Rethinking the Material Afterlives of Animals, 1500–1800

Deadline: Apr 30, 2025

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Do animals introduce a material difference to objects from the early modern period? Should scholars think differently about objects that include animal remains than they do about other materials?

The editors of this volume invite essays that examine human and non-human animal relations through objects made of animal remains in the early modern period to investigate this possible difference. This era saw intensified zoological research alongside the expansion of armed trade, overland and maritime travel, and extractive industries dependent on biotic materials. These shifts shaped the ways in which animal remains were preserved, transformed, and recontextualized within artistic and economic networks. Rather than treating these materials in terms of visual encounters alone, contributors to this volume are asked to foreground the visceral and tactile engagements generated by objects crafted with materials such as fur, skin, quills, feathers, shells, ivory, and bones.

We encourage essays that stem from diverse epistemologies and that explore alternative approaches to thinking about artistic materials. How might perspectives that emphasize reciprocity and relationality, for instance, reshape art historical approaches to objects made with and from animals? How does animal presence both “construct and disrupt” human culture? How are the material “affordances” of biomatter—their ability to alert, lubricate, protect, join, support—preserved, distorted, or deferred in human-made objects? How do such materials maintain continuity with their former life and how are they fundamentally altered? We invite contributors to reflect on how their work can be a site of reconciliation, acknowledging both the original contexts of these materials and the contemporary responsibilities of their material, intellectual, and spiritual caretakers.

The book seeks full-length essays that examine moments of transformation in the lives of these animal materials: from the deep ecological knowledge of those who sourced these materials, to the artisans and artists who processed them, to the wearers and collectors who recontextualized them. How do the acts of sourcing, crafting, and collecting materialize particular worldviews? How do these objects navigate tensions between organic and inorganic, sentient and non-sentient entities? What are the limits of such categories?

We also invite shorter contributions that explore the specific ethical and methodological challenges that museological care and conservation raise. How does the field of conservation reckon

with biotic materials' instability and latent animacy? What are the ethical implications of working with such materials? How do artists, scholars, curators, and knowledge-keepers participate in the care of historical objects that include animal substrates?

As a whole, this volume aims to chart new methods for engaging with animal materials in the archive, interrogating how anthropocentrism and colonialism have shaped art history's disciplinary practices and omissions. We welcome contributions from scholars in art history, visual and material culture, museum studies, and related disciplines who are interested in rethinking the material afterlives of animals from diverse cross-cultural, temporal, and methodological perspectives.

Please submit a 500-word abstract to Catherine Girard (cgirard@stfx.ca) and Sarah Grandin (Sarah.Grandin@courtauld.ac.uk) by April 30, 2025, specifying whether you are planning to write a full-length essay of up to 8,000 words or a shorter contribution of up to 4,000 words, including notes. Final essays will be due in February 2026.

Reference:

CFP: Rethinking the Material Afterlives of Animals, 1500-1800. In: ArtHist.net, Mar 20, 2025 (accessed Nov 12, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/44856>.