



The Material Life of Things: Symposium

Hands On: Seven Perspectives on the Material Transformation of Art

Friday 5 November 2010

15.00 – 19.00, Research Forum South Room

The Courtauld Institute of Art, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 0RN

Abstracts

Moya Carey (Asian Department, V&A)

Manipulating the Past and Naturalising the Foreign – Re-mounting Historical Ceramics, I: Marketing Iran in the 19th Century: Re-fitting Safavid and Chinese Ceramics in Qajar style

A great deal of the Iranian objects in the Victoria and Albert Museum were collected during the late 19th century, by the sole agency of Robert Murdoch Smith, an engineer for the British-owned Persian Telegraph Company, who travelled widely in Iran, and was therefore ideally suited to the task of acquiring art objects for the South Kensington Museum, as it then was. Murdoch Smith bought in bulk from dealers, and courted private collectors. During this period, Western interest in collecting Iranian art was just beginning, and the art market in Iran responded to this. This response may have guaranteed the manipulation by dealers of a fragmentary material culture into re-fashioned saleable objects. In this context, we may examine the large corpus of re-mounted ceramic vessels acquired in Iran by Murdoch Smith, 17thC Safavid fritware, and Chinese porcelain. These are objects which have been repaired where vulnerable extremities have broken off, and re-fitted with brass replacements of lost spouts, handles, lids and necks. The brass fittings are densely decorated with a figurative repertoire from contemporary Qajar visual culture: although their addition serves to restore much older objects, they do not pose as Safavid or Chinese in style. Instead, Safavid or Chinese artefacts are re-framed by their Qajar mounts, and re-fashioned as collectible Qajar commodities. Some objects have been re-fitted in a way which ignores their original function, or converts them to a new application: a multi-necked flower-vase intended to display multiple stems is transformed by a new brass collar into a single-necked vase, perhaps more appealing to a Western collector at large in Iran. This paper examines the extent to which new fittings manipulated older ceramic vessels, in their forms and also for intended new functions and contexts. What was the motivation for these manipulations – to satisfy collectors as display objects, or to permit continuing use as vessels? There is a level of discomfort in the museum experience concerning objects with historical accretions such as these, which reveals our

tellingly inflexible presuppositions about museum pieces. This seems to ignore the object's existence after its creation by a "master's hand", and before its ascension to the aspic of the museum environment. For most historical objects, this involves a very long period as an owned and traded object, and yet the intervening time, experience, transformations and transference can be treated as something only negative - to be cleaned away like soil from an archaeological find, to reveal the glossy and original artwork. Perhaps for this reason, re-mounted ceramic objects are often omitted from or undiscussed in museum displays, implying a measure of self-censorship in traditional art history.

Francesca Dell'Acqua (Università degli Studi di Salerno)

The 'Framed' Infinity of His Likeness: the Cultural Context of the Genoa Mandyllion

The so-called *Mandyllion of Genoa* (Genoa, San Bartolomeo degli Armeni) is an icon portraying the likeness of Christ with a luxurious enamelled, repoussé and filigree gilded frame. The delicate object is at the same time a relic, being a reproduction of the Holy Face of Edessa, a panel painting, a Vita icon, a metal revetted icon. The Mandyllion of Genoa is encased within two bejewelled frames of various dating (1601, 1702), and a mid-fourteenth century Palaiologan filigree and enamelled repoussé frame, lined with a delicate Byzantine silk. This Palaiologan frame is made up of four filigree plaques that circumscribe the outline of a very dark face of Christ; and an outer, rectangular frame, in which ten plaques in filigree work alternate with ten small rectangular, enamelled and repoussé plaques featuring the history of the relic of the Edessan cloth until its arrival in Constantinople in 944. The Palaiologan frame circumscribes a three-pointed, dark face of Christ painted on wood, having on the verso a painted red cross. This painted icon is a reproduction of the cloth imprinted with Christ's facial features that He, while preaching in Jerusalem, is said to have sent to king Abgar of Edessa (today Urfa, Turkey), and since then known as 'the image of Edessa'. The chronology (tenth to fourteenth century), as well as the origins of the central painted icon are debated, and still await for a devoted research by icon specialists. The Genoa Mandyllion raises many interesting questions relating to, for example, its unclear cultural origin, its debated chronology, the supposed imperial patronage; the alleged authenticity of the central icon as the image from Edessa, its decontextualisation in Genoa perhaps as a consequence of a theft rather than a gift, its change of destination from a private, imperial cult in the Constantinopolitan Pharos chapel to a once-a-year public display in the genoese cathedral, its pre-modern restorations and additions, and last, but not least, the unparalleled quality of its craftsmanship. The focus of my paper will be the cultural context that produced the frame, adapted it to a pre-existing icon, and eventually pretended it was the original image of Edessa on the occasion of a diplomatic gift.

Rebecca Farbstein (McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, Cambridge)

Material Manipulation: Art Production Technologies and Traditions in Palaeolithic Europe

This paper will discuss a range of tactics and techniques used to make Palaeolithic art. Several raw materials, for instance ivory, antler, and bone, will be considered, and the social and aesthetic implications of technical choices will be discussed. Particular areas of interest include sensitivity to the natural characteristics of raw materials, preservation of a raw material's found form or imposition of a new, arbitrary shape, and technological innovation and virtuosity in material modification and art production.

Sally Korman (independent scholar)

While You Were Sleeping: Maniera, Manipulation and Michelangelo's Lost Cupid

In 1496 Michelangelo carved a marble Cupid: a little boy, aged about six or seven, lying asleep. This figure, now disappeared, forms the focus of a remarkable episode of double-dealing. In order to pass it off as a classical work, the young sculptor was persuaded to bury

the Cupid, artificially ageing it. His unscrupulous dealer sold it as an antique to a Roman cardinal for two hundred ducats. He then attempted to cheat the artist, offering him thirty ducats, claiming that this was the sum he had received. The case of the Sleeping Cupid was reported by Michelangelo's 'official' biographer, Ascanio Condivi, in his *Life* of 1553: and by Vasari in his revised edition of 1568. More than a cautionary tale about the vagaries of the art market, the story demonstrates how faking an object's material history could inflate its value. To collectors, a genuine antique was worth more, both in monetary and aesthetic terms. This is revealed by the judgment of a later owner, Isabella d'Este, who displayed it alongside a Cupid attributed to Praxiteles. Of Michelangelo's sculpture she offered the qualified assessment: 'for a modern work, it has no equal'. Yet for Vasari and Condivi, writing retrospectively, the true value of the Cupid lay elsewhere. In Condivi's account, when the forgery is suspected, Michelangelo is invited to submit a work to the cardinal's agent. He responds by making a drawing of a hand. This has several possible resonances. It can be read as a confession – 'the Cupid is by my hand' – but also serves as proof of his skill: a spontaneous expression that recalls Vasari's famous story of Giotto answering a similar challenge by drawing a perfect circle. Throughout the *Lives*, Vasari employs the common formula 'by his hand' to denote authorship of a work of art. The word he uses to denote individual style – *maniera*, from which the terms 'manner' and 'Mannerism' are derived – is related etymologically to the word for 'hand'. For Vasari, as for other sixteenth-century commentators including Michelangelo himself, the hand functions as a physical expression of the interplay between the creative agency of the artist and the independent 'life' of the work of art. Born from the hands of Michelangelo, buried under layers of earth and deception, the Cupid was subjected to an afterlife of historical manipulation in the rival biographies of Vasari and Condivi. In their hands, the sleeping statue awakened a powerful fable of authorship and authenticity.

Luisa Mengoni (Asian Department, V&A)

Manipulating the Past and Naturalising the Foreign – Re-mounting Historical Ceramics, II: Hybrid Creations: Chinese Ceramics with European Mounts

The practice of adding metal mounts to imported objects is documented in Europe since the late 14th century, when exotic objects, such as Nautilus shells, ivory tusks and porcelain, still a rarely seen item at the time, were set in gold and silver to highlight their rarity and beauty. In the 17th and 18th centuries, large quantities of tableware and decorative items were exported from China by the East India companies, and Chinese porcelain became more readily available onto the European market. The practice of setting objects in metal mounts, made of silver, gilt bronze and copper, quickly turned into a popular fashion in several European countries, such as France, England, Germany and the Netherlands. In some cases, metal fittings applied to finished or partially finished objects served the purpose of changing their function and use; in other cases, mounts helped adapting the imported items to the style and general appearance of European interiors. In 18th century France, the addition of elaborate gilt bronze mounts could raise considerably the market value of an object, and make it more appealing to purchasers, who were not necessarily or primarily interested in porcelain. The hybrid products deriving from such creative operations thus acquired a new multi-layered identity, which was distant and distinct from the original, and reflected instead the taste and preferences of European clients. During the mid-late 19th century a change in taste among collectors led to the discarding of several historical mounts, which were seen as spurious additions obscuring the purity and authenticity objects. These interventions have in fact irremediably altered their history and biography. The Victoria and Albert Museum holds one of the largest collections of Chinese export ceramics in the world, including a consistent group fitted in European mounts. This paper will introduce selected examples, and will discuss how these imported objects were reconstructed and manipulated over time to adapt them to different functions and new tastes.

Nat Silver (The Frick Collection, New York)

Transforming the Trinity Altarpiece

The Trinity altarpiece, now in the National Gallery, was commissioned from Francesco Pesellino by a confraternity of priests in Pistoia between 1455 and 1460. In the eighteenth-century, it was violently chopped into fragments which, with the help of art dealers, were transformed into desirable collector's objects and dispersed across Europe and Russia. Using photographs, watercolours and descriptions of the pieces in the nineteenth century, this paper will examine the manipulation of the altarpiece and how it shaped subsequent interpretations by art historians

Maria Elena Versari (Duquesne University, Pittsburgh)

"Look, and Look Again": Manipulated Artworks, Competing Evidence and the Challenge of Modernist Historiography

This paper will examine the process of the manipulation, destruction and reconstruction of modern artworks and the role this process has played in the development of historiographical and critical assessments of modernism. It will address the repercussions that specific material and stylistic choices had on the historicization of works by Umberto Boccioni, Alexander Archipenko and Valdimir Tatlin and the diminished status of material evidence and historical documentation in current theoretical approaches to the modernist canon