Materiality is the Message

Alabaster Sculpture in Europe, 1300–1650 (exh. cat. Leuven, M Leuven), ed. by Marjan Debaene and Sophie Jugie

Magic Rock Crystal (exh. cat. Cologne, Museum Schnütgen), ed. by Manuela Beer

Reviewed by Bram de Klerck

As a sculptor, Michelangelo Buonarroti worked in marble, and sometimes in wood and clay. He is also known to have cast in bronze (now lost) figures of Pope Julius II and the biblical hero David and, on a Florentine winter’s day in 1494, to have produced a statue made of snow.1 But never, as far as we know, did he work in alabaster. It is rather striking, then, that Albrecht Dürer, during his visit to Bruges in April 1521, noted the “alawaser” (or “alabaser”) statue of the Virgin Mary in the Church of Our Lady in that city, made by Michelangelo.2 At the time, the white marble Madonna and Child, imported from Italy by the Flemish merchants Jan and Alexander Mouscron in 1506, had been standing in the church for at least seven years. As Dürer’s characterization must evidently be understood as “alabaster,” it appears – at least to the modern mind – to be a strange mistake for the German painter and printmaker to confuse Michelangelo’s marble with that material. However, as Alabaster Sculpture in Europe, 1300–1650 clarifies, in sources of the time it was quite common to speak of alabaster when referring to marble, and vice versa. It even seems that the two terms were sometimes used as synonyms. Telling, for instance, is the French term marbre d’alabastre (31).

Conversely, in the case of a second material widely used in artefacts from ancient times on, rock crystal, an unsuspecting modern observer may at first sight be confused by the confrontation with this beautifully water-clear, colorless substance, and mistake it for glass. This confusion, however, would hardly have occurred until the seventeenth century at the very earliest, when a glass of a quality was produced that, in brightness and translucency, was approximate to rock crystal. It is this natural crystalline mineral that is the subject of Magic Rock Crystal. These two books on the artistic use of alabaster and rock crystal during the European Middle Ages and Early Modern period accompanied major exhibitions that were presented by Museum M Leuven (14 October 2022 to 26 February 2023) and the Museum Schnütgen in Cologne (25 November 2022 to 19 March 2023), respectively. They contribute to the interest in materiality, and in the application of scientific technical research of it, that have become of paramount importance in art historical studies in the past few decades.3 The two publications – both voluminous tomes, wonderfully produced and lavishly illustrated – are the subject of the present review.

Magic Rock Crystal, edited by Manuela Beer, Deputy Director of the Museum Schnütgen, is devoted to artistic objects that are made entirely of rock crystal, or incorporate parts in that material. The stunning exhibition in Cologne brought
together about 130 artefacts among which were vessels and reliquaries, small sculptures and reliefs, dating from the first century CE through the sixteenth, as well as manuscripts describing and paintings depicting them. There was a certain focus on works from collections in Germany, with nearly forty objects from Cologne alone. Twenty sections addressed themes like the origin, trade, and working of rock crystal; the production of artefacts using the material in Europe, sometimes incorporating older pieces from the Byzantine or Islamic world; and the symbolic meaning attached to the material in both religious and secular contexts. Appropriately, the exhibition closed with a large crystal ball, measuring 17 cm in diameter and weighing 7.5 kilos, that was made in Milan before 1580 and epitomizes the supernatural, magically foretelling powers of the material (397–399).

More than two hundred artefacts discussed in the publication – including, but not limited to, those on display in the exhibition – are listed in an appendix with factual information and bibliographic references. A few notable works are singled out in short essays, like the Northern Italian panel reliquary in the form of a game board, a work of ca. 1300 now in the Stiftsmuseum Aschaffenburg (343–345); the Venetian cross with miniatures, ca. 1335 and more than 85 cm high, in the Erfurt Cathedral Treasury (149–151); and the magnificent ewer in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, probably manufactured in Paris in the first half of the fourteenth-century, which stands more than 26 cm high and has, handle and all, astonishingly been cut out of one single piece of crystal (347–349).

The greater part of the publication consists of about thirty concise essays written by as many authors. Together they provide an overview of virtually every aspect of the history, production, use, and reception of rock crystal in medieval and Renaissance Europe. The chapters – too numerous to discuss all – build on extensive art historical research, which, as far as a large part of the German and also a portion of the Netherlandish share of the material is concerned, goes back to the catalogues of important earlier exhibitions organized by the Museum Schnütgen of medieval art in the Rhineland and in Cologne, notably Rhein und Maas of 1972, and Ornamenta Ecclesiae of 1985. Since then, many other publications have treated rock crystal in various other parts of Europe and the world.

The mineral quartz called rock crystal – “Bergkristall” in German, “cristal de roche” or simply “quartz” in French, “quarzo ialino” in Italian – is found in large quantities in the Alpine region, but the material used in Europe in antiquity and the Middle Ages also seems to have come from places in the East, like Madagascar, and the Abbasid Caliphate. The material was worked in Bagdad and Cairo, and later also in European centers like Venice, Paris, Freiburg, and Cologne. A chapter by archaeologist Jens Berthold draws attention to the discovery, in 2005, of the remains of a twelfth-century rock crystal workshop in the center of the latter city, whence until then only indirect evidence of the working of the material was available (83–98).

Many chapters contain useful overviews of particular areas, periods, or art forms of interest and importance to rock crystal, like the production and use of it during the Early Middle Ages (233–250), artefacts originating from the bishopric of Cologne during the Romanesque (103–118) and Gothic (119–132) eras, or the use of the crystal in elegant, courtly tableware (351–363). The contribution by Svenja Trübenbach (Museum Schnütgen) draws attention to the interest in the optical possibilities of a material like rock crystal in the context of paintings associated with the “optical revolution” in the fifteenth-century Southern Netherlands (307–320). One intriguing example that apparently has never before been discussed in this sense is the panel of the Feast of Herod by Juan de Flandes, painted ca. 1496–1499 (Antwerp, Museum Mayer van den Bergh). In this painting the legs of the table on
which Salome is about to place the dish with the severed head of John the Baptist are made of crystal, perhaps to enhance the association of the white covered table with a Christian altar (311–312). The symbolism, the miraculous and magical power of rock crystal, once understood in terms of solidified water or eternal ice, are discussed in various chapters of the book. The beauty and clarity of the substance as well as its suggestion of immateriality have always been associated with sanctity and the divine. Amulets made of rock crystal must have been worn by, and were sometimes buried along with, Merovingian women of child-bearing age, as the mineral was believed to offer protection during pregnancy and birth (237–238). Specialists in optic effects and instruments Bernd Lingelbach and Olaf Schmidt-Kiy address the more practical use of rock crystal in their reconstruction of the way in which the eleventh-century Vikings of the Swedish island Gotland used it for a specific kind of magnifying glass. These lenses had an a-spherical, elliptic curvature on both sides and, when carefully made, gave an image without the distortion of a “normal” magnifier. Defective products, it seems, could always be employed as pieces of jewelry (367–373).

As is almost inevitable in a multi-authored volume like this, the chapters contain a number of redundancies, as the etymology of “rock crystal,” its characterization by Pliny the Elder in book 37 of the Naturalis historia, the contrast between the material’s relatively low cost and the high esteem in which it was held, or its medicinal and/or miraculous qualities are all discussed more than once. Also permeating the publication, but in this case in a positive and constructive way because of the various viewpoints from which it is discussed, is what perhaps is the most fascinating aspect of rock crystal: the paradox of the material’s transparency. Of particular interest is the view from a magical and curative stance which sometimes discarded crystal precisely because of this otherwise highly appreciated quality, for the power of a stone or gem was believed to lie in its color (384). On the other hand, pieces of rock crystal on reliquaries are often used to specifically cover the relic parts. Sometimes these are understood and described simply as an eyelet or a magnifier, in which the small venerated objects not only appear bigger but also seem to float. But, as Cynthia Hahn explains in her contribution on “Crystalline Visions,” rock crystal can to a certain extent also hamper the view by blinding the eye (39–41). Also Anne Kurtze in her essay on “Transparency and Permeability” stresses the contrast between the visibility suggested by rock crystal on the one hand, and the simple fact that few laymen would even get close enough to catch a glimpse of a relic on the other. More important than the actual visibility seem to have been associations with Heaven and Christ, for a piece of crystal may close off a relic, but let through a supernatural light. And it is only by the reflection of light that the modeling of the translucent stone becomes visible (273–283).

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The second publication treating a specific material in an art historical context, Alabaster Sculpture in Europe, 1300–1650, was edited by Marjan Debaene, the Head of Collections of M Leuven. Together with Sophie Jugie, Director of the Louvre’s Sculpture Department, she also curated the remarkable exhibition in Leuven. The show brought together alabaster statues and reliefs originating for the greater part from the Southern Netherlands, France, Germany, and England, and, although there were a few earlier and later works, dating mostly from the heyday of alabaster sculpture, i.e., the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries.

Most of the works exhibited were from collections in Belgium and France. These included large sculptures like the Louvre’s relief, more than two meters wide, of the Death of the Virgin of ca. 1530–1540, which is provided with wonderful
schiacciato work in the background attributed to the Italian sculptor Giovanni di Giusto di Betti (known in France as Jean Juste), commissioned for the now destroyed church of Saint-Jacques-de-la-Boucherie in Paris (202–203, cat. no. 69); the impressive tomb commemorating Philippe Chabot, Count of Brion (1543–1570) made for the church of the Celestines in Paris and now in the Louvre (106–107, cat. no. 35); and the fourteen reliefs taken from the Saint-Anne Altarpiece sculpted in 1610 by Robert Colyns de Nole II for the Leuven convent of Heverlee, now in Museum M (244–245, cat. no. 97). While the huge, immovable altarpieces in England and Spain necessarily were absent from the exhibition, many smaller statues, reliefs, and fragments were on display, from a possibly twelfth-century mortar with the town seal of Nivelles in M Leuven (288, cat. no. 126) to the Louvre’s eighteenth-century polychrome Madonna and Child from Trapani on Sicily (267, cat. no. 111). There were also a few instructive arrangements inviting comparison between alabaster and marble, e.g., the marble Madonna and Child by Conrad Meit from Brussels Cathedral (ca. 1525–1530), placed alongside his somewhat later alabaster rendering of the same theme in the Musée municipal of Saint-Armand-les-Eaux (44–46, cat. nos. 5–6). Samples of the varieties of rock used for sculpture were also available for visitors to scrutinize and actually feel the differences.

The publication is conceived as an exhibition catalogue with separate entries, compiled by a total of eighteen specialists, for each of the approximately 130 objects on view. However, like Magic Rock Crystal, this book also aims to present introductions to and a synthesis of the various aspects of the material under consideration. Thirteen chapters by fourteen authors – again, too many to discuss all of them – are divided into four sections. The first treats the material aspects of (gypsum) alabaster: fine, soft, and often shiny white; easy to carve, polish, and polychrome. The second part is about its use in a funerary context, employed in grave monuments or parts of them. This section also devotes ample attention to patronage and social networks. The third part concentrates on (parts of) altarpieces, mainly in the Netherlands, France, and Germany, but also in England and Spain. It also discusses aspects of the trade and export of alabaster church decorations throughout Europe. The last part comprises the rather nondescript category “Sacred and Secular” in which small devotional sculptures, like several depictions of the severed head of Saint John the Baptist, find themselves alongside the magnificently detailed, life-sized portrait bust of King Philip II in the Prado, ca. 1560–1570, which is traditionally attributed to Pompeo Leoni (176–177, cat. no. 117).

In many respects the individual contributions link up with recent publications, most notably with those by Kim Woods, and in particular with her 2018 overview Cut in Alabaster, which treats European alabaster sculpture within a slightly narrower time frame of ca. 1330–1530.7 A new strain of research, however, is focused on the material’s chemical characteristics. The Belgian Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage (KIK-IRPA) presents a non-invasive method of distinguishing alabaster from marble by means of x-ray fluorescence analysis (31–37). A second method of scientific research regards the provenance of the material. As geochemist Wolfram Kloppmann (BRGM Orléans) clarifies, until recently it was believed that the homogeneity of alabaster prevented the distinction of variants. It was only in 2014 that a reliable method of isotope research was developed, making it possible to read the chemical “fingerprint” of a particular sample of alabaster, and thus to establish the date and place of its origin (24–29). For this method of research it is necessary to cut off a tiny piece of the material, which is probably one explanation for its hitherto limited application.

There is also a second limitation to this chemical fingerprinting, as isotope research can give an idea of a sample’s origin, but not of the place
of its processing. For instance, the “Master of Rimini” of around 1430, named after the altarpiece once in Rimini and now in the Frankfurt Liebieghaus, is generally believed to have been active in Northern France or the Southern Netherlands. Although isotope research reveals that his alabaster came from Franconia, there is no reason to assume that the master would have been German. Stefan Roller, Head of Medieval Sculpture at the Liebieghaus, remarks that there is no evidence of the existence of any alabaster workshop in the Franconia region at that time anyway, not even in a major artistic center like Nuremberg. According to the author, the probable shipment of the German alabaster would rather strengthen the hypothesis of the harbor city Bruges as the master’s hometown (129).

Roller also proposes that the altarpiece may have been made for San Francesco in Rimini, before the church was converted in an early Renaissance fashion into the “Tempio Malatestiana” (131).

The use of alabaster yields various interpretations. Its whiteness and the ideals of beauty and purity that are easily associated with it are described by Aleksandra Lipińska (Cologne University) in terms of femininity and moral purity, also employing concepts like misogyny and racism (13–21). Of a more historical nature are the observations made by Jessica Barker (Courtauld Institute) about alabaster as an appropriate material for funerary monuments – because of its associations with the human flesh and body, by means of the connotations with its color and fragility, and the material’s distinctive warmth to the touch. Especially in transi figures that represent human bodies in a state of decay there seems to be a “blur of the boundary between representation and reality” (81) that was demonstrated most vividly in the exhibition by the monument of Jean V de Hénin-Liétard, Count of Brossu, a work that Jacques Dubroeucq executed between 1551 and 1562 (108, cat. no. 37).

Given the apparent confusion between alabaster and marble, repeatedly discussed in this publication, it is interesting to note that the material seems to have such specific symbolical associations. For if it was often so difficult to see the difference, one wonders about the role of the tactile sense in the original exchange between the artwork and its public.

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Both the books on rock crystal and alabaster as materials during the Middle Ages and Early Modern periods in Europe inventory and classify artefacts passed down through the ages. Although quite a few of the discussions and interpretations presented in the two volumes have already – at least partly and often by the same authors – been published in other recent books, volumes, and articles, they nevertheless admirably summarize their production, trade, and patronage, and their use and function. New insights pertain to the symbolism and reception of rock crystal in particular, and the (as yet partly unexplored) possibilities of chemical determination of the origin of alabaster samples.

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Although most of the artist’s sculptures are in marble, a crucifixion (Florence, Santo Spirito) is in wood; and a River God (Florence, Casa Buonarroti) is in clay. The bronze statues and the snowman are mentioned in Giorgio Vasari’s Vie, see Frank Zöllner, Christof Thoenes, and Thomas Pöpper, Michelangelo, 1475–1564: Complete Works, Hong Kong etc. 2007, 22 (snowman), 49 (bronze David), 66 (bronze Julius), 404, cat. no. S3 (Crucifixion), 432, cat. no. Sy7 (River God). For the snowman, see also April Oettinger, Michelangelo’s Snowman and the Art of Snow in Vasari’s Lives, in: Anne B. Barriault et al. (eds.), Reading Vasari, London 2005, 203–209.


