



Detail of the doorway of the Royal Chapel of the Cathedral of Granada.  
© Capilla Real de Granada

# Newsletter

ICOM-CC Sculpture, Polychromy, and Architectural Decorations Working Group

## PRESENTATION

### Timeless Forms and Moving Stories: Sculpture Conservation and the Forthcoming Exhibition

Dear Colleagues,

We are pleased to share this second edition of our newsletter for the triennium 2023–2026, which reflects upon the diverse yet interconnected challenges surrounding the conservation, research, and interpretation of movable, articulated, and polychrome sculpture within both historical monuments and modern museum contexts.

The featured projects in this issue engage with a range of critical themes central to our field: the material and structural complexities of preserving monumental architectural sculpture, the ethical considerations of treating modern composite works, and the evolving curatorial narratives surrounding the display of medieval artefacts.

Among these, the ongoing conservation of the monumental doorway of the Royal Chapel of the Cathedral of Granada exemplifies the intricacies of integrating sculptural heritage within an active architectural setting.

Meanwhile, the research into Yves Klein's "Blue Venus" raises pertinent questions regarding the treatment of modern polychrome sculpture, where original materiality and artistic intent intersect with conservation decision-making.

Further insights are offered by the study of the artistic ensemble of the main chapel of the Monastery of Santa María del Parral in Segovia, which highlights the delicate balance required when conserving large polychrome ensembles in situ.

Looking ahead, the forthcoming exhibition 'Praymobil: Medieval Art on the Move' (Suermondt-Ludwig Museum, Aachen, 29 November 2025 – 15 March 2026) promises to open new discussions on the mobility, function, and reinterpretation of medieval sculpture — reminding us of the shifting narratives and renewed relevance that such works can assume in contemporary museum settings.

Together, these contributions underscore the complexity of conserving and presenting sculptural heritage, where past craftsmanship meets present-day technological, ethical, and museological considerations.

We hope this selection will stimulate reflection and dialogue among our members/colleagues and inspire further scholarly exchange within our Working Group.

Happy Reading...!!

Warm regards,

Deepakshi Sharma  
Coordinator  
Sculpture, Polychromy, and  
Architectural Decoration Working Group

# Conservation of the Doorway of the Royal Chapel of the Cathedral of Granada, Spain

Lola Blanca López & Lourdes Blanca López



Fig. 1. Overall view of the doorway of the Royal Chapel of the Cathedral of Granada. ©Capilla Real de Granada

This article provides a summary of the conservation work carried out by an interdisciplinary team and financed by the Chapter of the Granada Royal Chapel on the monumental Elizabethan Gothic doorway leading to the Royal Chapel of the Catholic Monarchs from November 2024 to June 2025.

Designed by the architect Enrique Egas, the portal features a sculptural programme attributed to the carvers Jorge Fernández and his disciple Nicolás León. This programme exhibits clear iconographic unity under the patronage of Saints John the Baptist and John the Evangelist. The upper part features a representation of the Adoration of the Magi, flanked by Saint Michael and Saint James. The tympanum displays the coat of arms of the Catholic Monarchs, accompanied by the eagle of Saint

John, as well as their attributes of the yoke and arrows, bearing the inscription "Laudent eam in portis opera eius" (*Let her works praise her in the gates*). The door is adorned with a magnificent apostolate in the archivolt and a splendid alfiz decorated in Renaissance style, flanked by two macebearers.

The doorway was built using calcarenite stone, carved from the same blocks as those used to build the cathedral, according to the architect's design. The sculptural group is crafted as freestanding figures with the same level of detail and finish as a polychrome wooden sculpture. The master sculptor paid meticulous attention to detail to give the figures thrilling realism in their gestures, movements, and exquisite clothing and attribute decorations. Once the carving was complete, the images were placed in their respective niches and secured with iron rods.

During conservation, we discovered that a coating layer of lime had been applied to the figures to conceal the porous texture of the stone, creating the appearance of smooth surfaces and polished flesh tones, as well as a delicate texture on the clothing, achieved by incising a pattern into this coating to simulate gilded stucco. It is unclear whether they were prepared for subsequent polychromy, but we can confirm the presence of gold using 100% pure gold leaf, applied to the necklines together with lead white, calcium carbonate and verdigris bound with drying oil, in the letters of the inscription.



Fig. 2. Cleaning process using a laser. ©Capilla Real de Granada

The doorway showed significant accumulations of greasy dirt caused by centuries of candle smoke, which gave it a false amber-grey colour, and there were repairs and missing decorative elements.

The conservation treatments were therefore very respectful, focusing on structural consolidation using silicates and lime mortar, as well as thorough cleaning via chemical methods involving poultices, mineralised water and laser cleaning.

Reconstruction of losses was limited to the linear recovery of the architectural design, such as one of the abutments of the scalloped arch, and to losses affecting the devotional aesthetics, such as the hand of the Infant Jesus or the face of the angel in the heraldic coat of arms of Ferdinand the Catholic.

<https://youtu.be/aR42xaEnUQM?feature=shared>

**Promoter:** Cabildo de la Capilla Real de Granada (Granada Royal Chapel Chapter)

**Technical direction:** Diego Garzón Osuna (architect); Lola Blanca López and Lourdes Blanca López (conservators of the Archdiocese of Granada); and María López Olid (technical architect of the Archdiocese of Granada).

**Historian:** Rosa Pérez de la Torre

**Contracting company:** TARMA Restauración y Patrimonio S.L.



Fig. 3. Detail of the doorway during cleaning.  
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## All About Yves' "Venus": Researching Treatment Options for an Yves Klein "Blue Venus" Sculpture

James Hughes



Fig. 1. A variety of mock-ups sprayed with various recipes of I.K.B. in March 2025. ©James Hughes

The 20th-century conceptual and visual artist Yves Klein (1938-1962) needs little introduction. Despite having only about a decade of artistic output, Klein's avant-garde approach to philosophical and technical experimentation led to significant shifts in modern art. He is particularly recognized for creating a unique pigment system called International Klein Blue (I.K.B.). As the Sherman Fairchild Fellow in the Objects Conservation Department at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, I have spent the past eight months exploring the practical and ethical challenges of conserving a damaged sculpture covered in I.K.B. titled "Blue Venus" (circa 1962).

The Met's "Blue Venus" ([MMA 1985.445](#)) is number 50/350 in a limited edition produced posthumously in 1982 by Jean-Paul Ledeur, the Parisian conservator involved with Klein's work since at least the 1960s.

The sculpture is a single hollow plaster cast that has been painted blue and then covered with International Klein Blue (I.K.B.). I.K.B. is an application technique that involves mixing a low-concentrate poly(vinyl acetate) adhesive with dry ultramarine pigment and suitable organic solvents. This mixture is then applied to various surfaces by brushing, rolling, or spraying. The solvents in the mixture evaporate quickly, leaving behind a velvety layer of loosely-bound pigment that is delicate and highly susceptible to damage. As the pristine quality of Klein's I.K.B.-covered surfaces are essential to the intended reception of his work, virtually any damage they sustain, usually in the form of scratches, scuffs, compression marks, burnishing, and a flattened appearance, detracts from the unique visual and textural properties Klein worked so diligently to create.

The strong desire for uninterrupted surfaces in Klein's work has inspired a variety of innovative treatment techniques to be employed by conservators worldwide. While researching the challenges of treating vibrant monochrome surfaces with complex topographies can be costly and time-consuming, as a Fellow I have been fortunate to have the time and resources available to devote to investigating techniques previously unexplored by the Museum's conservators. For example, contemporary treatments often focus on re-spraying editions of these works using a modern I.K.B. mixture. Although the process is ethically complex, the re-creation and application of this pigment system can be learned using the materials and techniques very similar to those Klein used during his lifetime.

During my time at the museum, I have dedicated myself to exploring the conservation of Klein's sculptures, starting by closely following the technical steps involved in their production. In collaboration with conservators in New York, Paris, and Vienna, I learned from direct experience how I.K.B. is made and applied to three-dimensional surfaces. This experimentation deepened my understanding of the development and use of I.K.B., leading to the creation of painted plaster mock-ups sprayed with various recipes of the pigment/adhesive mixture (see images). These mock-ups allowed me to test both re-spraying and potential localized treatment options away from the original artwork while gaining first-hand knowledge of the working properties of the unique medium.

Ongoing tests for treatment options are promising. While re-spraying the sculpture has been established as a viable method, it is an irreversible solution and one better suited for more extensive or significant damage. The next steps in my research involve moving on from the mock-ups I have been experimenting on and begin testing/assessing treatment options on the Museum's "Blue Venus," utilizing insights gained from working with I.K.B. and manipulating its properties. This approach aims to preserve the artwork as the artist intended, while avoiding interventions that may be viewed as excessively invasive or permanent. Ultimately, this rewarding project underscores the complexity of Klein's surfaces and the ethical and practical challenges associated with their conservation. A broader communication focusing on the implementation of treatment strategies on The Met's damaged "Blue Venus" is forthcoming.

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/484267>



Fig. 2. The author spraying a plaster dome mock-up with a modern mixture of I.K.B.

©Melissa David

# The Artistic Ensemble of the Main chapel of the Monastery of Santa María del Parral in Segovia, Spain

Olga Cantos Martínez

The monastery of Santa María del Parral in Segovia, Spain, houses one of the most significant Renaissance sculptural ensembles in the Castilla y León region. It consists of a pinewood altarpiece flanked by stone cenotaphs commemorating Juan Pacheco, the first Marquesses of Villena, who played a fundamental role in 15th-century Spanish politics, and his wife, María de Portocarrero.

Since its foundation, the monastery has been an interesting example of royal patronage in relation to the Hieronymite order, highlighting the important role played by the monarchy and the nobility in the successive phases of construction. Records indicate that King Henry IV was the main driving force behind the works, whose initial intention was to be buried in the main chapel, although in 1471 he renounced this wish in support of his favourite, Juan Pacheco, who transformed it into a family pantheon. After his death in 1474, Diego I López Pacheco became the driving force behind the artistic endowment of the main chapel of the temple. However, upon his death in 1529, Diego II López Pacheco would finally complete the undertaking.

Construction commenced in 1528 with the creation of the main altarpiece by sculptors Juan Rodríguez and Gerónimo Pellicer, and painter Francisco González, working alongside other collaborators. Concurrently, work commenced on the alabaster arcosolia that house the praying figures, a funerary monument that was enlarged a year later, this time in dolomitic limestone, to adapt it to the architectural layout of the altarpiece. Diego de Urbina, one of the most important artists of the reign of Philip II, was commissioned to gild and decorate the altarpiece from 1553 onwards. The typology of the sepulchral altarpiece would link the devotional memory of the marquises with the Eucharistic meaning of the altarpiece and the earlier altar located at its feet.

In consideration of the historical and artistic significance of this outstanding monument, restoration work was carried out between March 2023 and January 2025 with the aim of safeguarding it and enhancing its value. This project was promoted by the Directorate-General for Cultural Heritage and Fine Arts of the Ministry of Culture, through the Sub-Directorate-General of the Spanish Institute of Cultural Heritage.



Fig. 1. Overall view of the complex after treatment.  
©TRACER Restauración Conservación S.L. for IPCE

The condition of the altarpiece and cenotaphs has been significantly affected by the historical situation of the architectural complex that houses them. In this context, it is important to note the period of destruction, plundering and subsequent abandonment of the monastery between 1808, when French troops invaded Segovia, and 1835, when the Spanish confiscation took place. In terms of more recent history, in the mid-19th century the building was in a ruinous state, with the roof of the church destroyed, causing water to leak in which affected various areas, including the presbytery and its contents. However, it was not until 1914 that it was officially recognised as a National Monument, and since then various restorations have been carried out to preserve its integrity.

Although many of the monastery's possessions had been moved several times, the altarpiece and cenotaphs have remained steadfastly in their original position. It is evident that the work carried out on the church's roofs, windows and vaults has been crucial in maintaining its structural preservation. However, other alterations were made, including in 1965, when the steps in front of the altarpiece and the cenotaphs were removed, along with the granite plinth and the grille separating the main chapel from the nave. This led to a change in the distinct liturgical spaces of the Hieronymite order. The altar table, which had previously been attached to the base of the altarpiece, was moved forward, thus losing its monastic character. Instead, a series of figures modelled in plaster by a local artist in 1968 were installed. As a result, the sculptural ensemble ended up raised above the floor level and now houses a modern choir stall.

Furthermore, other historical interventions have been verified, such as the whitewashing of the cenotaphs with lime, partly tinted grey and yellow to highlight certain details, which profoundly altered their appearance. In 1926, chronicles documented this event and the fact that they were 'smoked'. It has been confirmed that several figures are missing from the altarpiece. During the course of the work, an irregular coating of extremely oxidised terpene resin (colophony) was identified. This was applied at an unknown date and has distorted the coloured finishes by reducing the contrast between tones. In terms of conservation, it is essential to take into account the natural process of material degradation, which is influenced by environmental conditions and the presence of a thick layer of dirt. The altarpiece showed signs of biodeterioration, the presence of unrelated figures (even replacing the manifestor), as well as mechanical damage such as cracks and misalignments. In addition, there was a lack of adhesion and loss of polychromy. In addition to lime, in many areas of the cenotaphs, and even more so on the edges or side enclosures, numerous rough grouts covered part of the stone slabs.

The actual intervention work involved dismantling the masonry and installing a complex scaffolding structure that took up the entire space of the main chapel. The work on the cenotaphs focused primarily on the removal of grout using ultrasonic ablative equipment, followed by laser cleaning of the dirt layer (only on the calcitic dolomite). Subsequent analytical checks were then carried out to ensure that the process did not cause any surface alterations to the stone. Regrouting with a compatible lime mortar ensures morphological continuity for all surfaces and volumes.

As for the altarpiece, after fixing the paint layers and characterising the polychromy, the thick layer of colophony

and various stains were removed using, depending on the case, non-polar surfactant gels, binary mixtures of solvents with suitable polarity and, on the most sensitive surfaces, a semi-humid process with rigid agar-agar gel at a controlled pH value, validating the results analytically. Next, in order to restore the visual harmony in keeping with the liturgical purpose of the piece, an illusionist technique of chromatic reintegration was applied. This was aided by the removal of the later plaster reliefs, which were replaced with wooden panels evoking the space originally occupied by the altar table.

Finally, the installation of transparent UV protection filters on the chancel windows and a new, more efficient lighting system with controlled and predetermined illuminance levels allow for proper viewing of the main chapel and its artistic heritage.

<https://www.facebook.com/reel/738111965692455>



Figs. 2-3. *Arcosolium of Juan Pacheco* before and after treatment.  
©TRACER Restauración Conservación S.L. for IPCE



Figs. 4-5. *Presentation of the Christ Child* before and after treatment.

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# Exhibition 'Praymobil: Medieval Art on the Move'

29 November 2025 – 15 March 2026, Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum, Aachen

Michael Rief

This exhibition is the first show worldwide to focus on the agency of medieval sculptures in the form of movable and 'self-acting' figures. Around 80 objects from German and European museums, church and private collections, mainly from the period between 1300 and 1550, will be on display. These include small- up to life-size wooden sculptures and three paintings.

A medieval source describes these works of art as 'bewegend, als wenn es lebete' ('moving, as if they were alive'), conveying the illusion that they were alive in church customs, liturgy and devotional practices. These sculptures, mostly made of wood but sometimes also of terracotta or metal, were used in the late Middle Ages and early modern period to illustrate and bring to life primarily the life of Christ and the Passion story as protagonists of spiritual plays. They were intended to give the impression that they were acting themselves, for 'reenactment' beyond church ceremonies and during liturgical celebrations.

In the art-historical literature, the term "Handelndes Bildwerk" ('self-acting' or 'animated image') has been used for this since the late 1980s, but it can lead to misunderstandings, as the images themselves do not act, but are moved. These include naked and dressable Infant Jesus-figures and cradles/beds, almost life-size palm



Figs. 1-2. "Multi-functional" Entombed Christ/Ecce Homo/Man of Sorrows, Cologne, around 1390. SLM Aachen, Inv.Nr. SK 1050 ©Anne Gold



Figs. 3-4. Crucifix with articulated arms, eastern Austria, around 1510. SLM Aachen, Inv.Nr. SK 1002

©Anne Gold

donkeys mounted on wheeled frames with a figure of Christ riding them (also in miniature format for nunneries), which were pulled through the church district in a large procession on Palm Sunday. There were also crucifixes with moveable arms, which could be used to re-enact the Descent from the Cross, Lamentation and Entombment with the participation of human actors. There were also figures of the dead Christ and of Christ's Ascension, which were pulled into the so called Holy Spirit Cavity in the church vault on Ascension Day.

The moving images also include, as is still little known, figures of the Virgin such as the *Maria gravida* (Mary in Hope), from whose womb the baby Jesus could be taken out; *Madonnas* with a removable child attached; depictions of the Mother of God who herself or the Infant Jesus had a rotating head; figures of Mary that could weep 'real' tears; the *Madonna* as the Mother of Sorrows ('*Pietà*') with the removable body of Christ for mourning or burial.

The exhibition also features sculptures illustrating several biblical events: images of Christ that could be used in the context of the Passion story, both in the *Ecce homo* scene and as the *Man of Sorrows* and Christ in the *Sepulchre*; as well as sculptures depicting the sitting Infant Jesus that were attached to Mary and placed on cushions during processions on *Candlemas* ('presentation at the temple') or for display on the altar.

It is an exciting and little-known fact that so many sculptures were actually used and moved in the liturgy and devotional practices of the late Middle Ages, thus bringing them to life. Sculptures from this period are usually associated with static objects.

In contrast to these moving images, there is also evidence of self-acting sculptures. This applies both to automata and to images in painting and graphic art that act independently according to various legends. This is true, for example, for St. Catherine of Siena, who received the stigmata from a carved wooden crucifix, St. Hedwig, who was blessed by a crucifix, and St. Bernard, who received a jet of milk from the breast of a Madonna sculpture. This aspect of sculptures acting of their own accord is also presented in the exhibition.

In addition, the exhibition deals with the "misused" work of art: it exposes weeping, bleeding and talking images as fraud, which, for religious reasons, but above all for the sake of tangible profit, feigned the idea of miracles. These practices, which were based on the trade with faked relics and were surprisingly widespread, played a significant role in the sometimes particularly vehement rejection of moving images during the Reformation. However, single cases of the conversion and reuse of movable images also occurred in Protestantism, which the exhibition does not seek to conceal.

The exhibition is dedicated to examples of medieval art which, in contrast to the precious treasuries of collegiate churches and bishop's residences, were admired and revered above all by broad sections of the population at that time. The focus of interest is on the interfaces between art history, religious practice and folk customs. It should be mentioned that the figures were used on the one hand for theatrical and dramatic performances involving the participation of the people, with singing, spoken sequences and music, which were certainly loud and lively affairs, but also for contemplative meditation (e.g. the dead body of Christ in the Holy Sepulchre, Infant Jesus-figures) after the reenactment.

Based on a few pieces from our own museum and selected loans from European collections, the exhibition aims to highlight the use of media at the time and the connection between spiritual plays and theatrical practice within and outside the liturgy. The focus is on function, an aspect that is often ignored in the study of artworks and even eliminated in museum presentations (wheels removed from Palm Sunday Christ figures, joints of movable limbs filled in and retouched, etc.). Only recently have questions about the function of objects come to the fore, whereas for decades only questions of style were discussed.

<https://suermondt-ludwig-museum.de/ausstellung/praymobil/>



Fig. 5. *Palm Sunday Christ on a donkey*, Bavaria, around 1490  
SLM Aachen, Inv.Nr. SK 349  
©Anne Gold

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#### Credits

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Triennial Working plan and follow us  
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