



## **33rd Congress of German Art Historians Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz, 24–28.03.2015**

Call for papers

### **The Value of Art**

The social and political function of art is currently being interrogated, more intensively and thoroughly than we have seen in a long time. The explosive nature of the Cornelius Gurlitt case is thereby a daily topic of discussion, as are forgeries and the relevance of everything that, subsequent to the iconic turn, we might term the upward revaluation of the art work or of images *per se*. Not least in view of these many debates, the Verband Deutscher Kunsthistoriker e. V. (Association of German Art Historians) and the Institute of Art History at the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz, as joint organizers of the 2015 Congress of German Art Historians, have chosen “the value of art” as the central theme of its multi-day conference.

During the meeting, the spotlight will fall in particular on those research activities that reflect the current social and political status of the discipline of art history, and also that of its objects and institutions. The twelve sessions making up the programme each approach the conference’s theme from a different perspective and thereby clearly demonstrate how the enquiry into values and evaluations is reflected in a wealth of aspects and current academic discourses within art history’s various professional groups. The sessions that have been chosen correspondingly include those that take a completely fresh look at traditional art-historical forms and contexts, such as gold, the Church and court art. Other sessions go on to discuss the question of the value of art for our own present. In an epoch in which museums, and the role they play in cultural education and the preservation of the arts, no longer enjoy automatic social acceptance, the question of the value of art is being raised with increasingly urgency. The sessions will therefore ask, from the perspective of today, how the value of art, and more generally the medium of the image, restates itself in museums, churches and cultural landscapes, as well as in other disciplines such as the neurosciences.

Following the call for sessions in autumn 2013, interested colleagues are warmly invited to submit their proposals (1–2 pages) for individual papers to be delivered in the sessions outlined below. Each session can accommodate five 30-minute papers. The final selection will be made by the heads of each session and the members of the board at a joint meeting.

Please send your proposals to:

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Closing date for submissions: **14.05.2014**

## Sessions

### The value of gold. The semantics and reception of a controversial material from the Byzantine era up to the 19th century

Starting from the idea that was summarized, in the Middle Ages, in the motto *ars auro prior* (art is superior to gold) and was subsequently updated and refined by Leon Battista Alberti in his preference for imitation over real gold, this session aims to shed light on the relationship and rivalry between the material, symbolic and artistic value of gold. Attitudes towards gold as a material were characterized by ambivalence, as witnessed by the paradox presented by the widespread and persistent use of gold grounds and gold ornament in medieval and Renaissance painting and in their often vehement rejection in the art literature of the same period.

In this session we shall examine, across a timeframe spanning several epochs, to what extent technological knowledge of the working of gold and of the properties immanent in the material became relevant for its semantics and reception. Particular consideration shall also be given to more recent studies exploring the relationship between the use of materials in the Early Modern era and a growing scientific interest in optics.

Additional focus shall also fall upon art and knowledge transfer from the eastern Mediterranean region: to what extent, for example, can we speak of a reception of the material aesthetic of the gold grounds of Byzantine icons and mosaics by western European art of the Early Modern era, and what were the consequences of their assimilation and modification? In this context we shall explore the question of what, in a painting otherwise obeying the Renaissance rules of perspective and unified pictorial space, the aesthetic added value of the use of gold as a material could have been.

**Iris Wenderholm, Hamburg / Frank Fehrenbach, Hamburg**

### Luxury art objects and public image. The value of the (applied) arts

The relative, changing and indeed fragile evaluations to which artworks are regularly subjected are the topic of this conference. In the spirit of the reflexivity of our discipline, a critical interrogation of the hierarchies of the arts that operate – implicitly or explicitly – in academic art history also belongs in this context. In this session we shall review the appraisal of the so-called applied or decorative arts from the perspective of history and the history of knowledge. Since the early 20th century (or more precisely, after the 19th century's interest in arts and crafts had ebbed away), university-based research has given only rare consideration to works of goldsmithery, textile art and ceramics. Yet these luxury art objects enjoyed an extraordinarily high status at the European courts of the Early Modern era. They were housed, fittingly, in treasuries – a reflection not only of their material value but also of the technical mastery and virtuosity they manifested. A no less important aspect of these art treasures, and one that has been a focus of research in more recent times, is their performativity in historical situations, in which they not uncommonly assumed a key significance. Their choice as furnishings for banqueting halls and official reception rooms was frequently motivated by the fact that they lay at the immediate disposal of their princely owners. In rites and ceremonies these art objects communicated highly differentiated messages. In them, dynastic tradition assumed materialized shape, as it were.

A fresh evaluation of the applied arts should focus – with a rigorous methodological approach that can overcome the art-historical hierarchizations of the 19th and 20th century – on the presence and functions of luxury art objects in the context of

the courts of the Early Modern era. It should thereby seek to identify in particular the strategies with which significance and valence were generated. Investigations in this area can also shed light more generally upon value categories and value parameters.

**Birgitt Borkopp-Restle, Bern / Dirk Syndram, Dresden**

## **The value of things. Material culture in the context of late medieval and Early Modern courts**

For some time now, objects have found themselves back at the centre of academic interest. This is thanks in particular to the theoretical focussing upon the material environment initiated by Jean Baudrillard, Roland Barthes, Bruno Latour and others. The “return of things” is explained above all by their re-appraisal as active agencies in the process of identity formation and communication.

The discussion surrounding things and the object character of artworks only belatedly found its way into the narrower art-historical discourse. Precious objects were classed as applied art and their aesthetic significance and power of expression marginalized by comparison to works of architecture, sculpture and painting. This marginalization of the object was reinforced by the concentration upon the image that accompanied the broadening of the scope of art history in the wake of visual studies. The focus of interest only finally returned to precious objects with the start of the discourse on materiality. Objects are today receiving growing attention in the context of investigations into transcultural exchange and as components of interiors.

The value of things in the late Middle Ages and Early Modern period is not a factor solely of the esteem in which they were held in the context of court and city. Rather, it should be asked whether their value was not also ultimately determined by their function as “actors”, or more accurately “actants” (Latour). When and through what properties did precious objects enter into relation with the subject? Over and above their function in the areas of commerce and gift-giving, religious practices and political and social image-building, can we identify “functions” in which they assumed an “active” identity-giving role? What significance does the material of these objects thereby hold? To what extent was time consciousness stabilized by objects, and what bonds did objects make possible? What role was thereby played by the visual discourse on objects?

It should further be asked to what extent the art discourse of the Early Modern period had already relativized the “power” of objects and how this precipitated into rooms housing collections of art. Although this session is intended to focus on the Middle Ages and Early Modern period, we should also ask whether and how pre-modern objects are used in modern art.

**Elisabeth Oy-Marra, Mainz / Juliane von Fircks, Mainz**

## **The value of context. The influence of spatial setting on the appreciation of art: museum versus palace versus church?**

“Artworks as objects of contemplation are part of an environment.” However banal this sentence may sound, our appreciation of a work of art is profoundly influenced by the nature of its context and by external conditions governing the way in which it is perceived. Whether displayed inside a museum or appearing in the historical setting of a church, a secular interior or a garden, works of art must be seen both as individual works and as part of a larger context.

The choreography of the viewer’s physical approach to the artwork, the emphasis placed upon its location, and its embedding within a broader (visual) programme – these factors are in most cases out of the hands of the artist and are decided by

those who place art. The way in which art is staged for the viewer is therefore a fundamental yardstick of the (social) regard in which individual works are held.

The relationship between work and spatial context is particularly potent in the setting of a castle or palace, where the overall décor and (original) functional procedures assume major significance above and beyond the individual work and require attention. The weighting lies elsewhere in the case of museums, which express the esteem in which a work is held primarily through its position within the collection as a whole, encourage concentration upon the individual object, and endeavour to optimize the external conditions of its reception with aids such as lighting and captions. But although both palace and museum consider the question of presentation carefully, each understands the value of the artwork very differently, or more accurately makes a very different evaluation of the legibility of its various layers. Shortly after the end of the German monarchy in 1918 and the nationalization of Germany's castles and palaces, a dispute escalated in many places over the question of which was the better location for masterpieces: added value conferred by their appearance within a traditional historical context or by their concentrated embedding in a museum environment?

While a more fundamental disagreement over art-historical method underlies these disputes (which are in part still ongoing), the question of context has today assumed a fresh topicality, as ever more artists are exploring the effect of their works in historical spaces. This session therefore examines the question of the influence of environment on the value of art in the example of the field of tension between palace (or historical interior or church) and museum. We welcome contributions that examine the general relationship between artwork and setting or look at concrete cases in which a change in spatial setting has resulted in a change in our estimation of an artwork, as well as contributions that consider the autonomy of works of painting, sculpture and handicraft in their spatial context, in other words that examine e.g. the history of the relocation of an artwork from a palace/castle into a museum and the impact on its reception, or the search for optimum forms of presentation of artworks within the history of museum building.

**Samuel Wittwer, Berlin / Bénédicte Savoy, Berlin**

## **Rival values: original, copy, reproduction and forgery**

The art-historical and economic relevance of the expert appraisal of artworks has been plainly demonstrated by recent investigations against art forgers and their accomplices. But away from the headlines, too, the lack of a thorough examination of the criteria by which artworks are classified and evaluated, both under the terms of a globally operating art trade and against the backdrop of an increasing institutionalization of provenance research, is also illustrated by countless cases of artworks whose origins are in doubt.

A look at the history of fluctuating attributions to “great masters” such as Botticelli, Raphael, Rembrandt and Velázquez, and at the associated, in some cases far-reaching economic consequences for the owners concerned, raises fundamental questions as to the status and value of an original in relation to an autograph repetition, a copy and a fake: is an art work only genuine if it is executed by the artist in person, or does its authorization by the artist suffice? Why is an original itself worth more than a copy if it is visually indistinguishable from the latter? Has the improvement of reproduction techniques over the centuries altered the criteria of distinction between original, copy and forgery? In the identification of an artwork as an original, copy or forgery, do aesthetic, historical, legal, moral, ethical and economic values all interlink or must they be separated and weighed up against each other? When it comes to determining the authenticity of artworks, how much can the latest scientific

methods of investigation into materials and techniques tell us, and where do their limits lie? And last but not least: what do these findings signify for academic and commercial practice, e.g. with regard to the conception and function of the catalogue raisonné, in particular given that questions of authenticity – although of art-historical relevance – only become critical on account of their impact on the market?

This session aims to analyse and continue the critical discourse on the rival artistic and economic values of original, copy, reproduction and forgery against the backdrop of historical factors.

**Johannes Nathan, Berlin/Zurich / Dorothee Wimmer, Berlin**

## **Counting drapery folds versus visual studies. Research at museums and universities: rivalry or teamwork?**

Opinions at museums and universities on what is comprised by the term “art history” seem to be moving apart at the speed of light. While the focus at museums appears to fall on individual work phases or questions of artist mobility, universities explore only highly theoretical questions, as they see it. In most cases no inspection is thereby made of the works themselves. What are the causes of this divide, which upon closer inspection is perhaps not as unbridgeable as it first appears? Collaborative research projects by museums and universities, where they are conducted at all, are often accompanied by mutual misunderstanding and mistrust.

Museums create exhibitions, but unfortunately it is regularly the case that these are not based on the latest state of scholarship. Universities carry out research, which often takes place far from the object as the subject of art history. Under what conditions and in what ways objects can and should be exhibited is unclear, since findings are usually only presented between the covers of a book or on the Internet. Cooperation between museums and universities is nevertheless being increasingly encouraged and in the context of evaluations, for example, is stipulated as a quality criterion of the work of both institutions. Successful examples of such collaboration are intended to show how such joint research can be conducted, by what paths results are obtained, and what the benefits of such a partnership of equals can be.

Examples can relate to joint lectures or courses, exhibition projects at universities, exhibitions placed on a well-researched academic footing (something by no means always common even in museums), and comparative research projects on objects in museums and/or comparative objects outside museums. Another example can also be the collaboration between museums and universities on provenance research (an area of particular topical relevance), on the compilation of catalogues raisonnés and on restoration projects.

**G. Ulrich Großmann, Nuremberg / Kilian Heck, Greifswald**

## **European Architectural Heritage Year 1975. Old buildings, new values – new buildings, old values**

2015 marks the 40th anniversary of European Architectural Heritage Year, held under the motto of “A Future for our Past”. This is also the occasion to examine the mechanisms by which value is established. Since the 1960s, representatives of art history and practical heritage conservation, energetic individuals and groups of concerned citizens of various political persuasions have mounted spectacular campaigns and conducted unflinching educational and publicity work in order to generate fresh appraisals of the buildings and complexes of historicism and to uncover their potential. With the support of the German National Committee for the Protection of Historic



Monuments, founded in 1973, a broad spectrum of society adopted the positive approach to historicism that we today take for granted.

The heritage protection laws passed as from the 1970s onwards were a further result of this commitment and anchored the protection of historic monuments as a permanent institution. Today we have come full circle: the new buildings that were stylized back then as monstrous and as a repudiation of the past, now need to be listed as historic monuments themselves. The protagonists of those years face the challenge of having to protect the very architecture against which they protested when it was new. Those born after 1970 must discover their own architectural past. The highly publicized dispute over the Mainz Town Hall, built in 1973 and today in urgent need of restoration, is a topical case in point. What aspects of the new buildings of the 1970s show them engaging with the history of architecture, and can these be used today as a starting-point from which to establish their value? Is it time, within the context of heritage protection, to adopt a different approach and to define new values for buildings that are only now becoming old? Or do the old values define the new buildings? Are we long overdue a generation change not only in the evaluation of architecture but in heritage conservation as a whole?

**Werkstatt Baukultur Bonn (Martin Bredenbeck, Constanze Falke, Martin Neubacher) / Carsten Ruhl, Frankfurt/Main**

## **Art – culture – landscape: interactions and evaluations. Current perspectives from art history and cultural geography**

Historical cultural landscapes such as the Upper Middle Rhine Valley, a UNESCO World Heritage region just outside Mainz, take shape via the interplay of natural and cultural processes. Works of art and architecture, with their spatial relationships within the landscape, are relics of the past that render the historical layers of these processes visible; as condensed signs, they mark places of symbol and memory. Cultural landscapes that have evolved over time are dynamic spaces that have constantly seen changes to their use and evaluation. Currently, however, the pressure to change is extensively increasing as a result of the demand for renewable energies and large-scale infrastructure projects. For the study of cultural heritage, it is therefore vital to establish criteria by which historical cultural landscapes and their diverse, often unprepossessing and uncomfortable testaments to the past can be interpreted and evaluated.

This session wishes to provide a forum for the dialogue between art history, cultural geography and other historical cultural studies revolving around these themes. It examines current tendencies in the investigation of cultural landscapes and their relics from art and cultural history. Which methodological approaches employed in cultural landscape research and art geography are currently proving useful in academic theory as well as in practice? Of particular interest are reflections on how our perception and appraisal of cultural landscapes are determined by different medium-related strategies of visualization. How does the view of the landscape, the scenery produced e.g. by photography, relate to the three-dimensional experience of walking through a landscape, and what are the consequences of this? How do the possibilities offered by the latest digital media impact e.g. on cartography and on the visualization of historical and future processes in cultural landscapes? Contributions on the evaluation of cultural landscapes in non-European contexts are likewise welcome.

**Ute Engel, Mainz / Andreas Dix, Bamberg**

## Thorn in the flesh of a secular visual culture? The value of art in contemporary religious contexts

In the enquiry into the value of art in today's society, contemporary religious contexts represent a key area of focus. They range across a broad spectrum, starting with the use of pre-modern religious art in the traditional setting of a church (a use that may be subject to major changes as a result of reforms to the liturgy) and continuing with the integration of modern and contemporary art into traditional church interiors. The spectrum also incorporates the status of religiously connoted art in the work of contemporary artists, and finishes with the translation of the religious object into a museum environment. What value can art develop under these conditions, and what appreciation for and understanding of art are articulated here by a modern society with secular tendencies and equally by the churches and religious communities operating in this society?

Art can here be a cause of conflict, as witnessed by the public discussions that erupt whenever a contemporary work is commissioned or unveiled. But what kind of art is today capable of combining, in an appropriate manner, a sophisticated artistic concept reflecting the ideas and visual expectations of modern art with the ability to convey theologically and philosophically defined values and religious content? This question only superficially concerns the issue of abstraction versus figuration, since both have formed part of the basic repertoire of sacred art since the Middle Ages and as pictorial concepts exerted an enduring influence upon modernism, too. Instead, therefore, we should seek to clarify which conceptual demands are placed on art in religious contexts today and what receptive abilities are expected of the viewer. We should also ask, lastly, what significance religious commissions – in which modern artists must necessarily confront the age-old traditions of pre-modern, religiously connoted art – have for the artists themselves?

A number of more recent exhibition concepts, in particular in church museums, have demonstrated that the potential not just of contemporary but also of pre-modern religious art to convey ideas and values is best actuated via mutual dialogue or even through confrontation. Such confrontation of objects from the Middle Ages right up to the present day breaks down the boundaries between artworks that originally served a religious function and "autonomous" art. "Modern" and "pre-modern" artworks are freed for their direct reception, appraisal or rejection by the museum visitor. This concept offers a possible way of breaking up established museum structures and the associated aestheticizing or museum-dictated "immobilization" of art and its conceptual potential.

**Matthias Müller, Mainz / Stefan Kraus, Cologne**

## Mimesis and modernism. Visual art's claims to validity – between universalism and worldlessness

In response to the widespread assumption that art represents a value *per se*, it should be pointed out that the values placed upon art are never constituted outside the bounds of latter's socio-historical sphere. Thus the autonomous status of art only represents a value where qualities such as autonomy and liberty are correspondingly appreciated by a society. Art can only be understood in relationship to society. Determining its relationship to reality – its mimesis – is fundamental in this regard.

With its release from service to church, city and state, modern art faces the problem of its possible marginalization and essential particularity. Since then it has sought to demonstrate its significance, insofar as it emphasizes its connection with the real and claims to deliver intrinsic knowledge. For this reason, the question as to the value of art in the modern era is closely bound up with what is viewed as reality.

This orientation towards the real is not confined to straightforward mirroring even in an art apostrophized as “realistic”; here, as also in an art emphatically delimited from realism, its value instead constitutes itself only in the sense of a representation of the real as the totality of values, of real reality, of the absolutely real from which all values arise. Such an essentialist concept of reality is accompanied by a claim to universalism which potentially – since it leaves the concrete social plane – switches into worldlessness.

The art of the modern era presents many different manifestations of the understanding of the real and its conceptual frame of reference. The positions adopted by artists variously centre upon the real, the spiritual, the human, the social, the historical, the elementary and the subjective, which thus become the “content” of their artistic procedures. With this in mind, it may be asked whether such positions, which in place of ideal truths and values allow only the procedure to appear, i.e. the method that represents and embodies art itself, are not themselves ultimately indebted to the need to hold on to the metaphysical shields of modern art and its claim that, in the reference to the real, art transcends reality.

In this session we shall take a critical look at western modernism’s conception of itself and its historiography with regard to its reference to reality and the value assumptions that are thereby made.

**Thomas D. Trummer, Mainz / Gregor Wedekind, Mainz**

## **The market value of the social element. A dilemma of contemporary art**

Since the 1990s, social relevance has played a growing role for the work of the artist and its legitimation. Examples range from political activism to quasi-religious aestheticism. Thus in 2013 Thomas Hirschhorn, following on from earlier projects in Amsterdam, Kassel and Paris, created an ephemeral “social outreach center” in the South Bronx in New York, while James Turrell wants to provoke emphatically communal, supposedly transcendental experiences with his installations at LACMA (Los Angeles).

Such art forms conceived with social performance in mind are coming under increasing criticism. Claire Bishop, for example, is extremely sceptical about the aim of participatory art and social practice to change social structures by activating art recipients (Bishop 2012). Artistic positions such as Mike Kelley’s institutional critique, and attempts at de-disciplining and occupying, can be understood as critical commentaries on this legitimation strategy by contemporary art.

The avant-garde ideal of social relevance, which is intimately bound up with a critical stance towards social, cultural and above all economic realities, has long since been recognized as a commercial value (Graw 2005). To put it bluntly, today’s artists will not earn the regard of institutions and hence the market unless they stress the social value of their work. Contemporary art evidently finds itself in a bind: it strives for social relevance and yet in so doing frequently appears to be obeying institutional and economic rules and thus cementing the status quo.

In this session we shall discuss positions within art and visual studies that reflect the situation of contemporary art outlined above. In this context it is also productive to investigate the market value of the social element in the historical avant-gardes that for their part strove for social relevance. The aim of this session is not to take pessimistic stock of the situation for contemporary art, but to attempt to analyse this dilemma in its connection with other – social, economic, theoretical and political – breaks and contradictions of the present day.

**Eva Ehninger, Bern / Magdalena Nieslony, Heidelberg**



## **Art and the value of feelings. Exchanges between neuroscience, cognitive science and visual studies**

This session starts from the thesis that the feelings triggered by artworks are not solely the private experiences of the viewer that lead to a heightened sense of self. Instead, feelings are seen as qualifying and value-setting means of access to the world. The perception of objects as beneficial or detrimental is far more than a purely individual reaction and is only partially to be seen as an automated reflex. Feelings as factors of the experience of art illustrate complex value systems and at the same time contribute to shaping the social environment. Neuroscientific research into the emotions, like neuroaesthetics, is often accused of treating the human organism and the artwork as fixed entities and therefore of understanding emotions as simple stimulus/response reflexes. On the other hand, criticism is also levelled at purely constructivist models of the feelings, as often employed in the humanities.

This session shall take a closer look at the approaches – often considered irreconcilable in the past – of neuroscience, cognitive science and the humanities. The starting point will be appraisal theory, which is gaining increasing importance in cognitive scientific study of the emotions and which views emotions as feedback results of ideas, wishes, expectations and norms. Brain research, too, is working on models of a social neuroscience. From this perspective, emotions are to be understood not solely as the expression of the individual's exclusive inner experience, but as complex processes which are connected in multiple ways with the social context. These new approaches present highly promising areas of overlap with visual studies. For if we transfer the notion of emotions as interactive processes to the question of the place and status of emotions in the artwork, we can relinquish the outdated model of the emotions, according to which an artwork is intended to be a container for feelings (on the part of the artist and/or the figures in the picture) to which it then gives renewed expression. Emotions in artworks can instead be understood as powerful factors of a social process and can plainly express social norms and values.

This session is addressed to those working the spheres of neuroscience, cognitive science and visual studies. It aims to explore the question of to what extent artistic means of expression with an emotional content are the results and triggers of specific social appraisals.

**Kerstin Thomas, Mainz / Raffael Kalisch, Mainz**