Arte, Labour and the Senses: Globally Entangled Histories of Early Modern Making

by Jill Burke

Titian's *Rape of Europa* (1560-62, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum) is one of the most analysed paintings of the Renaissance. Often read in terms of patriarchal agency over women's bodies or its patron, King Philip II of Spain's, conquest of a global empire, it is also the material result of chains of extraction that involve animal and human toil. The linen of the canvas, for example, was derived from flax, tended by peasant farmworkers, then reliant on chains of labour to be threshed, retted, heckled, spun, and woven; the cochineal red lake of the fabric to which Europa clings was extracted from scale insects cultivated by indigenous workers in Oaxaca and around, brought to Europe in the fetid galleons that had been filled with slaves on their outward journey; the sky through which they travel was coloured with the blue pigment, smalt, likely derived from the subterranean world of cobalt miners in Saxony. As well, therefore as being propaganda for its patron, this painting's very materiality is rooted in Habsburg colonial expansion and extractive global trade. Attribution of this work solely to Titian conceals worlds of skill, work and exploitation.[1]

In period terms, too, all these workers were engaged in 'arte'. According to the 1612 Della Crusca Dictionary, *arte* was 'a habit drawn from experience, which one can undertake with reason, applying to any material/matter you wish' (*un'abito cavato dalla esperienza, di potere operar con ragione, intorno a qual si voglia materia*). *Abito* is a disposition acquired through repetition – a skill sedimented in the body through doing something many times. *Operar con ragione* locates knowledge within that action of operation, a unity of manual work with the reasoning of the mind. *Materia* can be both 'matter' in the abstract – as in the 'art of conversation', the 'art of medicine', or material stuff – as in cookery, painting, pharmacy, mining. *Arte*, thus, is a period category that cuts directly across current disciplinary divisions inherited from the post-Enlightenment exigencies of the university faculty, the survey book and the museum department.[2]

The global microhistory of Titian's painting thus might serve as an example of the possibilities of tracing connections and entanglements through materialities and labour. The seventh cycle of the Turin Humanities Programme asks fellows to consider how we can rewrite the history of early modern

[1] For a pioneering example of tracing the intersection of materiality and global reach, see Hamann, 'Interventions'. For a consideration of this trend, Riello, 'The "Material Turn"'. For a recent example relating to Philip II, Houghteling, 'Tapestry as Tainted Medium'.

[2] Shiner, *The Invention of Art*; Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*.

art, knowledge and culture more broadly to incorporate a new emphasis on materiality, labour and its effects on early modern ecosystems and environments.

This cycle sits at the intersection of histories of art, materiality, knowledge and labour. Historians of science and art have long questioned the teleological foundations of their respective disciplines, based upon a series of individual geniuses (mainly western European men) who were traditionally understood as key staging posts in progress towards the present day. The tracking of the 'scientific revolution' has now largely given way to an investigation into the history of knowledge more broadly, drawn to incorporate a wide range of people and practices, including a new recognition of local, household and indigenous expertise.[3] The roots of history of art in Vasarian biographical storytelling, plus the exigencies of an attribution-driven art market means that individual artist biographies long remained the default taxonomy of the field. However, the mainstream of the discipline has seen two key shifts – rather than focussing on individual city states, artists and patrons there has been a move towards global connections[4]; equally we have seen a huge expansion of the source base beyond painting, sculpture and architecture to incorporate all manner of crafted objects and material culture.[5] There has been some convergence in shared concerns of these disciplines, including an interest in hands-on methodologies for historical research[6], and a focus on human effects on the natural world.[7]

There are three areas that are particularly relevant for this call:

1) The entangled environment

Whilst the environmental impact of European conquest and colonisation of the Americas from 1492 has received a great deal of attention of late, there has been less consideration of human-led ecosystem change in other parts of the world – including areas of European expansion such as west Africa, the Atlantic Islands and Europe itself. Historians of global material culture have repositioned intellectual and artistic production within a worldwide web of connections – materials, goods, and people in a flux of exchange shaped by European exploration, trade, and colonialism. In tandem, there has been an increased interest in historical animal and plant studies that considers the increasingly global entanglements of humans and non-human animals, plants and minerals that characterise the early modern era.

[3] See the much cited discussion by Daston, 'The History of Science and the History of Knowledge'.

[4] For a recent summary of this trend, see Casale, 'Global Early Modern Art in Seven Objects'.

[5] For a recent intervention considering this widened scope for material culture studies, see Burghartz et al., *Materialized Identities in Early Modern Culture, 1450-1750*.

[6] As in, for example the Making and Knowing project at Columbia led by Pamela Smith, the Refashioning the Renaissance project at Aalto University, led by Paula Hohti; the Artechne project at Utrecht University, led by Sven Dupré.

[7] For example, see recent interventions Asmussen and Raphael, 'Resource Landscapes'; Petcu and Saß, 'Toward an Ecocritical History of Early Modern Art'.

2) Embodied knowledge

Against the macrocosm of human-made climate change, a parallel focus has been on the microcosm of embodied engagement with materials through historical reconstruction, which urges a different understanding of historical processes that cannot be found simply through reading. The incorporation of critical historical reconstruction/remaking can be used to test hypotheses and gain insight into the tacit knowledge of past practices and previously common substances, materials and objects.8 This has contributed to the re-evaluation of what constitutes expertise and increased historical understanding of materiality and making, particularly in areas where the archives are silent. How can we expand, challenge or use these techniques to understand historical subjects better? Can examples of past practices– as recently argued by Annette Kehnel and Tanja Romankiewicz, amongst others9 - present solutions to present-day challenges?

3) The historical sensorium

There is increasing interest, too, in the multisensory past. Whilst the importance of visual communication in the early modern period has long been shown as key to the development of knowledge regimes, there is now increasing focus on considering the multisensory nature of human encounters with the world. This has led to exciting ongoing work on touch, taste, hearing and smell.10 The difficulty of describing smells, sounds, or feelings in words means that findings can be challenging to convey and document in traditional academic formats such as the monograph and journal article.11 These points of tension and difficulty may be fruitful points of departure for conversations during the cycle.

What we are looking for

We invite projects from historians of any stripe – for example, art historians, historians of science and medicine/knowledge, historians of labour, and scholars of material culture. The focus can be on any aspect of making, both human and non-human, that connects Europe with the wider world in the period 1400-1700. Because the programme is based in Turin, part of its intellectual proposition and ethical grounding is for projects that take advantage of the exceptional historical resources of the region and/or areas that can be reached by train, to mitigate the project's own ecological footprint.

Turin sits in the shadow of the Alps, a city whose history is entwined with the control of mountain passes between Italy and the north. It was formerly the capital of the Duchy of Savoy, a political entity whose territory ranged over present-day France, Italy and Switzerland. At the north-western boundary

[8] Hendriksen, 'Rethinking Performative Methods in the History of Science'.
[9] Kehnel, *The Green Ages*. Romankiewicz, 'Translating the Iron Age'.
[10] See, for example, Antonelli et al., *Gendered Touch*; Hoffmann, *From Gluttony to Enlightenment*; Tullett, *Smell and the Past*.
[11] For a recent consideration of these issues, Leemans et al., 'Whiffstory'.

of the Po plain, it belongs to a wider northern and central Italian corridor – with Genoa's historic maritime networks and role in Atlantic trade, Venice's role as an entrepot for the Adriatic and the East, the university cultures of Bologna and Padua – the artistic and natural history collections of these republics and court cities characterised by investigation into the natural world in myriad ways. There is thus a concentration of unparalleled early modern archival, artistic, and material resources that are global in scope and easily within reach.

We would like to provoke discussion about how the past can be known: through the analysis of objects, through the senses, through digital approaches such as text mining, and through critical historical reconstruction. We welcome suggestions for adventurous and/or public-facing outputs as well as more traditional monographs and articles.

If projects require the use of facilities for reconstruction, postdocs are invited to spend time as visiting scholars at the School of History, Classics and Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh, where they will be able to draw on the support, expertise and facilities of the Centre for Historical Reconstruction Research and the associated Historical Reconstruction Lab.

Proposals might address, among much else:
Early modern attitudes to substances and their working. The properties, preparation and behaviour of particular materials — pigments, dyes, metals, stone, silk, wool, leather, glass, wood, cosmetics, foodstuffs, papers and parchments — and what those properties demanded of the people who worked them.

Knowledge as related to gender and social class. How was 'women's knowledge' or 'peasant knowledge' categorised differently from urban literate men's? How was it related to the proximal senses, to oral culture, to practice as opposed to theory? How did printing and the increasing translation of knowledge into written words through practical texts and recipes change ideas of where knowledge was located?

Collecting, organising and understanding nature – particularly the labour behind these new forms of collecting and organisation of objects. Who tended the newly created botanic gardens, looked after animal collections, transported specimens? How was their hands-on knowledge translated into text?

Labour and its conditions. Who did the work of making? Projects might focus on apprentices, assistants, women, rural and household workers, the enslaved and the coerced, farmyard animals or beasts of burden. We are interested in labour as work, not solely as a vehicle for knowledge, and we welcome projects that take repetition, maintenance, repair and reuse as seriously as invention.

Instruction and execution. Recipes, secrets, contracts, specifications and technical writing are prescriptive and always incomplete. What lies in the gap between the written instruction and the hands

that carried it out, and what can be recovered of it? How can we manage the large mass of data inherent in the vast recipe collections that survive from the early modern period?

Embodied understanding. How can the non-visual senses be understood and articulated as a form of knowledge? Does this allow us to incorporate a wider range of historical actors? How can we imagine diverse ways to convey sensory history beyond the written word?

Nature imagined and encountered. How early modern actors understood the substances they worked — as generative, animate, spiritually charged, dangerous, providential — and how those understandings shaped practice. How did European conceptions of nature change due to increased contact with non-European knowledge systems, with unfamiliar plants, animals and material objects?

The uses of the past. Whether and how this history can speak to present-day environmental and social questions.

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