Textile Materiality in the Early Modern Period (Louvain-la-Neuve, 26-27 Sep 24)

UCLouvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium
Deadline: Mar 15, 2024

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Shimmering or matt, thick or thin, opaque or transparent, stretched or flexible, flat or pleated… They are but some of the many characteristics defining the sensory dimensions of textiles, inherently associated with their materiality. Whether worn by a prince or prelate, wrapped around precious objects, or covering walls and floors, textiles were ubiquitous in the material culture of the early modern period (15th-18th centuries). This omnipresence, from clothing to architectural adornment, has granted textiles a prominent status in the construction of social identities. Despite their importance, they have been neglected far too long in art history. Although recent studies have started tapping into the potential of this material, they are often focused on historical, iconographical or anthropological approaches, at the expense of its materiality and sensory experience. As it requires advanced technical knowledge, material studies have long been the prerogative of textile conservator-restorers and a few textile experts. The 'material turn' which has permeated the field of art history in recent years has however demonstrated the importance of a renewed focus on the material object by a larger community of art historians (as evidenced by the upcoming CIHA Congress devoted to Matter/Materiality).

The aim of this two-day conference is therefore to bring these different approaches together by fostering a dialogue between researchers dedicated to (the history of) techniques and conservation, and those focusing on the medial properties and the meanings conveyed by textiles when displayed, worn, or manipulated. To do so, paper proposals can be structured around one of the three (non-exclusive) thematic areas suggested below.

• Theme 1- History of techniques and conservation
It is probably no coincidence that the Greek word technè, meaning the technical skill or knowledge associated with craft production, and the Latin verb texere, meaning 'to weave', derive from the same root (Mitchell 1997). This etymological and ontological proximity is furthermore emphasized by the neologism 'textility' (Mitchell 1997, Ingold 2009), which refers to materiality not as a static property, but as a relational process. This first thematic line thus focuses on the history of techniques, from conception (design, pattern, cartoon) to fabrication (raw material, cutting, montage, finishing), including research on experimental archaeology, pattern-making and reconstitution practices. It is based on the material observation of textiles as a historical source in itself, allowing for an understanding of manufacturing techniques, the genealogy of forms and the biography of the objects.

• Theme 2- Representation and reception

The reason why early modern textiles, and garments in particular, can be considered as the art of representation par excellence, where life is set up as a spectacle, is due to their very materiality, understood as the kind of relationships humans have with matter (Picon 2018). In this perspective, textiles can fully leverage their optical and haptic attraction. As objects that are worn, manipulated and suspended, textiles are moreover anchored in a regime of ephemeral reception (with tapestries displayed during festivities as a prime example). This second line of research intends to explore the phenomena and sensory experiences associated with the materiality of textiles. It also examines how texts and images of the time reflect these ephemeral sensory phenomena. What are the pictorial or textual devices or techniques that perpetuate this medium and its sensory qualities through its re-presentation?

• Theme 3- Imitation and illusion
Finally, the third thematical perspective focuses on simulation, which is inherent in textiles as they imitate various techniques (needle painting, embroidered scenes, mimicry on orphreys, ...). Fabrics themselves can, however, also be counterfeited through other mediums representing veils, hangings, tapestries and other finery. Indeed, since the anecdote of Pliny the Elder about the illusionist curtain painted by Parrhasios which deceived Zeuxis, textiles have been the paradigmatic expression of the trompe-l'œil. From the Renaissance onwards, the art of tapestry was also narrowly associated with that of painting. Hangings mimicked the ability of painting to simulate the third dimension and thus transcend the flatness of the two-dimensional support. Existing painted panels were even entirely reproduced into textile. The aim is therefore to scrutinize these illusionistic transpositions of fabric represented through other mediums (painted, engraved, sculpted, or modeled). Drawing on the questions raised by the paragone, this last thematic area is situated at the crossroads of economic, plastic, semantic and symbolic issues.
Submission guidelines

The conference will take place from 26 to 27 September 2024, at UCLouvain (Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium). The proposals should not exceed 500 words in English or in French and should be accompanied by a brief biographical statement. The document is to be submitted by 15 March 2024 to
caroline.heering@uclouvain.be ; roxanne.loos@uclouvain.be and helene.malice@uclouvain.be.
The maximum duration for papers is 25 minutes.

Reference:
CFP: Textile Materiality in the Early Modern Period (Louvain-la-Neuve, 26-27 Sep 24). In: ArtHist.net, Feb 17, 2024 (accessed Nov 23, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/41241>.