surfaces was a complex and decidedly more expensive task, which has, in many cases, been the main reason why the gilding was covered. However, even when subsequent layers of paint were rendered in much lower quality than the original, there was persistent motivation to introduce alterations and novelties to the chromatic palettes of sculptures. These alterations effaced the original glittering effect of



saints carved in wood, whose draperies were repainted into a more naturalistic pallet, mostly plain and free of any ornamentation. Yet, new polychromy – which is customarily considered of lower quality and side-lined in art-historical literature – could have been the critical step in prolonging the life of late medieval and Renaissance sculptures. Indeed, while it is often remarked that the changes in the composition of wooden sculptures through time were moderate to minor, the same cannot be argued for their frequently changed skin.

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