

Showing, Persuading, Proving: Forms of Visual and Textual Evidence Production in Art Historical Writing, Connoisseurship, and Collection Practices of the Early Modern Era

A Workshop of the DFG Project: “The Materiality of Knowledge Orders and the Episteme of Drawing. The Drawing Albums of Sebastiano Resta.”

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5–7 October 2017, Leibniz Institute of European History Mainz (IEG)

Autopsy and empiricism experienced considerable growth during the early modern era, which was also constitutive for the viewing of art. Strategies of showing, persuading, and proving played a crucial role not only in early modern scientific practice but also—and increasingly—in both contemporaneous writing about art and in the emerging discipline of connoisseurship. The significance of autopsy and empiricism becomes especially clear in the collection and display of drawings, for which visual and textual evidence was marshalled to delineate specific organizational models, support attributions, or provide further information. Furthermore, in seventeenth-century texts on art, an increasing interest in the “*oculare ispezione*” can be found in the distinction between original and copy (Mancini) and in the growing significance of both descriptions of images (Bellori) and sources of evidence (Malvasia).

By drawing from vastly different sources—pamphlets, excerpts, letters, ekphrases, books and montages of drawings, etc.—we may analyze the ways that collectors, scholars, amateurs, and others handled “textual knowledge” and “visual knowledge.” Various lines of questioning may be pursued, including inquiry into terms used or practices of excerpt and commentary. What knowledge was preferred and how was it functionalized in relation to evaluation/attribution, periodization/classification, and methods and models? Can concrete statements be made regarding real work processes (thought and organizational processes, practices of reading and selection of excerpts)? How exactly did the production of textually- and visually-based evidence function in individual cases? What role did autopsy play in constructing valid arguments? To what extent was the inclusion of the reader/viewer as (eye)witness intended? In what way did the tendencies of art and other fields of knowledge condition the differentiation of connoisseurship and the collection of prints and drawings in the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries?

This workshop aims to discuss concepts of autopsy, their application to the developing art history of the seventeenth century, and their “scientification” in the eighteenth century. Special attention will be given to the material integration of artists’ knowledge and sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts on art into connoisseurial practice and the collection of drawings. If one pursues traces of “reading” and “showing” in such practices, varying levels of reference to well-known authorities of early modern writing on art—Vasari, Bellori, or Malvasia, for example—reveal themselves. Conversely, the importance of more practical and connoisseurial knowledge for writing on art will also be explored.

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