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WAX AND MORTALITY: A TRANSHISTORICAL STUDY ON WAX IN ARTISTIC
DEPICTIONS OF DEATH

by

MARY KATHARINE KIRKPATRICK

Under the Direction of Grace Harpster PhD

ABSTRACT

This essay is an exploration of the medium of beeswax throughout Western art history from antiquity to the Baroque period that explores how it has consistently been used to illustrate death, decay, and violence. Examples range from funerary effigies to magical poppets to anatomical models, each displaying how the substance of wax is inherently tied to corporeality and mortality. Each example is chosen to demonstrate how either the visual appearance or the tactile properties of wax influence its use in corporeal sculpture, culminating in the work of Gaetano Giulio Zumbo to illustrate a union of the two.

INDEX WORDS: Beeswax, Wax sculpture, Materiality in art

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MARY KATHARINE KIRKPATRICK

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts, Art History

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2022

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2022

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Georgia State University

May 2022

DEDICATION

I dedicate this essay to my late father, Mack Kirkpatrick, a true individual who inspired my love of art, and who was always happy to be my persnickety editor while offering enthusiastic support of my writing and all other pursuits. I also dedicate this essay to my mother, Pamela Rose Kirkpatrick, the kindest and strongest person I know, without whose encouragement, patience, and support, my academic success would never have been possible.

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1 INTRODUCTION

For thousands of years, works in wax have captivated viewers with their ability to emulate the appearance of human flesh. These works ranged from funeral effigies of royalty in ancient Rome which were treated for days as if they were the natural body of the deceased and then burned in a ceremony that sent the soul of the departed into the heavens, to Egyptian poppets that were embedded with the bones of fish and then used to torture the human being whose likeness they bore by way of sympathetic magic. The tradition of funerary effigies for kings continued into the Renaissance era of Western Europe, when life-size wax models of English and French royalty attended feasts in their honor as if capable of consuming food and drink, and were affixed to the lid of the coffin which contained the king's remains to serve as a vessel into which his subjects could metaphorically pour their respects. In the Baroque period, following discoveries in medical science, anatomical wax models were painstakingly rendered by artists for physicians to study anatomy and attempt to lessen the devastation of diseases like the bubonic plague. The purposes of these objects range from religious significance and monarchical reverence to secular research and artistic expression, but the common thread which ties them together is the ever-present theme of death. While wax can be used to create likenesses of living beings, it is inherently tied to death, with its aesthetic strengths lying in its ability to portray a body stopped in time, still bearing all the exterior necessities of a human being, but lacking the inner vitality of a living person.

Using a transhistorical approach to evaluate the patterns that exist linking wax and death in art over time, we can see how the properties of wax influence its uses and applications, from the composition of the substance itself and its status as a medium of animal origin, to its viscous and pliable consistency, which is sensitive to heat and cold, humidity and dryness, much like

human flesh itself, and specifically akin to human flesh after death. Dividing these attributes into distinctly physical or visual modes of information delivery, we can ascertain the particular ways people use wax to mimic flesh during different periods, whether through the tactile qualities that lend themselves to physical manipulation and violence, or the visual hallmarks of wax that imbue it with an air of memory and reverence. These two separate but complimentary sensory categories are eventually combined in the field of anatomical models, a modern application of wax sculpture which has equal need for both tactile and visual similarity to flesh. Viewing the examples in this essay through this material lens, we see why wax holds a position as a material that is most suited to mimic expired skin and tissue and to perform functional duties in the context of funeral ceremonies, supernatural rituals of bodily harm, medical studies of disease and demise, and a range of other practices which center the occurrence of death and the deceased body.

Several art historians before me have investigated material as a means to assess works of art. Michael Baxandall's treatise on limewood is a prime example of passion for material, and this as well as work on wax specifically enticed me to examine the exact reasons for wax's use in all manner of corporeal sculpture. Julius Von Schlosser's *History of Portraiture in Wax* gives an invaluable outline of the types of wax sculpture that have been created in Europe from antiquity to the time of Marie Tussaud, and Roberta Panzanelli's and Georges Didi-Huberman's contributions to the 2008 *Ephemeral Bodies* catalog testify to the monumental importance of memory and resemblance in these types of artworks, especially during the Renaissance and Baroque periods. Aby Warburg's writings on the physical aspects of wax ex votos outside of resemblance (the competition in size and ornateness within a church, inclusion of equestrian mounts, etc.) highlight the breadth of ways in which wax could be used for these types of

objects. Roberta Balliestro and Regina Deckers each examine Baroque ceroplastics and anatomical models with a wide lens, including the effect on senses beyond sight, which I expand on and connect to each example in this essay.

The wealth of literature on the subject of materiality more generally, both within and outside of art history, contains helpful concepts when thinking about how wax, or any medium, is unique in its applications. Art historian Daniel Herwitz expands on Hegel's assertion that "not all things are possible in all media of art" by explaining how certain materials are more apt to portray a given concept than others; Warburg's definition of *Nachleben*, or the legacy and continuity of an image, seems fitting in a discourse on wax, a material that is often associated with memory.¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's application of the idea of *affect* to art is relevant to my thesis in this essay; in the following examples, wax is used with the intention to provoke an internal experience within the viewer, be it sensual, visceral, spiritual, etc.² The material is a conduit of emotional and intellectual perception. My intention is to shed light on the dimensions with which wax emulates human bodies and portrays mortality, by impacting multiple senses and incorporating many of the human body's natural characteristics, both during and after life.

¹ Daniel Herwitz, *Cosmopolitan Aesthetics: Art in a Global World* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 109.

² Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Vol. 2*. Trans. and foreword by Brian Massumi. (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press 1987), 16.

2 WAX SCULPTURE AND DEATH IN ANTIQUITY

2.1 Wax Death Masks

Veristic portraiture was a distinctly Roman art form, with markedly naturalistic stone busts of consuls and patriarchs decorating public and private spaces alike, as can be seen in the patrician statue known as the *Patrizio Torlonia* (Figure 1). Unlike the idealized portraits of Classical Greece, Roman noblemen were portrayed as they truly appeared, with visible flaws, wrinkles, and skin textures, some of which were even emphasized. Earlier Greek masks were said by Pliny the Elder to be made by “fitting a mould of plaster upon the face, and then improving it by pouring melted wax into the cast,” a method developed by Greek sculptor Lysistratus at the dawning of the Hellenistic period.³ By pouring wax into the basic plaster mold, the sculptor could obtain the general shape of the face, and then add fine details using tools or the heat from his own hands. Masks were modeled while the body’s skin was still able to retain a shape that favored its appearance in life.⁴ Shortly after death, the tissues of the face change in shape due to a lack of moisture, and the bones of the skull appear more prominent. Since rigor mortis makes these changes permanent, the masks needed to be cast quickly to retain the shape of the face during life and ensure that the deceased’s likeness remained recognizable.⁵ This method of preserving true-to-life facial features likely influenced Roman portraiture, including busts and effigies.

³ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 35.44.

⁴ John Pollini, “Rome: Memory, Religion, Class Struggle, and the Wax Ancestral Mask Tradition’s Origin and Influence on Veristic Portraiture,” in *Performing Death*, ed. Nicola Laneri (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2007), 238.

⁵ Annie N. Zadoks-Josephus Jitta, *Ancestral Portraiture in Rome and the Art of the Last Century of the Republic*, 47–48, via Pollini, 238.

Masks could be made either hollow, with a thin layer of wax coating only the face of the plaster mold, or filled, as a half-bust, which would allow the object to stand on its own more easily. This method was likely tweaked over time, but the general formula for making death (and life) masks would remain largely similar. Wood was sometimes used to fill these busts, as can be seen in the remains of a shrine at the House of the Menander in Pompeii, where wax was likely affixed to the exterior of the surviving wooden supports.⁶ Once a Roman mask was finalized, it would be placed in an *armarium*, a type of cabinet with closing doors to protect the sculpture from the elements while also allowing it to be viewed, as the cabinets were kept in atria and other common areas of the nobleman's familial home.⁷ In this example, memory and reverence are the objectives for the creation of the object, and therefore, the visual appearance of the object is most important. The optical illusion of the face that looked exactly like the deceased's natural visage enforced the object's duty of ensuring memory.

Full body effigies were a key aspect of funerary traditions for the elite in Roman society. A detailed account of Emperor Septimius Severus' funeral in 211 CE shines light on exactly how the effigy functioned within the funerary events. Graeco-Roman historian Herodian writes in his *History of the Empire from the Death of Marcus*:

After a costly funeral, the body of the emperor is interred in the customary fashion. But then a wax image is fashioned in the exact likeness of the corpse and placed on a large, high couch of ivory draped with coverings embroidered with gold...Every day the physicians come and visit the couch; after pretending to examine the sick man, they announce daily that his condition is growing steadily worse. When it appears that he is dead, the noblest of the equestrians and picked young senators lift the couch and carry it along the Sacred Way to the Old Forum, where the Roman magistrates give up their authority...The couch is then carried out of the city to the Field of Mars, where, in the widest part of the plain, a square building has been constructed entirely of huge wooden

⁶ Véronique Dasen, "Wax and Plaster Memories," in *Children, Memory, and Family Identity in Roman Culture*, ed. Veronique Dasen and Th. Späth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 113.

⁷ Pollini, "Rome," 238.

beams in the shape of a house...The whole interior of this building is filled with firewood...They bring the couch to this structure and carry it up to the second story; then they add every kind of perfume and incense the earth provides, together with all the fruits, herbs, and juices that are gathered for their fragrance...After a huge pile of aromatic material is collected, and the structure is completely filled, a cavalry exhibition is staged around the building; the entire Equestrian cavalry circles around it, following a fixed rotating pattern in the Pyrrhic choruses and maneuvers...When these rites have been completed, the emperor's successor puts a torch to the structure, after which the people set it on fire on all sides. The flames easily and quickly consume the enormous pile of firewood and fragrant stuffs. From the topmost and smallest story, as if from a battlement, an eagle flies forth, soaring with the flames into the sky; the Romans believe that this eagle carries the soul of the emperor from the earth up to heaven. Thereafter the emperor is worshiped with the rest of the gods.⁸

The details of these proceedings give insight into how the physical properties of wax were invaluable in this type of funeral. Not only was the figure to be formed in the “exact likeness” of the deceased, but the wax “corpse” could hypothetically be manipulated over time to mimic deteriorating health conditions. Wax is also pliable enough to be positioned naturalistically on a couch, and light enough to be carried into the field and funeral pyre. Lastly, wax will melt and burn along with the funeral structure, completing the ritual of transmutation. The ability of wax to be manually manipulated is the greatest advantage to its use in this function; the physical properties of wax direct its meaning.

2.2 Magical Poppets in Ancient Rome and Egypt

Moving forward in time to the fourth century CE, after Rome had been divided into the Western and Eastern empires, we see wax used in magical rituals that also related to death, though less in a reverential or honoring manner and more aligned with self-serving or vengeful motives. Poppets are models of specific people that are used to inflict harm upon, or sometimes,

⁸ Herodian and Edward C. Echols, *History of the Roman Empire Since the Death of Marcus Aurelius*, 4.2.

in less sinister cases, to cast love spells or other manipulations on the person whom they resemble. One example of this practice was discovered in 1999 by Italian archaeologist Marina Piranomonte, where, along the Via Flaminia, a sanctuary dedicated to the Roman goddess Anna Perenna stood. Within its boundaries was a fountain with a cistern to its rear, and contained in that cistern were three lead vessels, one of which housed an intact wax poppet.⁹ Upon further examination, six poppets in total were found within the three vessels. Celia Sánchez Natalias writes, “these containers deliberately filled two ritual objectives at once: first, to serve as a vessel for the poppet representing the victim; second, to provide a surface on which one could write a curse.”¹⁰ The vessel’s form itself is significant, as it functioned as an urn for the effigy of a person who was likely intended to be killed, or at least severely injured, and as a surface upon which a curse could be written, it mimicked an act of hostility, similar to writing graffiti on someone’s home. The heavy and rigid material of lead serves as a foil to the flexible material of wax, an impenetrable coffin for the metaphorical body.

The inscription on one of the containers that held a poppet included a Greek letter, Theta (Θ), which Piranomonte interprets as possibly “the sign for ‘deceased.’”¹¹ Further evidence of Graeco-Egyptian influence is noted with the inclusion of tablets illustrating what are thought to be Osiris and Seth, both deities connected to the underworld.¹² Seth in particular is identified by name, in this case written as SETE, and pictured wearing a helmet, as he was associated with

⁹ Celia Sanches Natalias, “Magical Poppets in the Western Roman Empire,” In *The Ritual Year 10: Magic in Rituals and Rituals in Magic*, ed. Tatiana Minniyakhmetova and Kamila Velkoborská (Innsbruck: Tartu, 2015), 195-196.

¹⁰ Natalias, “Magical Poppets,” 196.

¹¹ Marina Piranomonte, “Religion and Magic at Rome: The Fountain of Anna Perenna,” In *Magical Practice in the Latin West*, ed. Richard L. Gordon and Francisco Marco Simón (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 207.

¹² Jürgen Blänsdorf, “The Texts from the Fons Annae Perennae,” In *Magical Practice in the Latin West*, ed. Richard L. Gordon and Francisco Marco Simón (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 226.

warfare, but his inclusion is likely more related to a story from his mythology in which he murders his brother Osiris. This action is seen as a parable “to explain the experience of death.”¹³ Inclusion of this underworld-related iconography underscores the significance of death in the poppet ritual, and the utilization of the pagan Egyptian belief system is notable, as sympathetic magic, that is, magic which serves to influence the feelings or health of a person through an effigy which is manipulated, was a common practice within the Egyptian religion of antiquity.

The poppets themselves were made of wax with additives including milk, which is of interest considering that it, like wax, is a material of animal origin. Interestingly, milk, as a “wholly natural food,” was commonly offered to the gods in ritual context, and its inclusion in the composition of a poppet might have been thought to encourage the gods to enforce the effectiveness of any rituals performed using the doll.¹⁴ The poppets found in the fountain of Anna Perenna are positioned in purposeful ways that demonstrated the intended effect upon the person they represented. One poppet was shown in the process of being enveloped and consumed by a large snake, which was possibly intended as a metaphor to “signify the bound victims of a curse,” as in Egyptian mythology, the deity Osiris was “rolled up in the coils of a snake” before being taken to the underworld.¹⁵ Furthermore, the poppet was placed in its container facing down, which Natalias interprets as being “used here to confine the target,” as it is reminiscent of burial practices used to “restrain the restless dead.”¹⁶ The poppet and snake were fixed together with iron nails in a “transferred death ritual,” in which the victim was intended to be paralyzed

¹³ Eugene Cruz-Uribe, “Stḥ ʿ Pḥty ‘Seth, God of Power and Might,’” *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 45 (2009), 202.

¹⁴ Joan P. Alcock, *Food in the Ancient World* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 84.

¹⁵ Natalias, “Magical Poppets,” 200.

¹⁶ Natalias, “Magical Poppets,” 199.

completely, with nails also pinning the figure's head and feet to a bronze tablet.¹⁷ While the exact intention of the spell-caster is not known, it can be surmised that the violent imagery combined with the iconography of Egyptian underworld deities and the Greek letter Theta, which symbolized death, functioned together as a call for the demise and damnation of the individual who was pierced and buried in effigy. An ancient Greek treatise on magical practices advises the practitioner to "Lay [the poppet] as the sun sets, beside the grave of one untimely dead or dead by violence."¹⁸ The thread of death is interwoven through each step of the poppet ritual, and in the case of sympathetic magic, the optical resemblance of wax to flesh is secondary in importance to the textural ability of wax to be pierced, tortured, and dismembered, in correlation with the human body. The softness of the wax corresponds to the softness of human skin, which yields readily to the pressure of a pointed object. Thus the violent intention in this example requires the physical abilities of wax to be destroyed.

The practice of using wax poppets for sympathetic magic was, unsurprisingly, also found in late-antique, Greek-influenced Egypt. A papyrus, written in Greek, describing a method for creating and using such poppets was found and dated to the fifth and sixth centuries CE. In this record, the writer guides the would-be sorcerer with instructions reading:

Take unsmoked wax and make a figurine. Write the magical signs on a small piece of papyrus and place it inside the wax and write the three omegas and the letters with them on the head of the figurine. Regarding the three bones of the *eisphatē*, stick the left one into the left eye of the figurine and the right one into the right eye and the one from the back into the head and put it into a new earthenware pot and leave the pot in the dark and fill the pot with water.¹⁹

¹⁷ Natalias, "Magical Poppets," 200.

¹⁸ Natalias, "Magical Poppets," 195.

¹⁹ Christopher Faraone, "A Wax Effigy Pierced by Three Bones: The Pharaonic Origins of a Late-Antique Cursing Ritual," *Symbolae Osloenses* 91, no. 1 (2017), 126.

The word *eisphatē* carries with it a degree of controversy over its meaning. In the aforementioned fountain of Anna Perenna, the wax poppets (made only one to two centuries before the Graeco-Egyptian papyrus was determined to have been written) have bones from birds embedded within their metaphorical flesh, and classics scholar Christopher A. Faraone mentions that this might help define the word, linguistically, as deriving from *phattēs*, meaning “of a dove.”²⁰ However, the poppets found in Egypt are not pierced by the bones of birds, but rather, by the bones of the *synodontis* fish, a type of catfish found in the Nile River. Faraone suggests that the word *eisphatē* was derived from an earlier text regarding poppets, written between the time of the New Kingdom and the Late Period (1550-322 BCE), before the Argead dynasty ushered in Greek rule of Egypt in the fourth century CE.²¹ These writings are known as the Egyptian Coffin Texts, and they describe a recipe for fashioning poppets that includes the *synodontis* bones in some manner, but does not specify exactly how they are to be used. If we are to assume this account pertains to future poppets as well as the more ancient ones, we gather that the Graeco-Egyptian poppets were to be pierced with three bones of the fish, one from the left, right, and back, conceivably the two sides and spine of the animal.²² Again we see the use of a material of animal origin, like the milk used in Rome, being combined with wax in an object intended to be a conduit of death.

The Coffin Text advises that the poppet be placed, “in the ground in a graveyard,” which is not dissimilar to the aforementioned Greek instructions recommending the poppet be placed near the grave of someone who has met an untimely demise. However, the Graeco-Egyptian handbook from which the instructions on the previous page are taken urges the spell-caster to

²⁰ Faraone, “A Wax Effigy Pierced by Three Bones,” 127.

²¹ Faraone, “A Wax Effigy Pierced by Three Bones,” 128.

²² Faraone, “A Wax Effigy Pierced by Three Bones,” 128.

place the poppet in a pot of water. In Egypt, the significance of using water could be related to the Nile River as an invaluable route of transport, the source of the *synodontis* fish, or the river Styx of Greek mythology, which separated the earthly realm from the underworld. It is also, of course, a most effective substance in which to drown a person. The physicality of the piercing with fish bones and the metaphorical drowning of this ritual emphasize how important the idea of the body is in this example, and therefore the primary significance of the physical.

2.3 Summary of Wax in Antiquity

The examples I've detailed in this section, namely Roman funeral effigies and magical Roman and Egyptian poppets, each use wax in a different manner that centers on death, either to honor the deceased or to encourage harm and death on a living person. The Roman effigies require the medium of wax because of its transient physical nature. Most three-dimensional models of the human figure in Rome were made with stone, but this material would not burn or melt on a funeral pyre. The wax body of the departed would melt and produce smoke which was believed to carry the human's essence to the realm of the gods. It could also be modeled to bear striking resemblance to the deceased and manipulated over the period before the burning ceremony to appear more sickly or closer to death. The poppets use wax with a more overtly tactile objective. Wax, unlike stone or terracotta, can be pierced quite easily with bones or other objects intended to inflict harm. And unlike wood, hair and other materials that imbue the poppet with the spirit of its likeness can be embedded in the sticky, soft material of wax. These examples from antiquity display how wax is the best suited medium to depict and to emulate a human body, both because of its natural consistency and its ability to be manipulated physically, as well as its propensity to mimic flesh visually.

3 WAX AS A SACRED BODY

During the early Middle Ages, the rise of Christianity as a major religion in Europe helped to shape artistic output, and the material of beeswax played multiple roles. Historian Alexandra Sapoznik points out that the value of honey bees grew during this time, and that Christian theology was an important component of this increase in demand because of bees' stature as "potent religious symbols in medieval Christianity... [that were] closely connected with the two figures most strongly associated with virginity: Christ and Mary."²³ It was believed that honey bees were a markedly chaste animal due to a lack in observations of mating, and the correlation between Mary giving birth to Christ as a virgin compelled the medieval church to feature a product made by bees in the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin, as well as in the Paschal ceremony, and in regular masses; the product was wax, which was used to make candles. The Paschal ritual in particular highlighted bees' significance; the Exultet rolls used in the ceremony contained illustrations of beekeeping as well as mentions of the bees' work in the text. Sapoznik also notes that Christ, too, "the Light of the World, was compared to a candle, the wax his body, the wick his soul, and the flame the godhead."²⁴ The corporeal metaphor of wax to Christ's own body is grounded in Catholic theology, a system of belief that places much emphasis on an interpretation of the Eucharist ritual as the literal consumption of Christ's body and blood.

²³ Alexandra Sapoznik, "Bees in the Medieval Economy: Religious Observance and the Production, Trade, and Consumption of Wax in England, c. 1300-1555," *Economic History Review* 72, no. 4 (2019), 1152.

²⁴ Sapoznik, "Bees in the Medieval Economy," 1153.

3.1 Wax and the Church

The use of a wax as a corporeal metaphor in early Christianity and throughout the Middle Ages takes form in a starkly different way to the uses seen in other periods. Many of the examples in this essay are effigies in appearance, be they life-size or small-scale, and are used to emulate the physicality of a specific person. First seen in the tenth century, Exultet rolls in Southern Italy were used in conjunction with a candle during the Paschal ritual (Figure 2). In the example of Paschal candles, the wax candle symbolizes the body of Christ without mimicking it in appearance. The candlestick, that is, the base beneath the candle, might be elaborately decorated with paintings of biblical figures or otherwise artistically fashioned, but the wax candle itself is a white column not fashioned in the form of a human figure, but nonetheless treated like a body. The Roman Missal details how the wax would be pierced with five grains of incense representing the five wounds of Christ, in the form of a cross, while a prayer referencing the violence inflicted upon his body was recited.

During the Easter ritual, an account of which curator Margaret B. Freeman detailed in her writing, all candles and lights within the church are extinguished, after which the Paschal candle, so named for the Hebrew word for Passover, is ignited. Freeman describes the ceremony, writing that “the ‘old fire’ which was extinguished...symbolized the ‘old law which reached its fulfillment by the death of Christ’; the ‘new fire’ was the new law, that is to say, Christ himself.”²⁵ Christ’s Resurrection is acted out through this ceremony, with the Paschal candle being used to ignite the other candles in the church, thus “[showing] that the flame of the Holy

²⁵ Margaret B. Freeman, “Lighting the Easter Candle,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 3, no. 8 (1945), 196.

Spirit proceeds from Christ and that not only the apostles and prophets...but also all the faithful of the church have been illuminated by Him.”²⁶

In the context of this object and this ritual, the wax stands in for the body of Christ and the flame for the Holy Spirit. The theme of sacrifice is central, as the events of the Crucifixion and Resurrection give purpose to the ceremony. The Exultet, the chant read by the priest while blessing the candle before it is lit, contains a short passage that may shed light on why wax is a suitable substance to transmute the idea of sacrifice:

On this, your night of grace, O holy Father,
accept this candle, a solemn offering,
the work of bees and of your servants’ hands,
an evening sacrifice of praise, this gift from your most holy Church.²⁷

Illuminated scrolls known as Exultet Rolls include illustrations of beekeeping. The purposeful mention of bees and their work underscores the theme of sacrifice, and as mentioned earlier in this section, bees were thought to be virginal, making their own sacrificial substance a product of virtue and a fitting material out of which to fashion a metaphorical holy body. This example is unique in that the tactile ability of wax to be manipulated and to hold a flame are important, as the wax is pierced in place of Christ’s body, and used as a metaphorical means of resurrection, but also carries a more mystical and romantic connotation about bees and the process of wax-making itself by the people of the medieval church. The overtly Christian nature of this example distinguishes it from pagan examples of antiquity, while still retaining the common necessity of physical manipulation.

I use the term “metaphorical body” in reference to different objects at several points in this essay, but I find the Paschal candle example to take the term most literally. In his

²⁶ Freeman, “Lighting the Easter Candle,” 196.

²⁷ “Exultet Chant,” *The Roman Missal*.

investigation of early modern Christian art, Alexander Nagel writes that “The ritual of the lighting of the candle was commonly called the *sacrificium vespertinum*. The text of the Exultet...makes direct reference to the sacrifice of the Paschal lamb...Before the candle is lit, incense is placed at the top of the candle in the form of a cross, and then the candle itself is offered as a sacrifice to God.” This passage illustrates how the candle was a surrogate sacrificial body, akin to both the lamb sacrificed for the Passover feast, as well as the Lamb of God, Christ. Nagel goes on write, “the flame with which the Paschal candle is lit symbolizes the divinity of Christ, triumphant again in the Resurrection. The flame, shedding light and rising upward, is a figure for the body of Christ rising from the tomb.”²⁸ The flame symbolizes Christ, but in this example, it is for his resurrected spirit, while the wax candle, which is pierced in the shape of a cross, is a proxy for his mortal body. Once again, the properties of wax allow it to connote death, though now in a Christian, Eucharistic context.

²⁸ Alexander Nagel, *The Controversy of Renaissance Art* (Chicago: The Univeristy of Chicago, 2011), 186.

4 REVERENCE AND VIOLENCE IN RENAISSANCE EFFIGIES

During the Renaissance period in Europe, effigies of royalty were popular in funeral ceremonies and as memorials, or even immortalizations, to keep in public spaces after the king or queen had died. Like the Roman full-body effigies of antiquity, they could be used in the actual funeral ceremony to represent the natural body of the deceased. They could also be used as votives, objects placed in a church with the intention that the person whom they resembled would be healed or otherwise looked upon favorably by God, saints, or other holy figures. Votives could also be made in the form of wax body parts rather than an entire body, if, for instance, the churchgoer wished to heal an ailment specific to the foot. Accuracy in appearance is necessary for these objects to serve their intended purposes; a funeral effigy must clearly emulate the deceased in order to function as a vessel for grief and respect, while a votive object must resemble the body or body part it is offered in an appeal to heal. Conversely, effigies were also created with harmful intentions, in the cases of poppets and punishment effigies. These examples highlight the tactile properties of wax over the visual, particularly its ability to be abused and destroyed as a metaphor for a human body, either in religious ritual or secular punishment. The disparate objectives of reverence and violence share a common theme, mortality, that takes form in the following examples of wax sculpture, with reverence being the primary objective in objects that centered the visual and resemblance, and violence and manipulation being the objectives in objects that centered the tactile.

4.1 Votive and Funeral Effigies

A well-known example of wax effigies being used for votive purposes was after the attempted assassination of Lorenzo de' Medici in Florence in 1478. Three life-size wax effigies

of his body were fashioned, with one dressed in the bloodstained clothing he had been wearing at the time of his attack, and placed inside churches in Florence and Assisi.²⁹ His family wished to thank the higher powers for what must have been a divine intervention to preserve Lorenzo's life, and also to broadcast to the people of Florence that such a powerful man could not be easily taken down. Historian and artist Giorgio Vasari praised the effigies for their impressively lifelike appearance, writing that they were "...painted in oils with all the ornaments of hair and everything else that was necessary, so lifelike and so well wrought that they seem no mere images of wax, but actual living men."³⁰ The emphasis on maintaining the appearance of living flesh seems counter to my argument on wax's connection to death, but as Georges Didi-Huberman writes, "wax...has been invested with the value of a haunting memory, a threat, a nightmare."³¹ In Lorenzo's case, his life was threatened and he lived through the nightmare. His living flesh bore the wounds of a near-death experience, and the blood soaking his clothing emphasized his proximity to death during his attack. The notion of memory is central to understanding how wax takes the forms life and death, and how closely the two are related. In the case of a funeral effigy, remembrance of the deceased is a key objective in fashioning the effigy in the deceased's likeness. In the case of a votive effigy like Lorenzo's, remembrance of violence is centered. Although Lorenzo did not meet his end in the 1478 attack, the importance of the memory of his nearness to death highlights mortality in this example. While most effigies made with a reverential objectives were funerary, and thus made in memory of the deceased

²⁹ Roberta Panzanelli, "Compelling Presence," In *Ephemeral Bodies*, ed. Roberta Panzanelli (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 13.

³⁰ Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite* 3:374, as quoted in Panzanelli, "Compelling Presence," in *Ephemeral Bodies*, 13.

³¹ Georges Didi-Huberman, "Viscosities and Survivals," In *Ephemeral Bodies*, ed. Roberta Panzanelli, (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 154.

person, Lorenzo's was made in memory of an event, in particular an event that displayed his vitality while also centering mortality, and this was done through painstaking visual emulation of both Lorenzo's appearance and the wounds he bore.

4.2 Political Poppets and Punishment Effigies

A fascinating discovery was made in London in the late summer of 1578, when three wax effigies were found "covered over with a great variety of different signs" and were reported to government officials.³² One of the effigies was inscribed "Elizabeth" on its forehead, and this detail caused some alarm within the royal circle, as reigning Queen Elizabeth I had garnered a degree of controversy by reinstating Protestantism as the state religion in England. The effigies were neither votive nor funerary in nature, but were in fact found to be poppets, not unlike the small poppets used in rituals of sympathetic magic in ancient Rome and Egypt. The uncovering of the figures led to public interest, and less than a decade later, in 1585, a play was published titled *Fedele and Fortunio*, which features a scene "in which a wax image with a name inscribed on its forehead is covered over with marks and signs, anointed with oil, pricked with a needle through the heart, and melted by flame—all of the elements present in the 1578 case."³³ The play was performed before Elizabeth herself, but fell into obscurity quickly after, and was omitted from almost all texts written since on witchcraft in the theater of early modern Europe.³⁴

Although poppets can be made with a variety of substances, many being the same that are used in artistic figural sculpture, wax poppets specifically were linked to Catholicism. English

³² Brett D. Hirsch, "Three Wax Images, *Two Italian Gentlemen*, and One English Queen," .” In *Magical Transformations on the Early Modern English Stage*, ed. Lisa Hopkins and Helen Ostovich, (London: Routledge, 2016), 155.

³³ Hirsch, "Three Wax Images," 155.

³⁴ Hirsch, "Three Wax Images," 156.

historian Pamela Pilbeam writes, “Painted wax figures [were] an integral part of the ceremonies of the Roman Catholic Church,” which is true of funeral and processional effigies, but magical poppets draw from sources that pre-date Christianity.³⁵ Poppets were first associated with pagan magic, as is displayed in the previously mentioned examples of Roman and Graeco-Egyptian poppets, which were made during the early centuries after Christianity came to be, but before it was adopted by Rome and Greece. The propensity for wax to be physically manipulated is key in this example. The poppet is not described as having any visual resemblance to Elizabeth, but rather is inscribed with her name to denote who is being represented. The poppet is then manipulated to complete the violent ritual.

Catholicism was looked at by some Protestants as being embedded with magic and the supernatural, as its ritual-heavy practice seemed mysterious in comparison to the relatively austere practices of the Lutheran or Anglican churches. Queen Elizabeth’s chief adviser William Cecil had discredited Elizabeth’s Catholic cousin and potential rival Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots, partially by characterizing her as a “witch and sorceress,” a practitioner of a “‘superstitious’ religion prone to belief in magical forces.”³⁶ This was echoed in the beliefs of other Protestants in early modern England, which created anti-Catholic sentiment among the largely Anglican English government, although Elizabeth herself was thought to be a more tolerant ruler than many.

The passage transcribed earlier in this section, taken from *Fedele and Fortunio*, illustrates how wax’s physicality was of utmost importance in the context of the poppet; that is, how it required the figure be readily manipulated and violated, and how wax was the only material that

³⁵ Hirsch, “Three Wax Images,” 159.

³⁶ Glyn Parry, “The Monarchical Republic and Magic,” *Reformation* 17, no. 1 (2012), 30.

could be punctured with a sharp object in a specific “body part” (the “heart” of the poppet), melted by heat, and overall exist as a conduit to harness the formless power of the ritual and transfer it to the natural body. The materiality of wax is also important in its association with Catholic ritual. The benign wax votives and funeral effigies of the church are here transformed into malevolent objects whose sole purpose is to bring harm to the unlucky person whom they favor. The two examples in this section, the votive or funeral effigy, and the poppet, illustrate the duality of wax’s mimetic abilities. In the former, it is reverence and visual resemblance that require the properties of wax, while in the latter, the tactile capacity of wax to be physically violated explains the artist’s choice of medium.

5 ANATOMICAL MODELS AND MEMENTO MORI IN THE BAROQUE PERIOD

During the Baroque period, which is usually dated to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe, funeral effigies and death masks continued to be popular among the upper classes, including church and government officials. In addition to these religiously affiliated ceremonies, new discoveries in medical technology gave rise to a previously unseen type of wax figure: the anatomical model. These models were used by doctors and scientists to study human anatomy in the hopes of developing more effective treatments for disease and injury, and to replace human cadavers with more permanent bodies to study. These two seemingly unrelated wax anatomies do in fact share a commonality, and that is the somewhat difficult define function of the memento mori, objects meant to remind the viewer of their own mortality, with the funeral effigies operating in the sacred space, and the anatomical models in the secular, or “public” space.³⁷ The anatomical model’s status as public memento mori was in large part due to the combined factors of visual resemblance and tactility. Models could be seen in classrooms, medical theaters, and by the general public in spaces like La Specola in Florence, Italy, a natural history museum which was founded in the eighteenth century. Seldom before their advent had a sculpture been created that produced the visceral reaction in viewers that these models could induce. Prior to and concurrent with anatomical models were punishment effigies that also produced strong feelings in viewers, though these were made with different intended purposes.

³⁷ Regina Deckers, *La Scandalosa* in Naples: A Veristic Waxwork as Memento Mori and Ethical Challenge,” *Oxford Art Journal* 36. No. 1 (2013), 89.

5.1 Execution in Wax

Punishment effigies are used even today, often burned in protests and depicting politicians embroiled in controversy, but in Renaissance-era Europe, punishment effigies served a much more literal purpose. Effigies were made in likeness of criminals who were absent at the time of trial—either because they had not been apprehended, or because they had already died—and were tortured and executed by the governing powers, be they political, religious, or both. One example of this is the execution in effigy of Sigismondo Malatesta, who was “found guilty of treason against the pope,” and sentenced to death by burning. Pope Pius II, the pope at the time of the incident in 1462, had an effigy sculpted which “was to imitate ‘the wicked and accursed man’s features so exactly that it seemed a real person rather than an image.’”³⁸ Since this effigy and others like it were not intended to and did not survive, the exact materiality of the figures is unknown. However, based on the importance of a meticulous physical resemblance to the criminal, particularly in the face, we might surmise that some of these effigies used wax to create fine detail seen in facial features. Since these effigies were made specifically to be destroyed, use of expensive or highly regarded materials was not fiscally prudent, at least in high quantities. Materials like straw and cheaper woods would have been used for the bodies of such figures, as full-sized wax figures were relegated to votives and funeral effigies of royal, or at least well-respected, members of society, and wood and straw burn as well as wax melts. We may infer that wax may have been used to model the facial details of the Malatesta effigy because it was commissioned from the highest order, the Pope.

³⁸ Allie Terry Fritsch, “Execution by Image: Visual Spectacularism and Iconoclasm in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe,” In *Death, Torture and the Broken Body in European Art, 1300-1650*, ed. John R. Decker and Mitzi Kirkland-Ives (Farnham: Ashgate Press, 2015), 195.

A Baroque-era example of the punishment effigy is the case of Kai Lykke, a Danish nobleman who was executed in effigy after accusing the reigning queen of adultery and then fleeing to Sweden. The execution in absentia took place in 1661 in Copenhagen and the figure is described as being “constructed out of wood and fashioned with moveable arms and legs. Its wooden frame was then covered with human clothing...The head, constructed of wax, bore the detailed facial features of Lykke.”³⁹ This is the first Scandinavian example of such practices, and in the written account of the event, wax is confirmed to be a medium used to build the effigy. The figure was treated as if it were the actual body of Lykke, being “[knelt] before executioners, blindfolded, and stripped of its necktie. The effigy then patiently waited for beheading by the executioner as hundreds of witnesses stood by. After the execution, the decapitated wax head was displayed alongside the gloved hands in the pillory of the marketplace so that witnesses could affirm the ‘death’ of the offender.”⁴⁰ Since the head was the only part of the effigy that was publicly displayed after “execution,” it was important that it bore a striking resemblance to the face of Lykke. It was also important that the effigy materials were easily destroyed by burning, as most punishment effigies were eventually burned as a final damning of the offender. Wax would serve both of these purposes more than any other material. Although fine detail can be achieved through carving stone, the stone will not burn, and the process of carving is time consuming. Wood will burn, but manipulation of the drier and harder material won’t yield the scrupulous details that wax will, nor does it resemble flesh in texture. Wax presents an ideal solution, as it breaks down quickly in extreme heat, and also bears the tactile hallmarks of human skin. This illustrates the physical strengths, and then the visual strengths, of wax in this function.

³⁹ Terry-Fritsch, “Execution by Image,” 196.

⁴⁰ Terry-Fritsch, “Execution by Image,” 197-98.

The appearance of wax in this case is important, but secondary to the physical violence that can be enacted upon it. This particular effigy was beheaded and then burned, displaying its ability to be both cut like human flesh and cremated like a human body. Observing the case of punishment effigies, the composition of wax makes it the optimal material to emulate death in a metaphorical execution.

5.2 Baroque Death Masks and Effigies

A Baroque example of funeral effigies which highlights the importance of resemblance and began during the early Renaissance period, continuing into the eighteenth century, is that of the Italian doges. Doges, elected heads of state, ruled over early modern republics on the Italian peninsula, such as Venice and Genoa. In 1485, an effigy was made of Venetian Doge Giovanni Mocenigo after he died of the bubonic plague, as his natural body was not suited for public viewing.⁴¹ Historian Ernst Kantorowicz describes the introduction of funeral effigies to France in the fourteenth century, explaining how the allegorical body functioned: "...enclosed in a coffin of lead, which itself was encased in a casket of wood, there rested the corpse of the king, his mortal and normally visible—though now invisible—body natural; whereas his normally invisible body politic was on this occasion visibly displayed by the effigy in its pompous regalia: a *persona ficta*—the effigy—impersonating a *persona ficta*—the *Dignitas*."⁴² The same objective was seen in Venice. The effigy needed not only serve as a proxy for the king as a mortal person, but for the king as the head of the state, which included all of the citizens who carried on his legacy after death. Over the next two-hundred years, effigies were used in funerals of doges and other

⁴¹ Ballestriero, "The Dead in Wax," In *Proceedings of the Art of Death and Dying Symposium*, (Houston: University of Houston Libraries, 2012), 12.

⁴² Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 421.

political leaders for different reasons, including the preference of the deceased not to be embalmed, as was the case for doges Leonardo Donà and Antonio Priuli in the seventeenth century.⁴³ The wax effigies in these examples were dressed and “shown for three days in the Hall of the Ducal Palace,” after which they were carried in procession to a church funeral before being buried in the family tomb alongside the natural body of the deceased.⁴⁴

This ritual seems akin to the earlier practice, also on the Italian peninsula, of the ancient Romans, as is described in an earlier section of this essay. In both rituals, the wax body of the deceased is treated as if it were the natural body, monitored by physicians, looked upon by priests, and finally put to rest in a traditional funeral ceremony, either by burial or burning. In both instances, wax is a preferable material, as it can be easily destroyed by fire if called for, but can also be preserved in a tomb, as the surviving head of Doge Alvise IV Mocenigo (d. 1778) exhibits (Figure 3). The head of Doge Alvise also displays how the visual appearance of wax had a profound impact on the effect of the object. This particular bust is exceptionally naturalistic, portraying a calm countenance and facial features distinct to the Doge, including skin texture and a bump on the nose. The wax’s translucence gives the object a glowing effect, enhancing the life-like quality of the bust. In another parallel to the Roman patrician busts, these portraits were kept in vitrine cases, as we see in the example of Doge Alvise, that emulate the *armaria* of antiquity.

5.3 Science Begets a New Flesh

During the Renaissance period in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, scientific interest grew, and this led to advances in medical technology during the seventeenth century that

⁴³ Ballestriero, “The Dead in Wax,” 12.

⁴⁴ Ballestriero, “The Dead in Wax,” 12-14.

changed the way physicians looked at the human body. One of the earliest known wax anatomical models was made by Tuscan artist Ludovico Cardi, widely known as Cigoli, at the turn of the seventeenth century. It was of small scale, similar to the models used by artists before constructing a sculpture in stone, but with a distinctly scientific eye for musculature.⁴⁵ Over time, as their function evolved, the models grew to be life-sized. The demand for a model that could be used in place of a human cadaver is easy to understand. Human remains could be difficult to acquire, and their decay, especially in the time before embalming became widespread, made them useful for only a short period of time. Models of a more enduring material were necessary to keep up with medical advancements, and wax provided a fine medium for such objects. Tactility was an important factor to consider when building a model of the human body. While clay could provide an easily manipulated surface, it could not supply the elasticity and supple texture of flesh, which wax could more readily mimic. Other materials, such as wood and stone, would present the same problem, as well as being more expensive and more difficult to work with than wax. Pigmentation of wax was another advantage in using it to build human organs and flesh; wax is naturally a yellowish tan color that is not far from the color of the skin of many Europeans, from whom many of the figures likely would have been modeled. Wax is also malleable enough to have pigment mixed into it while it is in liquid form, rather than only applied to its surface, though painting was also a popular method of coloring the models. Through the paired advantages of optical resemblance and tactile malleability, wax anatomical models signify an evolutionary revelation in the timeline of corporeal wax sculpture.

⁴⁵ Roberta Ballestriero, "Anatomical Models and Wax Venuses: Art Masterpieces of Scientific Craft Works?," *Journal of Anatomy* 216 (2010), 224.

Sicilian artist Gaetano Giulio Zumbo, born in 1656, was a forerunner in the field of anatomical models. Viewing his life-size wax model of a head, the earliest known of this kind, made circa 1695, is a visceral experience, even when seen from a photograph (Figure 4). In sculpting the head, Zumbo did not idealize the reality of death, or attempt to portray the subject as still healthy, as was common in some contemporary and later wax “Venuses.” Instead, Zumbo shows the heavy-lidded face of a decaying man, with yellowing skin and trickles of blood leaking from the nose and mouth. One reason for this shift to a more dramatically cadaverous imagining might be the sculpture’s intended use; the model was made to resemble a dead body, which we have seen before, but in this case, it is not a funeral effigy, or an effigy that demands a degree of reverence and respect to the deceased. This model’s function is to stand in for a corpse in a medical capacity, and to be able to be dissected either with the hands or with the eyes, with visible musculature, skeletal structure, and organs. Instead of a clean and composed corpse, prepared for burial, this cadaver is newly deceased, and beginning to show signs of decomposition.

Another explanation for the grotesque appearance of the model head is that its maker’s intention went beyond medical research. Regina Deckers describes the anatomical theaters of the Early Modern period as “public *memento mori*,” reminders of death that went beyond religious tradition and ventured into the secular realm.⁴⁶ Memento mori had been a largely private and religious tradition, with small objects fashioned for the purpose of self-reflection, but these large-scale, public works created a new type of secular memento mori, fitting during a period that was wrought with diseases like the bubonic plague, an epidemic of which tore through Naples in the

⁴⁶ Regina Deckers, “Frightening Fragments – The Representation of the Corpse in Baroque Sculpture,” *Journal of Baroque Studies* (2017), 89.

mid-seventeenth century. With death ever-present and casting a pall over the lives of Europe's citizens, piety and spiritual wellness were of paramount importance to the God-fearing public, and these public memento mori functioned, perhaps subconsciously, to remind the population of their shared fate. By fashioning memento mori in the form of human bodies that both looked and felt realistic, people were confronted with their mortality and encouraged to prioritize moral fitness. The sensory aspects of the wax sculpture, both visual and physical, gave the object its emotional and intellectual power.

6 EPILOGUE: ZUMBO'S TABLEAUX OF DEATH

Gaetano Zumbo's narrative tableaux, commissioned in Florence by Grand-Duke Cosimo III de' Medici and his son Ferdinando in the late seventeenth century, are prime examples of wax's ability to evoke intense reactions in the beholder. The figures in these dioramas are small enough that the viewer must get close to them to fully see the scenes, requiring intimacy and an active employment of the senses. Wax has historically been singled out for its olfactory and tactile qualities, and how the malleability of wax is a metaphor for the soul and memory.⁴⁷ Art historian and curator Jane Eade records the famously macabre Marquis de Sade's reaction to a Zumbo piece, quoting, "So powerful is the impression produced by this masterpiece that even as you gaze at it your other senses are played upon, moans audible, you wrinkle your nose as if you could detect the evil odours of mortality."⁴⁸ For Zumbo's work to impress de Sade, whose deviant exploits are the stuff of legend and after whose name the word "sadism" was coined, we can see that these tableaux held great power, both as art objects and as memento mori. Zumbo's tableaux *The Triumph of Time*, *The Plague*, and *The Vanity of Human Greatness* serve as memento mori, each in a unique way (Figures 5, 6, 7). Beginning with the earliest commission by Cosimo III, *The Triumph of Time*, we note the figure of Time as a cruel reminder of the ticking clock. In this tableau, Zumbo has modeled the figure of Time on the left side of the composition, his skin a tan and healthy color as he holds his scythe and gestures toward the carnage to the right. To the right are the bodies of the dead, most prominently two small children and a woman, each in a different shade of yellow or brown to show varying degrees of decay. In the far background are painted ruins of a pyramid and columns, and in low relief are two figures

⁴⁷ Christine Göttler, *Last Things: Art and the Religious Imagination in the Age of Reform* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2010), 253.

⁴⁸ Jane Eade, "The Theatre of Death," *Oxford Art Journal* 36, no. 1 (2013), 110.

carrying between them yet another corpse. These background figures as well as the figures of the woman and children were likely adapted from French painter Nicolas Poussin's *The Plague of Ashdod*, dating to 1630, which portrays a Biblical event but took inspiration from a concurrent plague in Italy.⁴⁹ The theme of the bubonic plague is seen multiple times in Zumbo's work and no doubt cast a pall over the lives of every person in Europe during its time.

A later scene of a similar nature is depicted in the aptly titled *La Pestilenza, or The Plague*, which likely depicts an outbreak in Naples in 1656.⁵⁰ This image is even more gruesome than *The Triumph of Time*, as it features many more bodies and is emotionally charged. An account of a plague epidemic in Florence in 1630 lists symptoms including, "...burning face and eyes, dry and black tongue, unusual facial expression, unspeakable prostration...and also horrible pustules which contain water and are hideously black like carbuncles."⁵¹ This visceral description of the horrific effects by the plague on human bodies is realized most starkly in this tableau. The ground is strewn with corpses in shades of dark green, yellow, and brown, the most startling of which is a recently deceased woman with a dying child trying in vain to breastfeed. The plague attendant to the right strains under the weight of the body he carries, the startling juxtaposition of the green corpse against his tan flesh yet another amplification of the carnage. In the painted background, a figure in low relief burns bodies taken off a cart, while a ruinous city is seen in the distance.⁵² The use of wax in images of the plague seems a purposefully morbid choice considering the rise of beeswax prices during such events due to the need for funerary

⁴⁹ R.W. Lightbown, "Gaetano Giulio Zumbo – I: The Florentine Period," *The Burlington Magazine* 106, no. 740 (1964), 490.

⁵⁰ Lightbown, "Gaetano Giulio Zumbo," 493.

⁵¹ Carlo M. Cipolla, *Fighting the Plague in Seventeenth-Century Italy* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 90.

⁵² Lightbown, "Gaetano Giulio Zumbo," 493.

candles. The third of this set of commissions, *The Vanity of Human Greatness*, is perhaps the most pointed memento mori in the group. In this scene, an open vault contains the decomposing, blackish-green corpse of what we can infer is a Roman soldier, due to the marble sarcophagus on which he lies as well as the funerary lamp to the right.⁵³ On the sarcophagus are two skulls, serving as memento-mori-within-memento-mori. Other corpses, including yet another child as well as a skeleton, are seen within the composition. The central character in this composition, however, is not living or dead, but is the ivory-colored allegory of Melancholy, perched atop the broken pediment of a tomb. Perhaps as a cautioning against the paganism of the dead Romans, the memento mori nature of this piece has more overtly Christian overtones. The angelic figure of Melancholy mourns the deceased in a composition “intended to provoke Christian meditation on death and the tomb.”⁵⁴ Such intense imagery repels some viewers, but during the time of Zumbo’s prolificacy, such feelings of horror were “considered profitable to salvation.”⁵⁵ Zumbo’s patron, Cosimo III, was notoriously devout, and images intended to arouse in the viewer what the Jesuit writer Daniello Bartoli might call contemplation of the grave would only further serve his pious interests.⁵⁶ Giorgio Vasari asserts that wax is inherently suited to represent the deceased in portraiture, and Archbishop Gabriele Paleotti argues that Christian art is worthless if it does not stir emotions of penance and piety.⁵⁷ Zumbo’s dioramas accomplish both of these objectives. Therefore, the importance of medium in these tableaux is as essential as the image itself. Wax is, in effect, a memento mori on its own, before it is even touched by the

⁵³ Lightbown, “Gaetano Giulio Zumbo,” 493.

⁵⁴ Lightbown, “Gaetano Giulio Zumbo,” 493.

⁵⁵ Lightbown, “Gaetano Giulio Zumbo,” 494.

⁵⁶ Deckers, “*La Scandalosa* in Naples: A Veristic Waxwork as Memento Mori and Ethical Challenge,” 83.

⁵⁷ Gabriele Paleotti, *Discourse on Sacred and Profane Images* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute, 2012), via Göttler, 255-256.

hands of the artist. It changes form with heat and cold, it exists as a solid and then it evaporates. Its ephemeral nature corresponds to the ephemeral nature of human flesh, and like human flesh, it has the “tendency to decay.”⁵⁸ Wax is also allegorical to memory in the eyes of prominent philosophers such as Plato, who wrote about how wax is a “metaphor for the soul,” likening a wax tablet imprinted with a seal to the soul imprinted by the memories of its vessel.⁵⁹

The corporeal quality of wax is summed up well by art historian Roberta Panzanelli when she writes, “Far more than any other sculptural media, [wax] is tied to the processes of life: birth, metamorphosis, dissolution – and sometimes regeneration.”⁶⁰ It differs from other widely used materials in the early modern and baroque periods. Unlike marble, which is always solid stone, wax is transitory and can take multiple forms. Unlike bronze, which, like wax, can be both liquid and solid, wax is organic, formed from living matter. Wood, although it is organic, does not capture the essence of human flesh in the convincing way that wax does. A sixteenth-century bishop of the commune of Bitonto, Cornelio Musso, gracefully shines light on how wax has been held as a sacred material for years, and how its own corporeality aligns so deeply with man’s: “The light is God, the wax is man, Christ is both...He is the wax that melts and ends in death, like us mortals.”⁶¹ In Zumbo’s tableaux as well as in his anatomical studies, the visceral portrayal of decaying flesh implores the viewer to contemplate their own impermanence. The three tableaux I have focused on in this epilogue, *The Triumph of Time*, *The Plague*, and *The Vanity of Human Greatness*, are so potent in their expression of mortality that other artwork

⁵⁸ Hanneke Grootenboer, "Introduction: On the Substance of Wax," *Oxford Art Journal* 36, no. 1 (2013), 6.

⁵⁹ Göttler, *Last Things*, 253.

⁶⁰ Panzanelli, Introduction, *Ephemeral Bodies*, In *Ephemeral Bodies*, ed. Roberta Panzanelli (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2008), 1.

⁶¹ Joanna Ebenstein, *The Anatomical Venus* (United Kingdom: Thames and Hudson Limited, 2016), 78.

renderings of similar subject matter pale in comparison. Even Poussin's oil painting *The Plague of Ashdod*, from which Zumbo modeled some of his figures, can hardly be held in the same regard. Rarely has one artist's work functioned such a variety of ways as Zumbo's. His anatomical models are intended to teach, his tableaux have the beauty and startling imagery of veristic artwork, and both can be said to function as memento mori in secular as well as Christian manners.

The gravity of the material cannot be overstated in these examples. Because of wax's capacity to be influenced by human hands, it becomes an extension of the human body itself. It retains the memory of a natural body long decomposed by emulating its visual appearance, in minute facial details and skin-like incandescence. Physically, it seems to be transformed without limit into a replica of a human body. The sheen of skin, both living and dead, the supple texture of musculature, the wetness of mucus and blood, and the texture of flesh, at once soft and firm, are all reproduced perfectly in wax. All these purposes are magnified to the extreme by the fact that they are done in beeswax, a material memento mori in itself.

7 CONCLUSION

The material of beeswax is formed of secretions from the glands of worker bees, which they then chew to make pliable. The animal origin of wax makes its inherent similarity to human flesh all the more uncanny, and the commonality between animals as diverse as honey bees and humans seems a poetic comment on our shared existence, and shared mortality. The ability of wax to yield readily to human touch gives it a quality of intimacy not seen in other media; it corresponds directly to body heat and the artist's hands, and its fragility and delicacy parallels that of human flesh. Objects fabricated with opposing motives, like votives made in the hopes of salvation, and poppets, used to cause harm and death, find a common form in wax sculpture because of its propensity for optical illusion; unhealthy skin is often described as "waxen," and the yellowish hue of uncolored beeswax can take on a corpse-like appearance, as we see in the tableaux of Zumbo. The physical qualities of wax are equally important in the history of its use in interactive sculpture. It allows effigies to be burned, melted, pierced, beheaded, posed, and operated on, be it in the name of funerary ritual, punishment, or medicine, all under the theme of mortality and death. In each of the four periods I have covered, from antiquity to the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the Baroque, similarities exist in the causality of wax's use in sculpture. The rituals in which tactility are of greater importance seem to be aligned with violence and manipulation, while the rituals of reverence take greater interest in visual appearance and memory. The two are combined in anatomical models, which must appear to the eye as a natural human body and be physically manipulated in their use as tools of science and medicine.

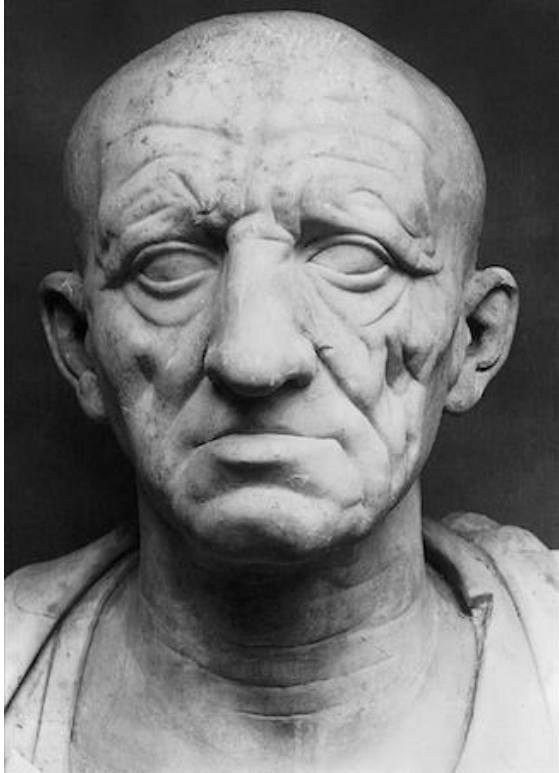


Figure 7.1 Patrizio Torlonia, c. 75-50 BCE, Palazzo Torlonia, Rome, Italy, marble.



Figure 7.2. Paschal Candle, 20th-21st century, beeswax.



Figure 7.3. Funeral Effigy of Doge Alvise IV Mocenigo c. 1779, Scuola Grande Arciconfraternità di San Rocco, Venice, Italy, H: 33 cm., beeswax.



Figure 4 Gaetano Giulio Zumbo, Wax Anatomical Head, 1695, La Specola, Florence, Italy, beeswax and pigment



Figure 5 Gaetano Giulio Zumbo, The Triumph of Time, 18th century, Museo Nazionale, Florence, Italy, H: 84.9 cm, L: 89.7 cm, D: 45.5 cm, beeswax, mixed media.



Figure 6 Gaetano Giulio Zumbo, The Triumph of Time, 18th century, Museo Nazionale, Florence, Italy, H: 84.9 cm, L: 89.7 cm, D: 45.5 cm, beeswax, mixed media.



Figure 7.7. Gaetano Giulio Zumbo, The Vanity of Human Greatness, 18th century, Museo Nazionale, Florence, Italy, dimensions unknown, beeswax, mixed media.

In Zumbo's *Theatre of Death* tableaux, physicality, optics, religion, politics, violence, and memory all coalesce to epitomize the aptitude of wax to fully capture the essence of flesh, death, and mortality.

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