

Material and Narrative Histories: Rethinking the Approach to Inventories and Catalogues

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Deadline: May 4, 2012

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This session aims to identify novel, scholarly approaches to inventories and catalogues by exploring the multi-faceted nature of these texts as narratives and as material objects. We understand narrative to include language, rhetoric, argument, and discourse and to exist in both temporal and spatial dimensions as well as socio-historical contexts. Materiality points to the production, physical manifestation, and dissemination of these texts.

Although catalogues and inventories are building blocks for much scholarship in art history (including histories of collecting, museums, the art market, and economic and material histories of art), these texts are often treated as purely empirical sources. The need to re-think the role of these texts in art history is particularly pertinent at this juncture when new modalities of inquiry made possible by digital humanities have fuelled a quest for “data”.

If we recognize these texts as texts, a number of questions arise. What is the role of authorship and who constitutes the author(s)? Who are the additional protagonists involved and how did each contribute? How were these texts developed as multivalent strategies (to celebrate, preserve or disperse collections, to impress, seduce or persuade readers)? How is meaning produced at the linguistic, semantic, rhetorical, visual, and material levels? Are there sufficient commonalities to regard these as texts as genres? If so, how do genre conventions relate to legal/institutional regulations and/or codes of production and how did they evolve? How is the reader understood at the original point of production and in subsequent reception histories? Such temporal shifts suggest that these texts are potentially instable and dynamic; how does this shape how art historians utilize such documents as evidence in their arguments?

Investigating inventories and catalogues in tandem unveils similarities, differences, and tensions associated with the evolution, production, and circulation of these texts. Moreover, by analyzing these texts together, we can better understand their current and potential roles in the methodologies, and writings of art history, particularly in the digital age.

We believe that a theoretically and methodologically driven approach to these materials can offer a substantial contribution to the field, leading to better understanding of the networks constituted by the words, objects, authors and readers associated with these sources. Papers may draw on case study examples but should nonetheless explore the larger significance of the material. We are particularly interested in lesser known inventories and catalogues posing unusual problems as well as exploring a diverse breadth of chronological and geographic material.

Session chairs: Anne Helmreich, The Getty Foundation (AHelmreich@getty.edu); Francesco Freddolini, Luther College, University of Regina/The Getty Research Institute (FFreddolini@getty.edu).

Deadline for paper proposals: May 4, 2012. Please refer to the 2013 Call for Participation (<http://www.collegeart.org/proposals/>) for full submission details.

Reference:

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ArtHist.net, Apr 2, 2012 (accessed Apr 7, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/3002>>.