How materials make meaning

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Without matter art could not exist; without matter art would be something it had never once desired to be.
Henri Focillon

Recent volumes of the Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek have focused on the representation of the artist and the relation between art and science, respectively, and materials and their role in creative production have implicitly been addressed in many of the contributions. The present volume takes a step further and explicitly addresses materials as active components in the conception, production and interpretation of artworks, in order to foreground the relation between materials and meaning — a large yet considerably understudied subject in art history. The volume’s title, Meaning in materials, has been chosen to highlight the specific nature of artistic materials, which never occur in the single abstract as ‘material’ or ‘materiality’ but as ‘many kinds of actual matters or substances — numerous, complex, visible, weighty’.

With just these four adjectives, Henri Focillon, who was among the first to address materials from an art theoretical perspective, compellingly conveyed the immense relevance of materials in art. Materials’ visual and haptic qualities, for instance, guide the choice of subject matter, personal and period style as well as aesthetic perception. Their physical properties afford the development of tools and technologies for and by artists who transform materials into depictions and representations. Their value make them political actors as they embody power and splendor, while a lack of value may turn them into symbols of sobriety in theological disputes.

This impact, however, can rarely be pinned down by determining the distinct meaning of a material in a work of art, like determining the iconography of a certain motif. On only a few occasions is the meaning of a material clearly defined, for instance when a sculpture is carved from a piece of wood that is held to have magic qualities or when the use of precious materials is reserved for a special person. Most of the time, material meaning is more diffuse and has to be inferred from the ways in which specific material properties inform artistic process, as Michael Baxandall has shown in his classic study on sixteenth-century German limewood sculpture. Limewood, he writes, was a wood that ‘favored carving’ due to its elasticity and uniform cell structure, daring sculptors to create more sophisticated shapes than they could carve in oak. The same structure that afforded elasticity and smoothness, however, also made the wood prone to shrinkage when aging, causing it to split. Sculptors therefore became ‘chiromancers’ as they learned to anticipate...