

Cinzia Conti (Rom)

Some characteristics of the sculptured bas relief

The restoration of Trajan's Column, conducted in 1981-1988, allowed us to get a close look at the details of the sculpture, which had never before been seen all together and for so long. The column is very generous in this respect, with its wealth of detail and state of preservation. The north and west surfaces are very well preserved, thanks to a golden yellow patina of calcium oxalate: beneath the patina we can see scratches produced by the tools used by the sculptors.

The same shapes and objects are executed in different ways (the rocks, leaves, trees, hands, feet, and tents); in fact, I was able to identify the hand of different sculptors, seven in all I believe, easily recognizable, sometimes because of the different tools they used.

Even the 58 portraits of Trajan show differences, perhaps due to the model that was used, certainly sculpted by different hands. The comparison of the portraits in sequence gives an impression of an emperor that has started to age a little by the time we get to the top.

By the end of the restoration there were even more questions to be answered. Were the drums carved separately and then assembled or was the frieze carved after the drums had been put in place: from the top or the bottom?

Did the sculptors follow a complex and precise drawing or were they each assigned a specific subject and a specific area to work on? And what degree of autonomy did they have?

What models were used for Trajan's face? Coins or marble busts? Which ones in particular?

Could it be that the sculpture was then coloured? What techniques were used and with what effect?

The present patina of golden yellow is artificial or natural?

I gave each of these questions some consideration but can only offer some suggestions.

Despite the many novelties to come out of the close examination, Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli's study "Il Maestro delle Imprese di Traiano" is still authoritative.