New Meaning in the Matter of 19th-Century Art (Paris, 26–27 May 25)

Institut national d’histoire de l’art, Paris, May 26–27, 2025

Michelle Foa

This symposium brings together scholars working in an area that has received far too little attention in the study of nineteenth-century art, namely, the material composition of art works and its role in generating the meaning of those objects. Focusing on the relationship between matter and meaning in the artistic production of this period, this event will shed important new light on the diverse ways that a wide range of materials functioned to transform artists’ and viewers’ understanding of the fundamental significance of art objects.

Despite the fact that the materiality of nineteenth-century art has been long overlooked by the discipline, the period was in fact a particularly consequential one in the history of the matter of art, that is, in how artists materials were produced, used, and understood. To give some examples, the manufacture of materials underwent radical change during this time, with synthetic ingredients such as pigments first being discovered and coming increasingly into use; the market for artists’ materials vastly expanding during the period, in part as a result of the rise of the hobbyist artist; the increasing technical and stylistic experimentation of artists working in the second half of the century included an emphasis on the innovative treatment of their media and the role of materials in the meaning of their work; and the rise of professional art conservation and restoration as a field, along with the creation of the institution of the public museum, to name just some of the fundamental changes in the matter of art, its treatment, and its reception during the nineteenth century. Furthermore, pivotal developments of the period such as industrialization, urbanization, increasing colonial expansion, political revolutions, the rise of the nation-state, the growth and abolition of slavery, and the burgeoning global trade and travel networks likewise define the nineteenth century as a period whose many major developments continue to shape the world today. This symposium seeks to illuminate the significant changes taking place with regard to the matter of art in the nineteenth century and link artists’ materials to meaningful developments, phenomena, and debates unfolding outside of the art world.

One goal of a symposium is to examine the intersections between the materiality of nineteenth--century art, the environment, and ecology. Participants will, for example, analyze the significance of the origins of much of the matter of art in the organic and mineral matter of the earth and the far-reaching impact of the emergence of synthetically derived artists’ media. Another topic that will be addressed is the developing profession of art restoration over the course of the nineteenth century, which had profound consequences for debates about the stability and longevity of the matter of art and for shifting public perceptions of the role of museums as caretakers of historical objects. Furthermore, the symposium will examine the different modes of transmission of knowledge of artists’ materials from earlier periods as well as artists’ perceptions of the historical speci-

ficity of various media. In all these ways, the symposium will illuminate nineteenth-century considerations of the temporality of the matter of art: in the making of the work, in its controversial restoration, and by examining artists' and viewers' attitudes towards materials as embodiments of the relationship between the past and the present and between artistic tradition and innovation.

Finally, this symposium hopes to bring to light how artists' materials were treated in the writings on art of the nineteenth century. Participants will analyze the various ways that critics, art historians, and theorists positioned the matter of art in their interpretations of specific objects and in their narratives of the history, evolution, and identity of the discipline of art history.

The symposium will bring together a geographically diverse group, with speakers coming from France, the United Kingdom, Germany, Austria, and the United States.

More information about the event can be found on its website, including how to register for free.
https://matterof19thcenturyart.com/

For any questions, please contact matter19con@gmail.com or Michelle Foa, mfoa@tulane.edu

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Programme:

Day 1 (May 26)

9:15-9:45am: Registration, coffee
9:45-10:00am: Opening remarks
10:00-10:40am: Ewa Lajer-Bucharth, "Drawing in the World: Madeleine Basseporte at the Jardin du roi"
10:40-11:00am: discussion
11:00-11:10am: break
11:10-11:50am: Michelle Foa, "Degas's Landscapes: Making, Matter, and the Ground"
11:50am-12:10pm: discussion

Lunch Break

1:45-2:15pm: Carol Armstrong, "Medium Matrix Materiality: Mary Cassatt's Aquatint Suite"
2:15-2:35pm, discussion
2:35-2:45pm: break
2:45-3:25pm: Richard Taws, "River of Words: Paper, Water, Zinc"
3:25-3:45pm: discussion
3:45-3:55pm: break
3:55-4:35pm: Noémie Etienne, "Casts and Corpses"
4:35-4:55pm: discussion

Day 2 (May 27)

9:30-10am: Coffee
10-10:40am: Ann-Sophie Lehmann, "Most Useful Flax": The Ecology of a Raw Material for Art
10:40-11am: discussion
11-11:10am: break

11:10-11:50am: Kirsty Dootson, "British Oil Paints in the Age of Empire: Charles Roberson’s Media Climates"
11:50am-12:10pm: discussion

Lunch Break

1:50-2:30pm: Prita Meier, "A Transimperial Matter: The Modern Life and Death of Afro-Asian Ivory"
2:30-2:50pm: discussion
2:50-3:00pm: break
3:00-3:40pm: Barbara Jouves-Hann and Maxime Métraux, "Artists and the Preservation of their Paintings in the 19th Century"
3:40-4:00pm: discussion

End of conference

Reference:
CONF: New Meaning in the Matter of 19th-Century Art (Paris, 26-27 May 25). In: ArtHist.net, Apr 18, 2025 (accessed Nov 19, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/47279>.