Dancing across ‘the gap’ with 360 Degree Art History

Helen Hughes BA Hons, Dip. Cons, ACR FIIC

Introduction

This poster scrutinises ‘the gap’, the subject of this conference. Examining how and why it evolved, and how it is maintained. Recent considerations of Art History highlight the discipline’s concern with ‘meaning’ and its relegation of materiality to the periphery of its research interests (Yonan, 2018). By a remarkable ‘sleight of hand’ Art History has made the study of secondary sources the primary means of critically appreciating physical art objects. What is even more remarkable is that this state of affairs continues unchallenged. ‘Materiality is at the periphery’ (Yonan, 2018).

Art History

I hold a degree in the History of Art & Architecture awarded by University College London in 1979. During my studies I benefitted from an innovative methods and materials course module introduced by the Head of Department, Professor John White, and delivered by the paintings conservator Libby Sheldon. Seminars were held in various London galleries, artist workshops and conservation studios. Students were encouraged to closely examine a wide variety of art works looking for signs of their creation, and consider the range of materials and production methods available to artists at specific periods. I chose to specialise in the late medieval period and during site visits led by Dr Francis Woodman clambered over the over external buttresses and explored the dark recesses of the triforium of several English cathedrals. He challenged his students to identify building phases, and offer explanations on why the tower of Ely Cathedral was always falling down. The 1970s were a time of innovation. The National Gallery had just published its first Technical Bulletin (National Gallery, 1977) which provided fascinating insights into the changes works of art undergo during the course of their lives and revealed how skilled deceptive restoration can challenge the unsuspecting ‘eye of the connoisseur’.[i] Michael Baxandall’s classic *Painting an Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, published in 1972, presented paintings as the product of hard bargaining between clients and artists. (Baxandall, 1972). Contracts were drawn up which specified the quality of materials, where

ultramarine was to be used, which figures would be executed by the master of the workshop himself and what work would be carried out by his assistants. These insights helped explode the myth of the ‘hand of the master’ especially as it was evident that assistants were expected to imitate the ‘hand of the master’.

John White’s virtual reconstruction of Duccio’s monumental altarpiece the Maesta was guided by his examination of the unpainted wooden backs of the individual panels, now scattered across the world in various museums (White, 1979). He took photographs and matched up the grain of the wood to make a reconstruction mosaic of the rear of the altarpiece which when flipped over helped establish the original pictorial narrative and meaning. This study, together with his understanding that the process of drawing and applying paint to the front could only commence once the entire altarpiece had been prepared with gesso and gold leaf, led to remarkable insights about the development of perspective in early fourteenth century Italy. White logically assumed that Duccio and his assistants would start at the top left hand corner and work from left to right, and work downwards – avoiding the risk of drips of paint falling on completed work. White was able to demonstrate that marked differences between individual panels was not due to the style of individual ‘masters’ but the growing assurance of a team of painters who were becoming more accomplished in depicting three-dimensional space as they progressed across and down the face of the altarpiece.

I felt that this new engagement with materiality was part of the natural evolution of Art History but I was disappointed to find a deep seated reluctance, within the rest of the Art History department, to embrace these new adaptive ways of understanding art. Many of my tutors had no real interest in techniques and materials. During one seminar my suggestion that technical advances in thinners for oil paints allowed Netherlandish painters more freedom in the manipulation of their paint and make advances in ‘atmospheric’ perspective, was dismissed with a rather angry response that ‘the artist painted like that because he wanted to’. The seminar ended in a stony silence. I realised that Art History had become moribund and stagnant, coming face to face with the discipline’s fear of materiality. (Elkins, 2008) On completion of my BA in Art History I decided to train to be a paintings conservator to connect with objects. My decision was bemoaned as ‘the waste of a good mind’. I have worked as a conservator-restorer for over 40 years with no regrets about my career shift.

But Traditional Art History occupies such a position of power that it is able to guard its professional boundaries by creating a binary division and relegating conservators and those with an more object centred focus to the status of handmaidens. Art History deals with ideas and meanings. This is not to say that theoretical interpretations from new perspectives are not very valuable but the discipline as

a whole does not address fundamental issues of making, understanding chronologies and crucially formulating conservation options. Far from embracing these new approaches to understanding, Art History only pays polite lip-service to other disciplines for the duration of multidisciplinary collaborations, but refuses to mention their contribution or promote their methodologies when the project has been completed.

Technical Art History

> *'…without the kinds of knowledge gained from technical art history, art historians will never really understand their objects and will forever divorce them from material culture.* ***(Yonan 2021)***

The term 'Technical Art History' is often used to describe an approach to understanding art which embraces materiality. The term was coined by David Bomford in the 1990s (Bomford, 2018) but recent attempts to define Technical Art History are overly concerned with advanced material analysis and concerns about providing students with access to laboratories and expensive equipment. I feel that this definition relegates practitioners to the role of 'the white coated boffin' (Villiers, 2004). It has been suggested that the adjective 'technical' is unnecessary as,

> *'art is a technical thing, and the history of art naturally includes the history of materials and making, to be researched not only by visual analysis, reading, and writing but also using sense-based and art-based methods, such as handling, drawing, or reconstructing.*
> (Lehmann**,** 2022)

It has been suggested that Technical Art History was created because Art History failed to develop and was not serving the purpose of understanding objects.

> *'…without the kinds of knowledge gained from technical art history, art historians will never really understand their objects and will forever divorce them from material culture.* ***(Yonan 2021)***

More recently definitions of Technical Art History suggest it is more commonly used for more general observations, practical, or material knowledge and there are clearly overlaps with various

mainstream art historical practices and concerns. Nicholas Eastaugh argues that Technical Art History is,

> *'an accretion of methods and approaches derived from individually perceived need, rather than any overarching intellectual framework. Under this conception, the boundaries of technical art history are somewhat arbitrary; a definition of the field would then be along the lines of "whatever its practitioners choose to research, discuss and publish."' (Easthaugh, 2022)*

Multidisciplinary Research - Dissemination

The undeniable joy of *multidisciplinarity* is that it leads to *interdisciplinarity* and the heady connection of minds, freed from disciplinary boundaries and able to make breakthroughs in understanding and the creation of new knowledge (Hermens, 2012).

The process is '*some*thing agile, continuously dancing across the apparent divide between the library and the laboratory'." (Lehmann, 2022)

But what happens once the project is over and the findings are being written up?

'I generally take any publication where the technical information is in the body of the text rather than an afterthought appendix as a win! (Easthaugh 2022)

'…too often are our contributions limited to either an appendix or a technical entry at the back of a publication. (Jansson 2021)

Acknowledgment of the problem – that the input of conservators and technical aspects of multidisciplinary projects is frequently relegated to a footnote or sometimes totally ignored by the art historian tasked to write up and disseminate the project - is extremely useful. This is probably one of the reasons Art History continues to exerts its dominance by denying their collaborators the power to generate knowledge. Professional boundary protectionism at work.

My decision to train as a conservator after obtaining my art history degree was bemoaned by one of my tutors as 'the waste of a good mind'. I have worked as a conservator-restorer for over 40 years

with no regrets about my career shift. Conservators are trained to consider the object in relation to its multiple values – erasing the binary division of 'material' and 'meaning'. Conservators strive to establish objects' biographies and collaborate on conservation management plans. In the 1980s I was fortunate to be able to combine my interest in painting materials and architecture by becoming involved in Architectural Paint Research, researching the decorative and protective finishes applied to architecture by housepainters. My work involves the study of the documentation, on-site investigation, and the technical analysis of removed paint samples in cross-section aided by material analysis of pigments and media. Most of my projects involve interesting and productive multidisciplinary collaborations.

But despite having a lead role in many of the projects and making significant art historical discoveries, on numerous occasions, my contribution has been overlooked and minimised when the project written up by one of my fellow collaborators – generally the art historian. In the case of Bolsover Castle, Derbyshire, the original draft of the guidebook, written to coincide with the reopening of the building after extensive research and works to establish the original decorative finishes, made no mention of my research. It was only after my complaints that I was allowed to write a four page insert which was included in the publication (Worsely, 2001). I have since written several papers on my work at Bolsover Castle and delivered them at various conservation conferences (Hughes, 2010). At Danson House, London, the collaboration of the art historian, the building analyst and the architectural paint researcher was hailed as exemplary by the project manager (Jardin,2000). But when the final account of the research was published my contribution was relegated to a footnote by the art historian and the building analyst who wrote the monograph (Lea & Miele, 2011) And despite a major contribution to the research at Apethorpe Hall my discovery of the painted decoration applied to the important 17th century chimneypieces was not mentioned in the monograph (Cole & Morrison, 2015). Of course I was able to discuss my work at conservation conferences and have published papers on this project (Hughes,2017).

While Art Historians may fear materiality, Technical Art Historians and Conservators have no fear of documentation and history, as the vast array of academic papers they produce can demonstrate.

Conclusions

The approach fostered by John White, Libby Sheldon and Francis Woodman during my undergraduate training may be called Technical Art History but the observations we made did not involve any sophisticated equipment, but stemmed from a desire to know how an object or building had been originally produced and how it had been altered. The fact that the term Art History is now often pre-fixed with 'traditional' or 'academic' is significant. Perhaps the term 'Art History' needs to be reclaimed by the cultural heritage sector, refashioned and reallocated?

Technical Art History may be offered as the means to bridge 'the gap' between Art History and Conservation but I argue that its focus on 'hard science' and expensive equipment, is narrow and reinforces the unhelpful idea of the non-Art Historian being '*the white coated boffin'* (Villers, 2004)

But if the template of traditional Art History were to be abandoned then a constantly changing research focus could be encouraged. The field of research could be tuned to whatever the members of the research group choose to prioritise, discuss, research and publish. After all, every project is different. This shift would ensure that materiality would not constantly have to fight its way from the periphery. (Yonan 2019). And having wrested the words 'Art History' from 'Traditional/Academic Art History', what should we call this new inclusive boundary defying discipline?

I suggest - '360 Degree Art History'.

Helen Hughes

5 Fulbrook Mews
London
N19 5EN

020 7263 5916
07917070119

helen@helenhughes-hirc.com
www.helenhughes-hirc.com

helenhughes-hirc.com
Historic Interiors Research and Conservation

[i] The routine scientific examination of artworks began during the 1950s and overlapped with the end of Berenson's career overlapped with development of the more technical examination of paintings. He was aware it provided a challenge to his method of connoisseurship and he did express an interest in this new field. Caroline Villiers notes how at this period conservators seeking status embraced supposed 'objectivity of science'. This stance only helped to label conservators as 'white coated boffin' and resulted in their exclusion important 'subjective' debates on value. Villers, C. (2004) 'Post Minimal Intervention', The Conservator, Issue 28, 3–10.

Bibliography

Baxandall, M. (1972) *Painting an Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*. Oxford University Press

Bomford, D. (2018) Art and Uncertainty: The Limits of Technical Art History**.** Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Cole, E and Morrison, K. (2015) Apethorpe Hall - The Story of an English Country House. Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. New Haven, Yale University Press,

Erma Hermens, "Technical Art History: The Synergy of Art, Conservation and Science," *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe: Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks*, ed. Matthew Rampley (Leiden: Brill, 2012): 151–65

Elkins, J. (2008) On Some Limits of Materiality in Art History saic.academia.edu/JElkins. If you have any comments, suggestions, etc., please write: jameselkins@fastmail.fm

Hermens, E. (2012) "Technical art history. The synergy of art, conservation and science," in *Art history and visual studies in Europe. Transnational discourses and national frameworks*, eds. M. Rampley et al. (Leiden, 2012): 151–165.

Hughes, H. (ed.) 2002. Layers of Understanding – Setting Standards for Architectural Paint Research, Proceedings of a one day seminar held on 28th April 2000 organised by English Heritage, Donhead Publishing Ltd.

Hughes, H. (2010). "Interdisciplinary collaboration to understand and recreate the splendour of the Marble Closet at the Little Castle Bolsover". In Proceedings of the Joint Interim Meeting. Multidisciplinary Conservation: A Holistic View For Historic Interiors. Rome 23-26 March 2010 ICOM-CC. Edited by E. Janssen, M. Paris, M. Sawicki, K. Seymour, and A. Thorn, A.

Hughes, H. (2017)The discovery of the painted decoration of the Jacobean chimneypieces of Apethorpe Hall, Northamptonshire, UK (c.1624). In: S. Litjens and K. Seymour (eds). Polychrome Sculpture: Decorative Practice and Artistic Tradition. ICOM-CC Interim Meeting, Working Group Sculpture, Polychromy, and Architectural Decoration, Tomar, 28-29 May, 2013. ICOM-CC. Published Online: www.ICOM-CC.org 2017

Jansson, E. (2021)"Towards a "Theory" for Technical Art History," *Materia: Journal of Technical Art History, Vol, 1, Issue 1* (2021), https://volume-1-issue-1.materiajournal.com/article-ej/

Jardin, I. (2002) Architectural Paint Research in Practice in Hughes, H. (ed.) (2002) *Layers of Understanding – Setting Standards for Architectural Paint Research*, Shaftesbury: Shaftesbury Donhead Publishing Ltd

Lea, R and Miele, C. (2011) *Danson House: The Anatomy of a Georgian Villa*, English Heritage

National Gallery, Technical Bulletin Volume 1, 1977

Lehmann, A, (2023) in Materia – Journal of Technical Art History(2023) https://issue-3.materiajournal.com/essay_voices-from-the-field/

Materia – Journal of Technical Art History(2023) https://issue-3.materiajournal.com/essay_voices-from-the-field/

Streeton, N. L. W. (2022). Conservators at the interface with history of art: technical art history, multi-disciplinarity and material culture. *CONSERVATION 360º*, (2). Retrieved from https://monografias.editorial.upv.es/index.php/con_360/article/view/387

Villers, C. (2004). 'Post Minimal Intervention', The Conservator, Issue 28, 3–10.

White, J. (1979) *Duccio: Tuscan Art and the Medieval Workshop,* Thames and Hudson

Worsley, L (2001) Bolsover Castle, English Heritage

Yonan, M. (2021) "Technical Art History and the Art Historical Thing," *Materia: Journal of Technical Art History, Vol 1, Issue 1* (2021), https://volume-1-issue-1.materiajournal.com/article-my/;

Yonan, M. (2019) "Materiality as Periphery," *Visual Resources*, Vol. 35, No. 3-4 (2019): 200-216

Alexander, J. and Morrison, K. 2006/7. 'The recording of the mason's marks'. The Apethorpe Hall Research Programme Issue. Research News 5, 19-22.