

Saint Elías, Links in a Sculptural Chain of Two Artists

Ir a la versión en español

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ABSTRACT

In this SHOWCASE, considerations are made regarding the production of the novohispanic imagery, implying the combination of the carving and the polychrome, which uses as an axis the sculpture of *San Elías*, from the temple of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción (Our Lady of the Assumption), Tlapanaloya, State of Mexico. First of a group of five images restored in the Seminario-Taller de Restauración de Escultura Policromada (STREP, Seminar-Workshop of Polychrome Sculpture Restoration) from the Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museología (ENCRYM) of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH), which led to the identification of a carver and a painter from Spain: Pedro de Requena y Franciso de Gamboa o De Ibaía, better known as *De Zumaya*. The collection was addressed, in the terms proposed by Paul Philippot, as a unit.

KEYWORDS

sculpture, craver, painter, artists, unity

San Elías is a sculpture of 156.3 x 54 x 48 cm, representing the prophet; his clothing: a robe, belt, and brown scapular, as well as a white pellegrina are the signature characteris-

Intervención

JULIO-DICIEMBRE 2023
JULY-DECEMBER 2023

tics of the Carmelites (Figure 1), as indicated in the *Speculum Carmelitanum* (1680) (Limón, 2021, p. 12). He holds in his hands the attributes identifying a saint as a prophet: the book of prophecies on the right hand and a bass pen, wielded as a flaming sword, on the left one; regarding the body position, he is in a *contrapposto* position, standing on top of an orb while being held by a pedestal (Cañiza, 2018, pp. 9-14).

FIGURE 1. *San Elías* sculpture
(Photograph:
Guillermo
Vazquezpico, 2019;
courtesy: STREPE-
ENCRYM-INAH and
Temple of Nuestra
Señora de la
Asunción, México).



Intervención

JULIO-DICIEMBRE 2023
 JULY-DECEMBER 2023

It is difficult to analyze an image such as this one due to the absence of a reference framework for the study of the novohispanic sculpture and the denial of its existence by those investigating the neoclassical artists and, after them, the Academy, which defended the point of view of it not being a piece of art; for them, these types of pieces were simple lumps or images fulfilling a purely iconographic and worship function. Add to this the problems resulting from the unknown authorship of the pieces (Manrique, 1995, pp. 101-111). These are only a few of the difficulties that Jorge Alberto Manrique described in his text *Problemas y enfoques en el estudio de la escultura novohispana*.

This was part of the scenery presented when the piece representing *San Elías*, belonging to the temple of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción (Our Lady of the Assumption) (ca. 1815),¹ Tlapanaloya, State of Mexico, was restored in the Seminario-Taller de Restauración de Escultura Policromada (STREP, Seminar-Workshop of Polychrome Sculpture Restoration) from the Escuela Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museología (ENCRYM) of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH). However, the situation also presented an opportunity to identify specific properties for the study of the novohispanic sculpture at the end of the 16th century and the start of the 17th century, based on the analysis of the formal and decorative characteristics shared by a group of the sculpted pieces renowned by art history.

Based on the analysis of the carving on *San Elías*, as well as in the iconography of the polychromy, Pablo F. Amador Marrero accredits the authorship to the Spanish sculptor Pedro de Requena, master carver of the altarpiece from the Convento de San Miguel Arcángel in Huejotzingo, Puebla, and to Francisco de Zumaya, painter (Amador, 2021, 00:02:27). Amador found links that associate the carving of the sculpture to the Spanish Pedro de Requena: in the comparative analysis with several sculptures that helped identify the authorship of both, like in *Inmaculada Concepción (Immaculate Conception)* (Figure 2), of the namesake temple in Mexico, he recognizes similarities in the shape of the carving of the face, lips, nose, and chin, as well as the eyes' socket, which is the signature of the carver (Amador, 2021, 00:27:32).

¹ "Nuestra Señora de la Asunción (Our Lady of the Assumption), built in 1815. Although there is not enough information about the origin of the sculpture, knowing both temporalities—of the piece and the place where it is kept—allows us to infer that the sculpture came from another place. On the other hand, the pieces that make up the collection of this building come from others, such as old temples, states, and donations that were not registered" (Personal communication with Presbyter Baltazar Vilchis Hernández, Parish Administrator of Tlapanaloya, on March 3, 2018, in Cañiza, Murguía, Unikel, & Amaro, 2018, p. 19). Editorial translation from the Spanish version.

Intervención

JULIO-DICIEMBRE 2023
 JULY-DECEMBER 2023



FIGURE 2. Comparison of the faces of *Inmaculada Concepción* and *San Elías* (Photograph: Pablo F. Amador and Mercedes Murguía, 2020; courtesy: STREP-ENRCYM-INAH) and Temple of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Mexico).

Other signs that Amador explains are the details of the robe decorations, which also help associate Requena with the sculptures of *San Elías* and of *Santa Teresa*, the latter located in the museum of El Carmen, Mexico City, whose carving is accredited to the previously mentioned sculptor. This also helps associate the polychrome with Francisco de Zumaya, since circular elements forming pineapple-shaped symmetrical axes alongside eight-separated-petals flowers can be found among the decorative details. These are shown in the ornamental model of *Santa Teresa*; in the interior of its cloak, the fragment of a branch-cut stick can be seen (Amador, 2021, 00:16:38) (Figure 3).

These have also been identified in other three sculptures worked on during the STREP, namely: *Santa Magdalena de Pazzi* (Figure 4) and *Santa Catalina de Siena* (Figure 5), both belonging to the parish of San Pedro Apóstol, Tláhuac (Figure 4), and *San Diego de Alcalá*, belonging to the Corpus Christi Cathedral, Tlalnepantla, State of Mexico. Although the polychromy of the latter could be of an earlier period, all of them not only show one same model that copies and repeats the designs, but also that the painter solves the ways in which to give volume to the figures in a similar manner (Figure 6).

Intervención

JULIO-DICIEMBRE 2023
 JULY-DECEMBER 2023



FIGURE 3. Comparison of the decoration of *Santa Teresa* and *San Elías* (Photograph: Mercedes Murguía, 2022; courtesy: STREP-ENRCYM-INAH and Temple of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, Mexico).



FIGURE 4. Photographs depicting the process performed on *San Magdalena de Pazzi* (Photograph: Jesús E. Estudillo Sánchez and Paris A. Santoyo Toledo, 2023; courtesy: STREP-ENRCYM-INAH and Templo de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción).

Intervención

JULIO-DICIEMBRE 2023
 JULY-DECEMBER 2023



FIGURE 5. Photographs depicting the end of the restoration process performed on the sculpture of *Santa Catalina de Siena*; the decoration of the mantle can be seen (Photograph: Mercedes Murguía, 2021; courtesy: STREP-ENRCYM-INAH and Templo de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción).



FIGURE 6. Comparison of the decoration of the sculptures of *Santa Magdalena de Pazzi*, *Santa Catalina de Siena*, and *San Elías* (Photograph: Mercedes Murguía, 2021; courtesy: STREP-ENRCYM-INAH and Temple of Nuestra Señora de la Asunción, México).

Intervención

JULIO-DICIEMBRE 2023
JULY-DECEMBER 2023

As noted, the analysis of a sculpture for its restoration requires a multidisciplinary labour—in this case, between history and art history, as well as chemistry—that facilitates the recognition of artistic, historical, and iconographic properties, as well as the meaning, outside of the piece itself. This, in turn, somehow leads us to a term that has little critical fortune: *unity*.

An obsolete term: *unity*

One of the considerations that restoration critical theory has heavily emphasized is the concept of *unity*. Unity, always misunderstood and relegated to the background, as Paul Philippot criticized, is linked to the way of understanding the intervention and the historical awareness from antagonistic perspectives:

[...] one claims the respect of the sensitive traces of time, of what has been recently called “historical depth” or the part an object has already lived as intrinsic to the authenticity of its historical substance. The other is actively trying to abolish the effects of time in order to restore the unity of the primordial piece [Philippot, 2015, p. 20].²

Although Philippot recovers this concept and links it to the conflict between historical and aesthetic instances, ever since that moment, the importance of thinking about unity has been prefigured. It is a concept that, in theory, has had several definitions and considerations, but, in practice, is not always applied when making decisions.

As it can be seen in the transcription, it is impossible not to think of the perspectives of John Ruskin and E. E. Viollet-le-Duc, but also of the Brandian mediation between the previously mentioned historical and artistic instances. Furthermore, in the case of the position of Viollet-le-Duc, it is understood that the unity is related to the moment a cultural object is created, when the authors, architects, builders, and producers end—in that very moment, where its authenticity resides (even if to the restoration critical theory is nothing more than the sum of events throughout its history)—the cultural good.

On the other hand, the unity in an intervention is restructured based on the reconstitution of the *potential unity*,

² Editorial translation.

Intervención

JULIO-DICIEMBRE 2023
JULY-DECEMBER 2023

[...] whose aesthetic awareness reclaims the re-establishment, and whenever this is possible through a work of open integration of all falsification. In these cases, it is not about re-establishing a complete piece, but rather of reducing the inconveniences caused by the lacunas in order to grant the original, still persisting, the maximum possible presence and unity [Philippot, 2015, p. 26].³

Although it is specifically linked to the reintegration process here, how many times did we repair the concept of *unity* when proposing a cleaning or a reintegration? Without any doubt, this should be one of the reference frameworks regarding decision-making about the cleaning of a cultural object because reducing visual harm also deals with the problems produced by stains, dirt, and some pictorial aggregates that seeped into it throughout its history, even if they show signs of their use and reintegration in current cultural systems.

We found the version of the most relevant unity magnitude in Philippot work: when he considers it an initial element and vital for the methodology that a restorer must apply during an intervention. This refers to a prime example, an altarpiece where sculpture, painting, and relief are usually seen independently from each other, rather than as parts of the unity of the cultural heritage; or the architecture, where structure and decoration, plaster and relief are analyzed without visualizing their evident interdependencies, everything cooperates as a single undivided system (Philippot, 1973, p. 6). The same happens, from our perspective, with the pieces sculpted or decorated with the same decorative, formal, and material characteristics. Beyond the identification of the properties of certain sculptures and defining them as a unit, the possibility of comparing the similarities among them helps us think and recognize a wider unit, which, in turn, is essential to understand stylistic, artistic, and mode tendencies and, thus, the circulation of ideas associated with social and cultural aspects that are intrinsic to a space-time.

However, the interventions do not tend to cling to unity as a metaconcept; or, even worse, it is hinted at without considering the practical implications that it would bring about in the decision-making process. Thus, we have seen how paintings, sculptures, and furniture of a same altarpiece are worked on in an isolated manner. These are actions that, at the very least, are underpinned in a di-

³ Editorial translation.

Intervención

JULIO-DICIEMBRE 2023
 JULY-DECEMBER 2023

dialogue between work teams in order to achieve the same objectives and intervention criteria, as well as levels of action; or rather, restorations of a singular sculpture that, since its two parts were not considered as a unit, were solved by means of independent reconstructions of each part. In the case of *San Elías*, the unity was recognized beyond the sculpture itself. Thanks to the support of other fields, it was possible to know that the piece is one of the links in a chain of sculptures manufactured by the same craftsmen or carvers, or painters, or both, which allows for the identical execution of lacunas treatment in the sculptures that we have been able to intervene in the STREP (Figure 7). In every single case, we have intended to retrieve the potential hampered unity, using reintegration to recover the missing details that were found in the decoration of the rest of the sculptures. The possibility of doing this resides in the multidiscipline and a methodological task for its study and comparison with other pieces of the same period, which allows for the generation of consistent results, with no stylistic falsifications, by applying theory to the restoration practice.



FIGURE 7. The unit: links in the artistic chain of a sculptor and a painter (Photograph: Mercedes Murguía, 2021; courtesy: STREP-ENCRYM-INAH).

Intervención

JULIO-DICIEMBRE 2023
 JULY-DECEMBER 2023

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JULIO-DICIEMBRE 2023
 JULY-DECEMBER 2023

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