Circular Thinking (London, 26-27 Mar 20)

The Warburg Institute, School of Advanced Study, University of London WC1H 0AB, Mar 26–27, 2020

Megan C McNamee

Circular Thinking: The Drawing Compass as a Tool of Premodern Creation in Europe

'Circular Thinking' is a series of events (lecture, study day & panel discussion) devoted to the drawing compass, an essential tool of the premodern artist that came to represent divine Creation in Jewish and Christian (both Greek and Latin) exegetical traditions. Although now associated primarily with architecture, the compass was a transmedial instrument, integral to a range of artisanal operations. According to the artists' handbooks of Theophilus and Cennini, the instrument was ready-to-hand, yet evidence of its premodern use is relatively thin. Called circinus in Latin for the action of 'going round', circles and arcs were rarely its final output, but intermediary guides often lost in the making process or intentionally erased. Compass work can thus be classed as 'invisible labour'— work that contributes to the making of an object, but remains difficult to detect in its finished form. It is also dynamic labour that defies easy description in traditional print media, a problem compounded by a general lack of familiarity with the tool and the habits of hand and mind that it engenders. In the recent past, children handled compasses in school, their deployment de rigueur in elementary education. Today, this is no longer true. Through discussion, hands-on engagement and the close study of historical evidence, 'Circular Thinking' seeks to impart a more precise understanding of the compass's varied form(s) and uses — in the measurement, scaling, copying, the generation of diverse shapes in two and three dimensions — and, with this, its symbolic force.

All events are free and open to the public, but seating is limited. Book at https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/events/event/22214

'CIRCULAR THINKING' LECTURE
Thursday, 26 March 2020, 6–7:30pm
Lecture Room, Warburg Institute
Professor Robert Bork, University of Iowa
Circles Below the Surface: The Role of the Compass in Premodern Creativity

Circular forms appear overtly in many famous works of art and architecture, from the age of Stonehenge onward, but these visible circles are hardly the only ones that mattered to premodern artists, craftsmen and designers. The drawing compass was one of their most valuable and frequently employed tools since its use in combination with the straightedge permitted the establishment of precise geometrical order without any need for carefully calibrated rulers or measuring rods. The layout and proportions of many premodern artefacts—and even many modern

ones—thus become comprehensible only when the role of the compass in the creative process is taken into account. This talk demonstrates this principle using diverse examples ranging in date from the early Middle Ages to the twentieth century, including several in London collections: the Lindisfarne Gospels, a design drawing for the great Gothic tower of Ulm Minster and a painting by the Renaissance artist Piero di Cosimo.

'CIRCULAR THINKING' STUDY DAY
Friday, 27 March 2020, 10:00am–3:30pm (lunch on own)
Drawing upon examples from the Middle Ages and early Renaissance period, the 'Circular Thinking' study day comprises a practical workshop and museum visit. Participation is free and open to the public. Space, however, is limited; book early to avoid disappointment: https://warburg.sas.ac.uk/events/event/22214

Workshop
Lecture Room, Warburg Institute
Mustering an array of evidence—extant compasses, textual references, pictures and the physical traces of their use—the workshop will begin with an overview of what we know about compass use in Europe between ca. 500 to 1500, and how we know it. Participants will learn the rudiments of compass design in a hands-on practicum and bring this knowledge to bear on facsimiles of historic objects, working together to reconstruct the manoeuvres behind their making. Compasses will be provided, but feel free to bring your own if you have one!

Museum Visit
British Museum, Montague Place entrance, WC1E 7JW
The museum visit is an opportunity to examine premodern compasses and compass work in the company of the 'Circular Thinking' organisers and speakers.

'CIRCULAR THINKING' PANEL DISCUSSION
Friday, 27 March 2020, 4:00–5:30pm
Lecture room, Warburg Institute

Panellists will each present a case study of compass use or techniques in premodern Europe. These short presentations will be followed by a curated conversation and general Q&A.

Speakers
Dr Sarah Griffin, Winchester College
Constructing the Calendars in the Diagrams of Opicinus de Canistris (1296-c. 1352)

Professor Jean-Marie Guillouët, Université de Nantes
Testimony of Construction Practices in Some Late Medieval Compass Traceries

Dr Stephen Johnston, Oxford Museum of the History of Science
Drawing and the Design Process in Mathew Baker's Fragments of Ancient English Shipwrightry

Moderator
Dr Megan C. McNamee, Warburg Institute

Organised by Megan C. McNamee and Sarah Griffin. Email megan.mcnamee@sas.ac.uk with

questions about the program.

Reference:

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