



Belgian Black

Daniele Torcellini

Belgian Black refers to a marble stone known since the antiquity, quarried all-over the south west of Belgium, in an area around the cities of Namur, Dinant, Tournai, Basecles, Theux and Mazy (Golzinne). It is a limestone with a very fine and regular grain and high rate of purity in chemical composition, 93% calcium carbonate, 5% silica, 2% iron and manganese. It is one of the most intriguing and mysterious stone for its special features.

This limestone, which shows a deep black color, is characterized by the scarcity of fossils and calcite veins that allowed its polished black perfect uniformity and incomparable smoothness, making it a valuable and unique material. It is particularly appreciated for paving and interior design, as well as for fine sculpture. It is a sedimentary rock, it can be found in many outcrops of prehistoric terrains. Its color derives from an ancient and deep saturation of fossil hydrocarbons. The deposit of this material in a lagoon environment, in the absence of oxygen, happened during the Devonian and Carboniferous period, about 400 million years ago, during the Palaeozoic Era.

Carved slabs with latin inscriptions, found near the Belgian city of Namur, prove the use of this marble since the antiquity. Belgian Black, as recent researches confirmed, can be found also in the door of Saint Peter in Rome, where the epitaph the emperor Charlemagne offered to the Pope Adrian I is preserved. Columns and baptismal fonts have been realized in great quantity, near the Belgian quarries and then shipped all over the Europe, during the middle ages.

Renaissance and Baroque periods developed new architectural applications of this marble, reaching a high aesthetic impression, by juxtaposing Belgian Black with other colored marbles, quarried in Belgian areas too, such as Rouge Royal or Rouge Gritte especially, or with other materials. In the churches of the Catholic-Reformation period, Belgian Black has been largely employed, for its austere fascination, particularly suited in richly decorated polychromatic altars.

The Pietre Dure workshops settled in Florence in late XVI century used Belgian Black widely, mainly for the background of the stone paintings. During this period, the habit of naming Belgian Black as Paragone di Fiandra or Paragone di Inghilterra spread a lot, according to the tradition of using a hard stone, flint for example, to test the quality of metals like gold. The hardest stone known, was used to make a comparison (Paragone in Italian) to evaluate other materials.

Belgian Black was applied on a large scale in chessboard floorings, for example in the Palace of Versailles and the Chateau of Vaux-le-Vicomte. Until the 1930s it remained popular in Art Deco decorations such as clocks and vases. Despite its reputation, during the XX century, the exploitation of most of the quarries reduced progressively, due to the difficult underground operations required and to the high percentage of scraps in comparison with the useful material. Today it is a rare stone and one of the most expensive marbles in the world.

Belgian Black conveys a sense of arcane elegance. It has been though as unreachable for years, for its last quarry believed closed. It has been copied many times and its name has been overused for commercial purposes. In past, its deep color and its glossy brightness made it unique and incomparable, contributing to its success in architectural and artistic works.

At present, DCCAC has access to the only still existing quarry of this exclusive marble. DCCAC is pleased to offer worth opportunities to artists which would develop contemporary art projects where Belgian Black plays a significant role. DCCAC, rich of its own experience and knowledge in the field of hard-stones, is please to make available its stocks of this unique and fascinating material and to stimulate interesting relationships between artists and the most skilled artisans which can handle this precious stone.

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