

Materializing Transparency (Basel, 26 May 23)

Basel, Switzerland, May 26, 2023

Ruth Ezra

The history of transparency can be summed up as a progression in materials from the mined to the man-made: by the early modern period, rock crystal and alabaster — celebrated in the ancient and medieval worlds for their vitreousness and translucency — could no longer compete with the increasingly reliable clarity of factory-produced flint glass, which would in turn cede its primacy as see-through matter to that of manufactured plastics, made fully synthetic by 1907. Tracing but also challenging such a narrative of technological change and obsolescence, this workshop investigates the possibilities and limitations of transparency in all its material instantiations, and from perspectives both transhistorical and theoretical. Case studies include gauze, celluloid, varnish, openwork caskets, optical lenses, polaroid film, mordants, and witch balls. Taking these examples as starting points for wide-ranging discussion, we will think together about how the physical properties of a clear substrate, glaze, or surface might prompt reflection on concepts such as in/visibility, opacity, transcendence, distortion, obstinacy (Eigensinn), racialization, disclosure, and access.

Scheduled to coincide with the release of two important new books on transparency, *The Varnish and the Glaze: Painting Splendor with Oil, 1100-1500* (Chicago, 2023), by Marjolijn Bol, and *Transparency: The Material History of an Idea* (Yale, 2023), by Daniel Jütte, this workshop engages with current scholarship in the history of art, science, architecture, religion, museology, and conservation.

Supported by eikones, the NOMIS Foundation, and the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art.

Program

Location: Forum eikones, Rheinsprung 11, 4051 Basel

From 08:30 - Welcome - coffee in the foyer

09:00 - Ruth Ezra, Introduction

09:20 - Patrick Crowley, 'The Wrong Side of Things': Roman Reverse-Engraved Glass

10:00 - Manuela Beer, Difference in Transparency: Rock Crystal in Medieval Artefacts

10:40 - Coffee break

11:00 - Arne Leopold, Veiling the Gaze, Veiling the Material: Openwork Caskets and the Pretence of Transparency in the 13th Century

11:40 - Leena Crasemann, Veiling Space: Textiles' Anti-matter

12:20 - Lunch break

13:20 - Elizabeth Rice Mattison, Acid, Water, Rust, and Process in Dürer's Etchings

14:00 - Phillip Roberts, Richard Reeve and Alice Grove: A Night Language

14:40 - Coffee break

15:00 - Jennifer Y. Chuong, Tricky Transparency: Witch Balls in Nineteenth-Century America

15:40 - Yanning Ma, Can a picture be a terrarium? Transparency, vitality, and confinement in Victorian Britain (presenting online)

16:20 - Coffee break

16:40 - Kirsty Sinclair Dootson, Celluloid Skin: Transparency, Sensitivity, and the Racialization of Film

17:20 - Aïcha Revellat, So Transparent, So Opaque: Hannah Villiger's Early Polaroid Pictures

18:00 - Comfort break

18:15 - Book talk: Marjolijn Bol, *The Varnish and the Glaze* (Chicago 2023), in conversation

19:00 - Apéro

NB. The workshop is open to all and no registration is required to join in person; papers will not be streamed online.

Reference:

CONF: Materializing Transparency (Basel, 26 May 23). In: ArtHist.net, May 5, 2023 (accessed Jul 5, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/39211>>.