# From “Miniature” Material Cultures to Anthropic Principle (London, 16-18 Jun 25)

The Courtauld Institute of Art, London, Jun 16–18, 2025
Deadline: Mar 15, 2025

Wenjie Su

Scale—the relative dimension, magnitude, or scope of objects, and their proportional relationship to the observer—is often understood through the lens of individual or collective visual assumptions. As inhabitants of the terrestrial sphere, we tend to rely on our bodies and cultural paradigms to interpret the scale of geographical terrain, human-made structures, material artifacts, social phenomena, and historical events. Technological advancements—from maritime expeditions to space exploration, from telescopic and microscopic investigations to the detection of cosmic microwave background—have urged humanity to redefine its scale of existence. Meanwhile, various philosophical and religious traditions have long pondered humanity’s place and purpose in relation to natural and supernatural realms.

By exploring designs and creations conceived on a micro-scale or as small-sized, this conference invites discussion on human creativity and human existence through the theme of scale. Examples abound across diverse human traditions, including burial and ritual objects, microarchitecture, portrait miniatures, and accessorial items such as netsukes, snuff boxes, and pocket watches. These objects appear diminutive when compared to the human body, the “worlds” they represent, or their counterparts within more dominant socio-cultural systems. At times dismissed as frivolous and superficial, these streamlined and recontextualized objects can evoke out-of-scale resonances, transcending the original limitations of data or resources.

This conference connects studies that examine the art historical, historiographical, and ideological significance of scaled objects. First, we aim to deepen discussions on the sensorial, spiritual, intellectual, and technical implications of scaling. Particularly understudied are ephemeral objects and repositioned sites, such as lab settings and festival stagings. Second, we seek to investigate how the scale—of originals, reproductions, or paradigms—has shaped the central or peripheral status of specific objects and sites in art historical scholarship.

Third, we aim to highlight the unique contributions that humanities and art historical scholars can make in addressing cutting-edge intellectual challenges in fields including AI and astrophysics. Throughout the global history of visual and material cultures, creatively re-scaled objects have played a central role in conceiving and simulating worlds that surpass our optical and epistemological thresholds. By exploring how humans have continually shifted scales to position themselves within and across realms, this conference reflects on humanity’s inherently limited yet endlessly creative perspective and envisions pathways to launch beyond boundaries.

Further questions and topics include but are not limited to:
- Material, aesthetic, sensory, and affective qualities unique to small-scale objects.
- Practices of modeling and scaling in the production of scientific knowledge, such as mapping and laboratory experiments.
- The dialectics of miniature and monumentality.
- Relationships between scale, virtuality, and reality.
- Critical reflections on the interpretational framework of “miniaturization,” such as the so-called miniature paintings of various Asian and Islamic traditions.
- Challenges posed by small-scale objects or fragments in archaeological, museum, and pedagogical contexts.
- The role of scale-shifting in methodological turns, such as global history, gender criticism, and eco-criticism.

We invite proposals from scholars in a range of disciplines, including art and architecture history, museum studies, cultural history, intellectual history, and the history of science.

Please send an abstract (ca. 250 words) for a 20-min presentation and a 150-word bio as a single PDF file by March 15, 2025 to: w-su@nga.gov; yizhouwang@hkbu.edu.hk; stephen.whiteman@courtauld.ac.uk

Acceptance notification: March 30, 2025

Conveners:
Wenjie Su (Princeton University; CASVA), Yizhou Wang (Hong Kong Baptist University), Stephen Whiteman (The Courtauld Institute of Art)

Keynote Speakers:
Andrew James Hamilton (The Art Institute of Chicago), Wei-Cheng Lin (The University of Chicago)

Event details:
Out of Scale: From “Miniature” Material Cultures to the Anthropic Principle.
The conference will be held June 16-17, 2025, at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London. Optional group viewing sessions will be arranged on June 18. Accepted speakers will be invited to propose objects from London-based collections or sites that resonate with the themes of scale and the miniature.

Dates and Venue:
June 16-17, 2025 (conference at The Courtauld Institute of Art, London)
June 18, 2025 (optional viewing sessions in or around London)

Reference:

CFP: From “Miniature” Material Cultures to Anthropic Principle (London, 16-18 Jun 25). In: ArtHist.net, Feb 14, 2025 (accessed Nov 13, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/43951>.