Although not widely known, sculpture painted to dazzling and powerful effect was a regular feature on ancient Greek and Roman sculpture. Modern scientific methods confirm and reveal polychromy—the painting of objects in various colors—on the art of most early cultures, even allowing for the identification of pigments. By means of painted sculptural reconstructions, *Gods in Color: Polychromy in the Ancient World* restores the vivid polychromy of the statues of gods, heroes, and even mortals and explores the surprising force of this aspect of art as never before.

A selection of antiquities offers a strong contrast with the colorful reconstructions. Complementing this presentation are superb early nineteenth-century watercolors of Greek monuments and landscapes by English antiquarian Edward Dodwell and Italian artist Simone Pomardi; some of the classical structures they depicted still retained their original color at the time.

**Evidence for Polychromy**

Ancient writers from the time of Homer to late antiquity judged art based on its lifelike appearance. Since color is an essential part of experiencing the world, it was a given that statues of humans and gods were painted. And, in fact, excavated sculpture, before being scrubbed clean, often kept some evidence of polychromy. The unadorned white marble and bronze surfaces that have come down to us are therefore incomplete. Pure sculpture, an inherited notion of the Neoclassical ideal, would have been as strange to the ancients as these color reconstructions might seem to us today.

My life and fortunes are a monstrosity, partly because of Hera, partly because of my beauty. If only I could shed my beauty and assume an uglier aspect the way you would wipe color off a statue.

—Helen of Troy, lamenting in Euripides’s *Helen*, 412 BC
GODS AND HEROES IN COLOR

This sculptural group depicting the struggle between the Greeks and the Trojans reconstructs a portion of the west pediment of the Temple of Aphaia on the Greek island of Aegina (ca. 480 BC). The vivid patterns on the clothing of the Trojan archer (kneeling on the left) were discovered using raking light and ultraviolet photography. However, the pigments have been lost and were re-created based on the brilliant polychromy on contemporary Greek sculptures found on the Athenian Acropolis (see, for example, the reconstruction of a Persian horseman in this gallery). These hues exemplify the early Greek view of the garish clothing worn by the Persians and other eastern “barbarians.” By contrast, the Greek archer (kneeling on the right) wears a much more sedate garment ornamented with simple rectilinear designs.

Photographs of the large statue of Athena taken in ultraviolet light revealed that the goddess’s remarkable goatskin cape, trimmed with a border of snakes, was originally painted with more than a thousand snake scales.

THE PEDIMENTAL SCULPTURES
The Temple of Aphaia was lavishly painted with vivid colors and filled with some of the finest sculptures of the late Archaic and early Classical periods. This scene depicts the Trojan War in the presence of Athena, who stands in the center of the melee. It is tempting to speculate that this group represents a battle described by Homer in the Iliad and that the archers are the Trojan prince Paris and the Greek hero Teucer, the brother of Ajax.

THE TEMPLE OF APHAIA
The Temple of Aphaia, which is seen here in an enlargement of an early nineteenth-century drawing by Edward Dodwell, was dedicated to the local goddess of fertility and agriculture, Aphaia. Dodwell documented the temple in 1805 and wrote: No ruin in Greece is more rich in the picturesque, as every point of view has some peculiar charm. Surely, for this reason, it was a favorite site of Neoclassical and Romantic artists such as J. M. W. Turner.
EDWARD DODWELL AND HIS WATERCOLORS OF GREECE

English antiquarian Edward Dodwell (1777/1778–1832) was steeped in classical training before his taking first trip to Greece in 1801. His familiarity with ancient Greek and Roman texts and his love of Greece’s glorious past prompted his interest in documenting its physical remains and settings. Thus, when Dodwell returned to Greece in 1805 he hired the Italian artist Simone Pomardi (1757–1830) to accompany him. Bringing an artist to record sights was a common practice for European travelers in the days before cameras and postcards. On this trip they toured the country for eighteen months, drawing and recording antiquities and vistas with rigorous detail, producing about a thousand illustrations.

Through their drawings and written accounts, Dodwell and Pomardi brought to life classical monuments, some of which still retained their original color. Dodwell’s own words accompany the drawings on view throughout this exhibition. These impressions are taken from his 1819 publication *A Classical and Topographical Tour through Greece, during the Years 1801, 1805, and 1806*, which is on view in this gallery.

Besides the custom of painting statues, the ancients had various other methods of enriching their appearance; most of which are irreconcilable with our ideas of beauty or congruity. Some were gilded; many of them had eyes composed of coloured stones, gems, or glass.

—Edward Dodwell, 1819

CAMERA OBSCUCA

Dodwell and Pomardi often used a portable camera obscura, an optical device that makes it easier to create accurate images. This precursor to the modern camera is a simple mechanism: light passes through a small hole in one wall of a box, creating an inverted image on the opposite wall that can be traced.

Illustration of a camera obscura is the diagram on page 6, from Dodwell’s *Empire of Greece*, one of his engravings, 1817 edition, pl. 5. Image courtesy Private collection.
The concept of a classical art of pure white marble statues and architecture, which became the paradigm for artists working in the Renaissance and Neoclassical eras, drew upon the discovery of ancient works whose painted colors were faded and lost. It also developed from a reverence for the simplicity and symmetry seen in the arts of ancient Greece and Rome. The Renaissance artist Benvenuto Cellini (1500–1571) was inspired by classical allusions. On view here, his white marble bust of Cosimo de’ Medici shows the Florentine prince in the guise of an ancient Roman emperor. Antonio Canova (1757–1822), whose work is also on display in this gallery, was the primary Italian sculptor of the Neoclassical era. The cool refinement of his work often epitomizes the “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur” that the art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann admired in classical art.

The only way to become great and, if possible, inimitable is by imitation of the ancients—not by straightforward copying of antiquities, of course, but by emulating their essential aesthetic and moral qualities.
—Johann Joachim Winckelmann, 1755

PLASTER CASTS
Reproductions of classical statues cast from the great works of antiquity played a role in perpetuating the concept of the whiteness of Greek and Roman statues. In museums, these copies educated the public and fed its fascination with the classical world. In schools teaching art, architecture, and the history of art, students studied and copied the unpainted plaster casts. These practices influenced the modern idea of classical art, in particular the all-white sculpture and architecture that were hallmarks of Neoclassicism.
JOHANN JOACHIM WINCKELMANN

The German antiquarian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) is considered the first historian of classical Greek and Roman art. From the moment his pioneering publication The History of the Art of Antiquity came out in 1764, it had a far-reaching impact that produced a radical change in the prevailing idea of the ancient world. With his eloquent analysis of classical sculpture, he expressed his love of Greco-Roman beauty while ushering in modern archaeology and establishing art history as a scholarly discipline.

While not neglecting Egyptian and Near Eastern art, Winckelmann’s central concern was the historical evolution and aesthetic and ethical ideals of the ancient Greek tradition. Although primarily remembered for his fervent accounts of white marble male sculpture, which influenced the rise of the Neoclassical movement, he also described polychromy as a feature of Greek art.

This exhibition celebrates the three hundredth anniversary of Winckelmann’s birth on December 9, 1717.

Color contributes to beauty, but it is not beauty itself, though it highlights a beautiful overall appearance as well as its beautiful details.
—Johann Joachim Winckelmann, 1764

WINCKELMANN AND POLYCHROMY

In his study of classical sculpture, Winckelmann is often accused of seeing polychromy as the opponent of pure monochrome art. However, he appreciated that classical Greek sculpture was consistently colored. He described the statue of the goddess Artemis from Pompeii, which had just been excavated when he saw it (a painted reconstruction is in the middle of this gallery), as having blond hair and a white gown with stripes of gold and “lacquer color” decorated with flowers painted to suggest embroidery.

Orest Gericke after Anton van Denig (1731–1800), Johann Joachim Winckelmann, 1766. Oil on canvas, 55 x 43 3/4 in. (140 x 111 cm).
Winckelmann-Museum, Scuol, Switzerland.
THE PAINTERLY SKILL
OF ARCHAIC AND EARLY
CLASSICAL ARTISTS

The Archaic period of Greek art (ca. 600–480 BC) was rich in polychromy. The painterly skill of the ancient artist showed itself on architecture, sculpture, and even the smallest terracotta figurines. Painstaking examination of pigment fragments (with raking, ultraviolet, and infrared light) and scientific analyses (such as ultraviolet-visible absorption spectroscopy) indicate that sculpture during this period was originally colored with bright reds, yellows, greens, blues, browns, and blacks. In the early Classical period, sculpture was further embellished with gilding, silvering, and inlay.

Occasionally, colors used on an ancient sculpture are still visible to the naked eye. For example, when the original grave stele of Aristion (a painted reconstruction of which is in this gallery) was uncovered, it still retained red pigment on the background, yellow on the armor, blue on the patterns decorating the armor, and a brownish tone on the skin of the face. Further examination with ultraviolet and raking light revealed a profusion of decorative details on the armor and other ornamental elements.

WHAT COLORS REVEAL

The “Peplos Kore” (ca. 530 BC), one of a series of elaborately dressed marble statues of maidens (kore) from the Athenian Acropolis, is represented here by two painted casts, each with a different interpretation of the original hues. Although she was previously thought to represent a young woman in a simple woolen robe, a recent examination of the painted surface revealed she is wearing the ornate garment of a deity. The statue has now been reconstructed as Artemis, the Greek goddess of the hunt.

PIGMENTS

Most pigments were of mineral origin, such as red and yellow ocher, cinnabar, hematite, iron oxide, carbon black, and the copper carbonates azurite (blue) and malachite (green). Egyptian blue, the first artificially manufactured pigment, was made of quartz, lime, an alkali (such as soda ash), and a copper compound (such as bronze filings). Invented five thousand years ago in Egypt, it was employed throughout the Mediterranean region for millennia. The use of organic pigments, such as red madder and purple murex shell, has also been detected on ancient sculptures.
Greek and Roman sculpture was originally richly embellished with colorful painting, gilding, silvering, and inlay. The quality of a statue might be judged by its ornamentation. According to Pliny the Elder (AD 23–79), when the renowned fourth-century-BC sculptor Praxiteles was asked which of all his works in marble he valued most, he replied, “Those to which Nicias [a famous Greek painter] has put his hand,’ so highly did he regard the coloring of the artist.”

Sometimes sculptors left features uncarved to be rendered entirely in paint. In examples like these, reconstructing the original color can provide important clues to inscriptions, meaning, and even the original design. Happily, the lively reddish-brown hunting dog to whom Poseides points on his grave stele (on view in this gallery) has retained much of its paint. Thanks to the preserved color, we see that Poseides is directing our attention to his canine friend.

**Alexander Sarcophagus**

Still retaining much of its original polychromy, the Alexander Sarcophagus (a reconstruction is on view here) was the product of a Greek workshop from about 320 BC. Studies have identified twenty-two pigments applied to enliven the carved frieze of Greek-Macedonian and Persian warriors and hunters. When not depicted in idealized nudity, the Greeks wear garments rendered in elegant monochromes, while the bright clothing of the Persians demonstrates the Greek view of the tastes of the eastern world conquered by Alexander the Great.

**The Rendering of Skin Tone**

At least for stone sculpture, the Greeks followed the Egyptian convention of depicting women with lighter and men with darker skin. But gods and heroes, and even exceptional mortals, might be covered with gilded flesh, hair, or clothing. Roman artists used a wide range of pigments and surface applications to embellish their stone sculpture. Traces of color were found on a marble portrait of the Roman emperor Caligula (a reconstruction is on view here). To produce an authentic lifelike replica, paint was applied in multiple layers, and the bridge of the nose, the cheekbones, and the chin were polished to create highlights.
Examples of polychromy on Greek sculpture date back nearly five thousand years to objects found on the Cycladic Islands in the Aegean Sea. Prehistoric artists carved abstract marble figures that represent the human body in its most pristine, compact, and essential form. When first discovered in the early twentieth century, after millennia of burial, these stylized marble statuettes devoid of any color inspired artists such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Henry Moore to create emotionally stirring yet highly abstracted forms. Modern technology has now made visible what was not seen with the naked eye; these artists might have been surprised to know that Cycladic marble sculpture had received colorful decoration.

It’s a magical object . . . All that’s left are small, flat breasts and engraved lines for the arms . . . Better than Brancusi. Nobody has ever made an object stripped that bare.
—Pablo Picasso, 1944

**EGYPT**

I painted the tomb of the count Kheni; I also painted this tomb, I did it alone.
—The artist Seni, tomb of Tjeti-ker, Old Kingdom, Dynasty 6, ca. 2270–2184 BC

The use of color on sculpture throughout the ancient Mediterranean world dates back to time immemorial. In Egypt, where the dry, stable climate was good for preserving polychromy, statues of stone and wood have retained a range of painted colors resembling the pigments still visible on tomb walls. In this gallery you see how Egyptian artists—working primarily with black, red, yellow, brown, blue, and green—created lifelike images with symbolic and protective value for this world and the afterlife.

**NEAR EAST**

I founded therein a palace as my royal residence and for my lordly leisure for eternity. I decorated [it] in a splendid fashion.
—Ashurnasirpal II, r. ca. 883–859 BC

In Mesopotamia, polychromy was also an integral part of art and architecture. The powerful Assyrian kings of the early first millennium BC, for example, covered the walls of their palaces with colorful stone reliefs. So did rulers of the Achaemenid Persian Empire of the fifth and fourth centuries BC in their magnificent buildings. Although the colors on these reliefs are now almost entirely faded, modern scientific investigation is revealing the rainbow of colors that was fully embraced throughout the ancient Near East.