

Reflection at Work (Paris, 22–23 Jan 26)

INHA, Paris, Jan 22–23, 2026

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Reflection at Work: Representation, Perception and the Making of Light in Art.

In recent years, the development of Sensory Studies in Art history has reintroduced the study of sensory perceptions in the analysis of artworks (for example Constance Claassen for touch, Erika Wicky for smell, Marta Battisti for hearing). In keeping with these studies, this workshop, to be held at INHA (Paris) on 22nd and 23rd January 2026, aims to develop an interdisciplinary approach to the question of reflection in art, from the 16th to the 18th century.

The definition of reflection has long been associated with painting (Dictionnaire universel, Furetière). Drawing on the knowledge of optics, its effects have accompanied the transformation of the play of light in paintings and engravings, from a spiritual and religious interpretation to a gradual rationalisation. Reflection opens up the horizon to the off-field of the painting, makes perspective more complex, accentuates the shape of volumes and provides information about the nature of the material rendered. As an embodiment of the light represented it invites us to explore the polysemy of the meanings attached to its uses. Reflection also lies at the concrete interface between the work and the viewer.

Increasingly, research has focused on lighting ambiances and the way in which we create or perceive an artwork (a painting, a sculpture, etc.), taking into account the question of the position of the subject (artist or spectator) in relation to lighting devices (natural and artificial). Thereby the artwork is considered to be an object set in a physical and atmospheric environment, and not just an image, whereby the gaze is a determining factor in contemplation and analysis.

For the past two decades, digital technologies have made it possible to reconstitute works of art in their original lighting environments, from the moment they were created in the studio to their final destination. The pioneering work carried out by US-American academics has opened up fruitful avenues that promise to profoundly renew art historical methods. The analysis of light reflections painted on the reflective surfaces of a painting (as on the white of the eye and the mother-of-pearl pearl in Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl*) provides information on the sources of lighting used by the painter (Stork et al. 2008). The notion of Pictorialized illumination introduced by Justin Underhill makes it possible to examine the phenomenological interactions between the actual lighting of the site and the play of light, shadows and painted reflections. Digital simulations offer a dynamic visualisation of the different ways in which the work is illuminated and the play of reflections, depending on the time of day and the seasons (Underhill 2018, 2019). These approaches fall within the field of reception studies, while emphasising the material conditions and creative

processes behind artworks.

In addition, the visual appearance of a material is at the centre of some researchers' concerns, seeking to understand, extract and restore visual attributes such as colour, but also gloss, mattness, translucency or opacity (Simonot & al 2019, GDR APPAMAT). These characteristics are particularly tricky to grasp when dealing with complex materials such as paint, which is made up of metals, varnishes, diffusing pigment layers and artistically worked surfaces. These investigations have stimulated disciplinary exchanges with chemists, opticians, physicists, restorers and conservators, and enriched the history of surface techniques (glazes, varnishes).

Reflection, which results from the interaction of light with an object, has become both a subject of investigation into the choice of materials, lighting ambience and staging, and a tool for analysing historical know-how.

The aim of this workshop, *Le reflet à l'œuvre: représentation, perception, fabrique du phénomène lumineux en art*, is to bring together scholars from a variety of fields (history of art, history of science and technology, physics, computer science, philosophy) to examine the theme of reflection and the interactions between light and the work of art from a number of perspectives:

- How can we define a luminous ambience from a historical or philosophical point of view, from the point of view of physics, or from the point of view of digital reproduction?
- How can we understand reflection from these different disciplinary perspectives?
- What knowledge and skills are required to transcribe and exploit reflections?
- How does taking these phenomena into account affect the analysis of works of art and of museum scenography?
- Whether as a vehicle for information or an obstacle to perception, what ambivalences do reflections highlight in the interaction between the work of art and the viewer?
- How does the material study of surfaces open up new perspectives for the historical interpretation of the sensitive effects of reflection and of past conservation and exhibition practices?

This meeting is organised jointly by teams involved in the ANR projects AORUM (Analyse de l'OR et de ses Usages comme Matériau pictural, Europe occidentale, XVIe-XVIIe siècles, ANR-22-CE27-0010) and FabLight (La fabrique de l'éclairage dans les arts visuels au temps des Lumières (1760-1820), ANR-22-CE38-0009). These two programmes seek to renew of art history by combining material and sensory approaches and the analysis of representations. One aim is to explore the interplay between works of art and the luminous ambience of the spaces in which they are exhibited, using optical analysis of the brilliance of gilding (AORUM). The other objective is to use digital reconstructions to model the use of light in painting and in the learning and practice of painters and draughtsmen in the 18th century (FabLight). Through their interdisciplinary approach, these projects aim to gain a better understanding of the enrichment or displacement of meaning effected by the representation and use of light.

Proposals should include a summary in French or English (1500 characters) and a short bio-bibliographical note. They should be sent no later than 22 September 2025 to Romain Thomas (romain.thomas@inha.fr) and Johanna Daniel (johanna.p.daniel@gmail.com)

Organisers:

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Scientific committee:

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M. Battisti, V. Von Hoffmann, É. Wicky (dir.), « Figures du sentir. Percevoir, connaître et représenter l'expérience sensorielle du Moyen-Âge à la période contemporaine », dossier thématique de la revue *Arts et Savoirs*, 2023, n° 20 <https://journals.openedition.org/aes/6048>

C. Classen, *The Museum of the Senses Experiencing Art and Collections*, Bloomsbury, 2017.

David Howes, *The Sensory Studies Manifesto, Tracking the Sensorial Revolution in the Arts and Human Sciences*, University of Toronto Press, 2022.
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GDR Appamat Arts et patrimoine - GDR APPAMAT

L. Simonot, P. Boulenguez, *Quand la lumière diffuse la lumière*, Presses des Mines, 2019.

D. Stork et al., « Inferring illumination direction estimated from disparate sources in paintings : An investigation into Vermeer's Girl with a pearl earring », in D. Tork et J. Coddington (ed.), *Computer Image Analysis in the Study of Art*, SPIE-IS&T, 2008, vol. 6810 <https://doi.org/10.1117/12.759726>

J. Underhill, « Peter Paul Rubens and the Rationalization of Light », *Journal of Art History*, 2018, Vol. 87, n°1, p. 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00233609.2017.1315170>

J. Underhill, « The Twilight of Presence: Pictorialized Illumination in Leonardo da Vinci's Last Supper », *Leonardo*, 2019, Vol. 52, n°1, p. 44-53. https://doi.org/10.1162/leon_a_01343

(version française disponible: <https://fablight.hypotheses.org/2603>)

Reference:

CFP: Reflection at Work (Paris, 22-23 Jan 26). In: ArtHist.net, Jul 19, 2025 (accessed May 25, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/50434>>.