Open Arts Journal, Special Issue "Paintings and Their Parts"

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Maddalena Bellavitis, Centre de recherche et de restauration des musées de France (C2RMF), Università degli Studi di Padova

Paintings and Their Parts: Frames, Supports and Settings in Early Modern Art.

What can we learn about a painting by looking beyond its painted surface?

Building on recent work in technical art history, material culture, and the history of display, this special issue asks how the relationships between paint layer, support, framing structure, ornamental elements, and setting were fundamental to the identity and existence of an artwork, and how their alteration, separation, or dispersal has resulted in a profound loss of our understanding of the work and of transformations that are often irreversible.

Recent research has increasingly demonstrated that the material and physical dimensions of artworks can reveal fundamental insights into their conception, production, function, and history. Yet paintings are more than the sum of their materials. Their meaning and identity may also reside in the relationships between their different components—and in elements that have often been regarded as secondary or external to the artwork itself.

This special issue of Open Arts Journal explores the potential of approaching early modern Euroean and Latin American paintings through their parts, connections, and material contexts. Frames, supports, reverses, inscriptions, methods of assembly, and settings can all preserve evidence about an artwork's authorship, patronage, function, symbolism, original appearance, and subsequent transformations. Attention to these elements can also reshape our understanding of how paintings were conceived, displayed, and experienced.
Frames provide a particularly revealing example. Often separated from paintings in modern collections, they originally formed part of the work's visual and material identity. Their study can therefore recover information that is no longer immediately visible in the painting itself.

We invite contributions that investigate paintings through their constituent elements and their relationships, and that explore how material evidence can open new art-historical questions. Possible approaches include, but are not limited to:
• frames and framing practices
• supports, structures, and methods of assembly
• reverses, inscriptions, labels, and other overlooked evidence
• the relationship between paintings, frames, and architectural settings
• materials and their aesthetic, symbolic, or iconographic significance

• original display, lighting, and modes of viewing
• alterations, restorations, fragmentation, and reassembly
• material evidence and questions of authorship, workshop practice, and patronage
• technical examination and scientific analysis as art-historical evidence
• interdisciplinary approaches to the materiality and history of paintings

We welcome original and unpublished contributions from scholars across the humanities and sciences, including art history, architectural history, technical art history, conservation and restoration, material culture and anthropology.

The issue aims to bring together different methodologies and perspectives in order to address a broader question: can looking at a painting's parts change the way we understand the whole? This question was at the core of a workshop organised by the issue's editor in May 2026, from which five articles have been selected for inclusion in the special issue. We now invite proposals for five additional articles to complete the issue, please submit an abstract of 500 words (max.) and a short biography by the 1st of December 2026 to Maddalena Bellavitis: maddalena.bellavitis@gmail.com

Reference:

CFP: Open Arts Journal, Special Issue "Paintings and Their Parts". In: ArtHist.net, Sep 25, 2026 (accessed Nov 24, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/54387>.