

Renaissance and Reformation
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Anderson, Christy, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela H. Smith, eds. The Matter of Art: Materials, Practices, Cultural Logics, c. 1250–1750

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Book Reviews / Comptes Rendus

Anderson, Christy, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela H. Smith, eds.

The Matter of Art: Materials, Practices, Cultural Logics, c. 1250–1750.

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015. Pp. xvi, 339 + 73 ill. ISBN 978-0-7190-9060-8 (hardcover) £75.

In the introduction to this highly interesting publication, the editors Anderson, Dunlop, and Smith explain convincingly their wish to embrace cultural history in an interdisciplinary manner; indeed, the conjunction of the science of materials with material culture illustrates that “materials themselves bring with them to the object their own histories of origins and associations” (3). As the editors point out, this particular focus on materials and material culture is often criticized in recent historicist studies, where it is noted that the object itself becomes lost. Yet the introduction to this volume serves to justify its overall materialist approach. The highly varied individual case histories presented here are each supported by structured theoretical and speculative foundations, following traditional treatises or more contemporary trends in sociology, anthropology, architectural and literary studies, or studies in conservation.

Part 1 presents individual case studies of works of art, artifacts, makers, or commissions in which the particular early modern historical context is coupled with a detailed examination of the object in its physicality and material presence. Ann-Sophie Lehmann discusses the use of oil medium in early Netherlandish painting beginning around 1420, and this in light of Vasari’s founding myth of oil painting. Pamela H. Smith’s contribution explores metalworking in early modern Europe based on a detailed study of mining procedures and metalworking techniques by workmen and artisans within ancient and early modern texts, especially the writings of the thirteenth-century cleric and scholar Albertus Magnus. Anne Dunlop’s examination of a painting on wood panel by the Italian Renaissance artist Gentile da Fabriano of the early 1420s sets the stage for an intriguing study of the “secret life of pigments,” whereby the author considers that Cennino Cennini’s well-known treatise *Il libro dell’arte* should be viewed as much more than a mere handbook of artist’s techniques and materials. Dunlop explains most convincingly that Renaissance painting for Cennini is a creative experience in which the artist reveals “the

unseen things hiding [...] within natural ones, and making the absent visible to the eye" (86). Fascinating and groundbreaking in its contribution to the field of material history is Irma Passeri's presentation on gold leaf production during the Early Renaissance period, which is based on a detailed study of historical documents from the period.

In part 2 of the publication, Aden Kumler presents a most intriguing study of the materiality of the medieval Eucharist. The author points out that Eucharistic devotion during the medieval period is intimately linked to monastic attention to the actual production of Eucharistic hosts, as for example in the design of hosts made in elaborate "host presses." Kumler links the materiality of the Eucharistic host to its depiction in medieval altarpieces, whereby the materiality of the host termed "Jean le Blanc" becomes an allegory of devotion, termed "ocular piety." In what begins as a straightforward analytical examination of the artist's pigment "lead white," Spike Bucklow invokes a text by Albertus Magnus on the ancient and early modern methods of production of this particular pigment. Bucklow points out that Albertus's commentary on pigments is founded upon a Neoplatonic worldview. Additional medieval manuscripts are discussed by the author, mapping the use of lead white onto astrological forces and humours, thus going beyond a mere analytical description of a traditional artist's pigment. Eckart Marchand's contribution emphasizes the use of plaster, terracotta, and wax in Renaissance workshop practices. Often considered secondary and less noble than other more permanent and valuable materials such as stone or metals, the author shows that it is precisely the particular physical properties and working qualities that impart value and meaning to such materials. For the author, the use of wax may be linked to the Aristotelian concept of memory, and in another historical context wax is considered a sacred material, as in the medieval *ex voto*.

In part 3, a particular emphasis is placed on individual case studies concerning "the matter of art." Several contributions explore inorganic materials, such as the belief in medieval times that precious stones are indeed "mineral beings" (Brigitte Buettner). Carolyn Dean explores the sacredness of building stone in the context of the Spanish Colonial period: although building stone from Inca sacred monuments was very often reworked and reassembled in the construction of Spanish Colonial monuments, the sacredness of the stone for the Inca people remains within the materiality of the stone itself, despite any architectural transformation at a later date. The notion of intrinsic *sacredness*

localized within organic materials is explored by Christina Neilson in her offering entitled “Carving Life.” As for inorganic materials, organic composite materials using wood are considered sacred by both artisan and devotee due to the resemblance of wood sculpture to material properties and the structure of the human body. Also researching in the area of composite organic materials, Elizabeth Semmelhack presents a fascinating look at fine footwear of the Spanish and Italian Renaissance period in her study of the precursor of the modern high heel: the fine leather *chopine*.

This publication is an admirable and highly original work due to its focus on materiality during the early modern period. The individual contributions present subtle and thought-provoking variations on the relation between materiality and phenomenal appearance in the form of either artwork or historical artifact. The textual evidence supporting the individual contributions also permits the reader to become more aware of the critical role that materials themselves play in cultural history. The endnotes offer a wealth of information for further research on the various topics presented. The fine illustrations throughout are reproduced in black-and-white, a choice that harmonizes well with the rich theoretical and speculative foundation of the publication.

CHRISTINE FILLION
Art Gallery of Ontario

Bucciantini, Massimo, Michele Camerota, and Franco Giudice.

***Galileo's Telescope: A European Story.* Trans. Catherine Bolton.**

Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015. Pp. x, 340 + 25 ill., 8 plates, 5 maps. ISBN 978-0-674-73691-7 (hardcover) \$35.

The first pages of *Galileo's Telescope* describe a group of students pressed against a museum display case in Florence. While some students are uninterested in the case's contents—pieces of glass and wooden tubes—and move along, others stay behind, intent on unfolding the journeys of a museum artifact. *Galileo's Telescope* is best read as a guidebook for the latter; it takes readers unacquainted with the wooden tubes and pieces of glass across Europe and eloquently narrates the various encounters of the telescope.