Wax Flesh

Wax is the material of all resemblances. Its figurative virtues are so remarkable that it was often considered a prodigious, magical material, almost alive — and disquieting for that very reason. Even if we leave aside Pharaonic Egypt and its spellbinding texts, Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* already catalogues, in the Roman Period, the entire technical-mythical repertory of medical, cosmetic, industrial, and religious properties of wax. Closer to our time, a Sicilian wax-worker, a modest supplier of exvotos and crèche figurines, expressed some fifteen years ago his wonder at the strange powers of this material, nonetheless so familiar to him: “It is marvelous. You can do anything with it [...] It moves.” (R. Credini, 1991)

Yes, wax “moves.” To say that it is a *plastic* material is above all to say that it gives way almost without any resistance before any technique, before any formative process that one would impose on it. It goes exactly where you ask: it can be cut like butter with the sculptor’s chisel, or warmed up and easily modeled with the fingers; it flows effortlessly into molds whose volume and texture it adopts with astounding precision. Wax also “moves” in the sense that it permits the inscription, the duplication, the temporal as well as spatial displacement of the forms, which impress themselves into it, transforming, effacing and reforming themselves infinitely. Which is why, from Aristotle to Freud, this material has provided the privileged metaphor of the work of memory, and even of sensorial operations in general.

But still more, wax “moves” in the sense that it “upsets.” The *unstable* material par excellence — if stability is understood as the fixed character of qualities — wax presents a disconcerting multiplicity of physical properties. It seems to be a substance unconcerned by the contradiction of material qualities: it is solid, but easily liquefied; impermeable, yet readily soluble in water; it can be opaque or transparent, matte or polished, slippery or sticky, brittle or malleable; its consistency can be easily modified through the addition of a wide range of resins. It is a fragile and temporary material, but is most often used for object destined to endure. It is untouched by the traditional distinction and hierarchy of the plastic arts, for it can be sculpted, modeled and molded.

G. G. Zumbo:
Il Morbo Gallico
(or Sifilide)

Florence, Museo de la Specola
To be sure, this paradox of consistency is a paradox of transitory physical states. It is the name for the fundamental passivity – malleability – and fragility of wax, which would thus be to the notion of the image (conceived as stable) what the butterfly is to the notion of material (conceived as fixed). Not only is the state of each always consequent on some kind of metamorphosis, splendid as it is fragile – but the candle’s wavering flame is equally dangerous for both.

Wax “moves”: it warms up in my hand, it assumes the temperature of my body, and at that moment become capable of involuting before the detail of my fingers, taking my prints, transiting softly, as though biologically, from one form to another. Thus the vegetable material that bees have “digested” in their bodies and in a sense rendered organic, this material nestled against my flesh, becomes like flesh. This is its subtlety, but also its sovereign power: everything in it – plasticity, instability, fragility, sensitivity to heat, and so on – suggests the feeling or fantasy of flesh. Let one not be mislead by this fundamental anthropomorphism: it is simply a matter of seeing wax as a material particularly apt to reproduce the forms of the human body (if only be molding them); it is above all a matter of inquiring into the more subtle, more anthropological, yet also more textural connivance between this material and the simulacra of the flesh.

The response to this question is not to be found only in the history of the specific use of wax – a history I can only offer the barest outlines here – but even more in the phenomenology of its optical and tactile qualities: there probably exists no other substance that can imitate with such polyvalence both the external flesh, the skin, and all the internal flesh, the muscles and viscera which are also our flesh, but which in general are felt, seen and touched as though they were violently heterogeneous to the integuments or the more civilized surfaces of our bodies. As shown, for example, in the celebrated Freudian dream of “Irma’s injection,” the vision of the internal flesh often appears as an insight, the inverse of human form, the formless itself. This is the direction taken by Lacan’s interpretation (which comes very close to Bataille), in Le Séminaire, II: Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la Technique de la psychoanalyse (J. Lacan, 1980). Now it is precisely through such reversibility that the material virtues of wax become marvelous: even in its ever-to-be-expected indecision between form and the formless, wax remains, historically and phenomenologically, the incomparable material of organic resemblances. This, no doubt, is the principle reason for the intense fascination that this material has exerted over the long time-span of its history.

**Believers, Artists, Scientists**

Fascination – the power of empathy – is often accompanied in the order of discourse by something like malaise. Now, all malaise calls up resistance, avoidance, even censorship. We can observe, for example, that the attention brought to the history of wax sculpture has had the effect of destabilizing the conventional categories of art history, revealing something like a methodological gap at the very heart of the discipline.

In a well-known article entitled “Artist, Scientist, Genius,” Erwin Panofsky quite rightly insisted on the epistemological “decompartmentalization” initiated by the Renaissance: it was at this point, he says, that “those particular branches of natural science which can be called sciences of observation or description (zoology, botany, paleontology, physics, anatomy, above all) began the rapid development directly linked to the development of the techniques of representation.” It was also at this point that theory rejoined practice in “the suppression of the barriers that had
separated the 'liberal arts' from the 'mechanical arts' in the Middle Ages – separating theoretical knowledge, considered as the work of pure intellect, from the plastic activities in which the figurative arts were involved." (E. Panofsky, 1952)

However, the “history of art as a humanistic discipline,” from Vasari to the adepts of Panofsky’s iconology, has reinstated other compartments – whose elaboration was in fact begun by the 16th century academies. Among them are the aesthetic and social distinction between artist and artisan. Now, wax seems to partake more of artisanal technique than of artistic disegno: it does not belong among the “noble” materials of sculpture, it only enters humanist aesthetics at the bottom rungs of the ladder, linked as it can be – like plaster, for instance – to the “intermediary” or “humble” procedures of artistic creation. Thus on the subject of the
simultaneous rise of anatomical science and the “techniques of representation,” one finds infinite glosses on the anatomist Leonardo Da Vinci’ while the wax oeuvre of Gaetano Giulio Zumbo – masterful in artistry and invention, in addition to its achievements in anatomy and description – is with rare exceptions still confined to the carefully quarantined domain of curiosities or to the history of the sciences, and presented within the strict context of anatomical exhibition (in Florence, Leonardo is in the Uffizi, while Zumbo is in the Specola, on the other side of the Arno).

The caesura – this censorship – is, I repeat, simply the other side of the malaise and the non-aesthetic feeling procured by the excessive resemblance of objects in wax. As Ernst Gombrich said outright: “[before] the proverbial resemblance of wax images […] we feel a certain unease, due to the fact that it is situated outside the limits of symbolization” (E. H. Gombrich, 1995, p.53). In short, wax would always seem to go too far: the resemblance it produces is so radical, so unmediated, that the “real” of the image obfuscates everything else, pushing the “symbol” (the value of signification, the iconic content) into the background. Horst Janson went even further, excluding from any veritable history the crass, trivial productions – always out of line, mauvais genre – of a material, which, in his eyes, was so given to crude realism that it became inapt for style, and thus, for art itself. (H. W. Janson, 1988) Curiously, then, the history of art will have aesthetically recompartmentalized that which it had recognized as epistemologically decompartmentalized. One could say, in a word, that Panofsky’s iconology surreptitiously closed down everything that Warburg’s iconology had attempted to open up a generation before, by means of its “methodological enlargement of the frontiers” of the discipline. (A Warburg, 1990, p. 215). Today, the disturbing, unaesthetic reproduction of wax objects is primarily studied by anthropologists or historians of culture. But it is hardly surprising that Warburg – the inventor of an art history conceived as a veritable Kulturgeschichte, that is, implying a veritable anthropology of images – should have been a pioneer in restoring wax to its fundamental role in the visual culture of the Renaissance, by establishing the close relation between the high art of the Florentine portrait in the Quattrocentro and the votive production of wax effigies for the Santissima Annunzata (A. Warburg, 1902).

Julius von Schlosser was – from the viewpoint which interests us here, that of the material – the first to draw the consequences from this lesson in method. The author of a 1911 monograph entitled The History of the Wax Portrait, he dared to take the full anthropological measure of the phenomenon, approaching the diversity of its functions (funerary, votive, artistic, and scientific, without forgetting its use in freak-shows) as an astonishing survival of forms across the long-time span of Western history, from the Roman funerary masks to the advent of photography (J. von Schlosser, 1993). The approach was courageous, not only for the type of erudition it entailed, but even more so because it forced the art historian to question his “classical” concept of art and his habitual practice of history.

It seems possible to approach the “surviving” or transhistorical character of these images (one can consider, for example, the effigy of Marat in the Musée Grévin as a survival of the one which, in the first century before Christ, portrayed Caesar with his twenty-three wounds) by reflecting on the originary nature of the figurative practices linked to wax. After all, the Roman meaning of the word imago implies the impression of a face and the confection of a positive in wax, which, as Pliny explains in his Natural History, XXXV, was then colored and attained a state of “extreme resemblance.” The “origin,” of course, is not taken here as a supposedly initial source
in this complex history, nor does it designate a state of quintessence or simplicity. It merely speaks of the repetitive and anachronistic character of images in wax, whose “evolutionary law” escapes any clearly oriented pattern of explanation. […] Wax is also, as we know, the privileged material of seals, where it legitimates the existence of a symbolic power: royal authority, a juridical contract, the authentication of a relic, and so on. Unlike a simple mimetic or metaphorical representation, the wax imprint, we may say, incarnates the symbolic power. Operating not by optical imitation but by direct duplication, by contact with the ductile material, it produces images, which are corporeally – and not ideally invented – by the matrix or the negative of the seal. The analogy with the flesh (womb) is so strong that numerous medieval authors, among them Francis of Assisi, used the biblical image of the wax seal to evoke the stigmatizing mark of divine power in the hearts of the faithful. Such as the famous expressions of Psalms, 67:5 (sicut cera fluxerunt … a facie Domini) or 12:5 (at factum est cor meum tamquam cera liquescens), which St. Francis takes up in his hymn books.

This “incarnate power” of wax does not only form a metaphor in the discourse of the great mythical authors. It is everyday “flesh” for the believer – liturgical flesh. It is handled and kissed during mass, as the Agnus Dei; it burns and is infinitely exchanged in the form of candles (from humble votive candles to the massive plague candles fashioned along the ramparts of the city, in order to obtain divine protection); it is modelled and exhibited in the form of all kinds of holy dolls or crèche figurines. In the form of the funerary effigy, it shares in the transmission of power and in the ideology of the “king’s two bodies.” It is textural analogy with flesh (density, grain, color, brilliance. . .) is so great that it ends up serving as an organic relic, like the pink wax tongue exhibited alongside an Agnus Dei in a reliquary in the Schnütgen Museum in Cologne.

Omnipresent in these inexhaustible liturgical stagings, wax thus becomes an artefact of the flesh, an artefact whose symbolic power is precisely that of making people believe in the resurrection of the flesh. This is why the ex-voto in wax predominates throughout all of Mediterranean civilization: it offers a veritable encyclopedia of organic resemblances, external or internal, an encyclopedia where the description of the organs is woven of all possible fantasies, as in the “popular anatomy” described by Freud with respect to the hysterical body. This is also why, in so many churches, the wax faces of saints stand for the waxes faces of the real cadavers, seen as miraculously uncorrupted. Finally, this is the reason why the bourgeois Florentines of the Renaissance, still steeped in a profound Christian religiosity – but already readers of Pliny, who described the wax imago as a distinctive sign of civic dignitas – gave themselves over to the extreme, hyperrealist game of wax ex-votos molded directly on their face and hands.

This votive practice would be no more than a “curiosity” of local history – as it has generally been considered, in fact – if it had not had certain decisive consequences on all the visual and artistic culture of the Renaissance, as Warburg, the first, intuitively grasped. This is indeed “decompartmentalization” at work, a decompartmentalization due largely to the plastic and technical potential of wax itself: for the Florentine fallimgini – that is, votive “image makers,” active since the 14th century, perhaps since the end of the 13th – would ultimately pass on their technical mastery of realism by contact (casting, pouring of wax, coloration of the material) to the great artists of the Quattrocentro.
In short, the material of wax, this “believers’ flesh,” was slowly to become something like “artists’ flesh.” It is fascinating to see how the latter were able to expand the technical stereotypes of religious craft to the level of a veritable heuristics, that is, an experimentation open to all its stylistic consequences. Donatello, for example, offered a striking counterpoint to the classical faces of his Judith by creating the veil covering her head with a procedure that only the plasticity of the material made possible: he dipped a real cloth in hot wax and tossed it onto a cardboard or wooden mannequin, so that it would form the most natural, least “stylized” folds; he then had the hardened object directly cast in bronze.

We know that most of the innumerable bronze objects of the Renaissance first existed as modelli in wax – the “lost wax” that gives its name to the most common technique of casting. It was only from the 16th century onwards, with the development of the aesthetic taste for the sketch, that the sculptors’ modelli and bozetti would be saved from destruction by the use of more complex technical procedure. Thus we can
still admire the extraordinary wax models attributed to Michelangelo and his workshop, preserved at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in particular.

It is striking to see in three dimensions what the anatomical studies of Leonardo Da Vinci offered in two. Namely, “a composition of the surfaces” of the human body, to use Alberti’s phrase – a body now conceived the basis of the écorché. As Goethe would later say: “What is the outside of an organic nature, if not the eternally changing appearance of the inside?”

Thus we are led back to the terrain of the human anatomy, as though the figurative uses of the wax described an *anthropological circle* where everything, in one way or the other, must ultimately have to do with the theater of the human body. Did the “believers’ flesh” of the votive waxes not manifest, above all, the organic unease of the donors?

Did the “artists’ flesh” of the *modelli* not manifest, above all, their visual curiosity for the relation between the surfaces and the depths of the human body? And it is from these two precedents that the “scientists’ flesh” of the 18th-century anatomical waxes can be historically and technically inferred: beyond the fact that the Florentine artists traditionally belonged to the guild of doctors and apothecaries (Arte
dei medici e speziali), beyond the fact that the first anatomical écorché in wax was fashioned by the artist Cigoli (whose écorché dating from 1600 is today preserved at the museo nationale del Bargello in Florence), the capital point here lies in the tradition of technical know-how linked to a privileged material (wax) and a privileged figurative challenge (the flesh).

Thus it is no accident that the first great school of medical ceroplastics was born in Florence, at the very heart of humanism and of the “decompartimentalization” of the different branches of knowledge in the Renaissance. The great modelers of the Specola — Susini, Calami, Calenzuoli, Tortori — inherited, perhaps without their full awareness, knowledge and know-how from the long distant past times and cultural regions far removed from any “scientific” attitude. For in the exact anatomical description of a leg by Clemente Susini there survives the religious framing of a votive leg as well as the artistic concerns of a leg modelled in the studio of Michelangelo.

Vicious Circles

It is astonishing to observe that this “anthropological circle” was rounded in its entirety by a single man — the same man who gave wax sculpture its most extreme and disquieting masterpiece. I am speaking of Gaetano Giulio Zumbo. His whole life seems to have been a long voyage from his native Sicily to the north, and from “believers’ flesh” (the world of religious figurines) to “scientists’ flesh” (the hospital morgues where, From Bologna to Genoa to Paris, he carried out extraordinary anatomical models). Between the two, Zumbo discovered the Roman baroque; and then in Florence, for the Medici court, he fashioned four celebrated allegorical groups where the study of different states of the decomposition of the flesh is pushed so far that it is alternately fascinating and revolting.

Exact putrescence and baroque mortality: Zumbo produces artefacts of a raw, non-transposed anatomy, endlessly observed on real cadavers — and yet also subtly staged works of art, diverted and endlessly reinvented from the models provided by Bernini, or indeed Poussin. The conjunction of these two effects gives rise to a supplement of malaise, the very malaise which no doubt kept the four allegorical groups out of the Uffizi. Beyond realism, and even beyond style: Zumbo’s oeuvre has always been considered from the angle of perversion, indeed of perversion. Here the “anthropological circle” is so radically shut upon itself that it becomes like a “vicious circle.” This work casts us into the element of resemblance, as though into a region of infernal disquiet. It is the unease of organic resemblances, where nothing — above all not the “idealization” of an academic style — can preserve us from the formless.

The first author of stature to have recognized the overwhelming grip of this “vicious circle” was none other than the Marquis de Sade. His account of the sexual abominations and murders of Juliette and her companions in the city of Florence in Histoire de Juliette is studded with texts from the Voyage in Italy he had written some twenty-three years earlier: Sade’s description of Zumbo’s works — their “fearful truth,” he writes — is deployed in a context that mingles desire, cruelty, and death. Thus the Sicilian master of the wax anatomical sculpture is at the origin of two cultures which are generally considered contradictory: on the one hand, black romanticism and its popular destiny, incarnated by the wax museums of the Curtius, Madame Tussaud, or Grévin; and on the other hand, positivism and its popular destiny, incarnated by the 19th-century anatomical museum — part science exhibits and part freak show, which exhibited the consequences of vice in the form of terrifying pathological models.

One certainly ought not to see this “popular destiny” of wax sculpture — even in its farcical aspect, even in its predilection for the twin themes of sexual vice and
bloody crime 0 as a simple vulgarization of a malaise already present in certain votive or funerary effigies. When Julius von Schlosser evokes the déclassement of wax sculpture in the 19th-century, he does not forget to convoke Warburg’s notion of survival, and he does not forget to, consequently, to revoke “all teleological pretensions and judgments of value” (J. von Schlosser, 1910/11, p.120). Georges Bataille, for his part, made such déclassement a characteristic operation of the formless. How can one not see – Schlosser made it the entire conclusion of his book – that the very existence of the wax objects displaces any classical reference to the notion of beauty?

Here indeed is a displacement that contemporary aesthetics has taken up and radicalized: there is no longer any need to conceive, with Vasari, of any kind of “biological” progress in the arts; to that, Nietzsche opposed the eternal return – a vicious circle – and the mingling of the Dionysian in the Apollonian. There is no longer any reason to aspire to ideals hewn in marble; to that, Freud opposed the tragic play of desire and mourning, the vicious circle of Unheimlichkeit. Once again, wax would be a material for all this uneasy flesh, for all these vicious circles. A trap-material to catch our fantasies. A flight-material where resemblance is plastically exchanged for dissemblance, appearance (indeed, Medardo Rosso probably used wax for exactly that). A material where the compact mass of flesh is exchanged for the “indistinct breath of the image.”