Capturing Iridescence in Early Modern Europe (Paris, 15–17 Sep 27)

Paris, Sorbonne University, Sep 15–17, 2027
Deadline: Oct 5, 2026

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“Iridescence” a term evoking Iris, the goddess of the rainbow, was first coined in most European languages in the early 19th century. Its first recorded instances in print point to the English language, via the work of mineralogists and geologists. That the word should have first appeared in the natural sciences comes as no surprise, given that nature has retained a “monopoly on this metallic-like, colored effect” (Parker 2016, 58) until the 21st century, when nanoscience allowed the advent of iridescence-inducing technologies such as pearlescent flakes (Schenk et al. 2013). Our conference will look into the work of artists, scientists & authors as they experimented with iridescence before it was even understood or named.

Since iridescence represented a major mimetic challenge, namely the reproduction of something that could not be explained any more than it could be named, artists and authors had to innovate in order to reproduce its appearance and effects. This methodological premise ties in with the field of “bioinspiration”: this emerging domain, defined by the Biomimetics Committee of the International Organization for Standardization in 2015 as “a creative approach based on the observation of biological systems”, has up to now been mostly concerned with industrial or architectural developments (Raskin & Molina 2018; Camborde 2018; Pawlyn 2019; Boeuf 2022; Chayaamoor-Heil 2023; Fernandes 2024). Breaking away from such dominant perspective, we want to show how poetic, dramatic, literary and visual designs were never intended as “mere copies of living nature” but work instead to “extract a principle (or principles) from nature, seek to understand that principle, and incorporate the principle into a new medium, design, or other applications” (Bhushan 2024; 23).

One of the leading premises behind the IRIS project is that the history of the description of iridescence between the 16th and 19th century cannot be disconnected from a global history of international negotiations. Trade, travel and exchange were nothing new in the 16th century, yet “the trade in goods across distances moved a significant step towards becoming truly globe-encompassing [f]rom the late sixteenth century onwards (Gerritsen & Riello 2021, 4). Following those same routes, plants, animals, men and women, pictures and books circulated in hitherto unheard-of numbers”. In addition to increasing the number of iridescent specimens which were brought to the attention of the European audience, the discovery of new forms of natural iridescence, which oftentimes could not be shown first hand, led to the development of a booming visual and textual culture of reportage through which artists and authors tried to render these new natural wonders. Although these circulations nurtured scientific and artistic exchange and contributed to the devel-

opment of novel mimetic techniques, they also exposed complex dynamics of appropriation and exploitation that pervade this history.

Confirmed keynote speakers: Brendan McMahon (University of Michigan) and Franziska Schenk (artist and researcher, Birmingham City University)

Please submit your abstract (250 to 300 words) for a 25-minute paper and a short biography to IRIS_Sorbonne@proton.me by October 5, 2026. Speakers will be notified of acceptance in November.

Papers may address, but are certainly not limited to, the following topics:
1) Techniques of iridescence
- Appropriation: techniques of “appropriation” include attempts at rendering iridescence by collecting the material straight from the animal/mineral/vegetal (Mandrij & Simonini 2023). The term “capture”, which features in the title of our project, condenses the ambivalence of such techniques, by underlining their potentially predatory and unethical aspect.
- Innovation: the rendition of iridescence which so occupied scientists and artists alike also led to technical (visual) and generic innovations (visual & textual), as well as innovative taxonomy or translations. How have naming & describing iridescence before it was named impacted its interpretation?

2) Functions of iridescence
Much in the way iridescence serves functional purposes in the natural world (such as camouflaging or signalling), we would like to investigate the functions, metaphors or symbols attached to of iridescence over the periods and areas covered by our project:
Production of knowledge: how did artists, authors and scientists contribute to the apprehension of iridescence? This includes the official employment of artists by scientists (Kusukawa 2019) as well as the circulation of concepts and tropes between literature (including technical) and science, or across genres and linguistic areas.
Historicising physical phenomena: this will include a study of the changing function of iridescence depending on a “period eye” (Eaton 2016, McMahon 2017). We will here look more closely into the (geo)politics of iridescence as well as into its philosophical and epistemological use in order to historicise the very idea of biomimesis.

3) Meanings of iridescence
How did iridescence affect the mediums through which artists, scientists and writers tried to capture it? As a mimetic challenge in itself, iridescence questions the very limits of representation and pushes artists, scientists and authors to experiment and fail, sometimes.
This section may include discussions of the conservation and obsolescence of iridescence in visual arts (the degradation of materials making it sometimes impossible to sustain iridescence).
It may also deal with the power and effects of iridescence in the arts (drama, poetry, visual arts) as well as iridescence's loss of poetic and dramatic efficacy over time: how can we reactivate and not miss the puissance and polysemy of iridescence from our own historical position which now sees it as mostly “innocuous” or hackneyed? (McMahon 2017, 3). How and why did poets and playwrights strive to recreate the effect of iridescence upon their readers/viewers, and what does it teach us about the history of the "material perception" (Nordén et al., 2023; Fleming, 2017) of structural colours?

Speakers may also address the way history of science has experimented with and described iridescence over the centuries.
They may also inquire into the way iridescence affects human engagement with the natural world. Papers may here explore issues related to early forms of ecological sensitivity and sense of "biomimethics" (Delannoy 2021) and how they transpire through the capture of iridescent subjects by artists and writers.

We welcome applications from a broad range of scholars and museum professionals at all career stages. There will be no registration fee to participate in this in-person conference, and a subsidy to support at least part of travel and accommodation expenses for speakers.
A selection of the papers presented will be published both as scholarly articles and as contributions to the online exhibition accompanying the project.

The IRIS project is funded through Sorbonne Université's Émergence programme, and gathers scholars and museum professionals. Its members (and organising committee of the conference) are:

Vanessa ALAYRAC-FIELDING (Université Paris Cité)
Olivia DILL (Baltimore Museum of Art)
Anne-Valérie DULAC (Project leader, Sorbonne Université)
Arnaud DUBOIS (CNRS - Musée de l'Homme)
Bérénice GAILLEMIN (University of Warsaw, ERC TEOTL)
Sophie RHODES (Victoria and Albert Museum, London)
Charlotte RIBEYROL (Sorbonne Université)
Cecilia RONNERSTAM (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm)
Giulia SIMONINI (Bibliotheca Hertziana)

Selective bibliography

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