

Im/Materiality in Renaissance Arts

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The inspiration for this Special Issue on Im/Materiality in Renaissance Arts arose from two convictions: (1) that sensual experiences and the physicality of creation must be a part of our accounts of the past, and (2) that crosstalk among scholars of music, literature, art, and architecture can reveal both the historiographical gaps endemic to specific disciplines and the critical tools each specialty brings to the project of incorporating living, breathing artists, builders, poets, singers, players, worshippers, scientists, and others into histories of the Renaissance arts. The articles that follow all grapple with materials (some familiar, some new) and work to redefine the shadow realm of the immaterial in positive terms.

One headline that has emerged in putting together this Special Issue for *Arts* is the importance of getting comfortable with change. Historical materials can seem static. They may be degrading, and conservators work hard to preserve them, but their apparent completeness implies finality, and this plays with the histories that treat them: the traditional value placed on “facts” and incontestable conclusions creates closed accounts at the expense of open-ended essays that are forthcoming about the historian’s guesswork and hermeneutic fancy. How can we chart the webs of thought, action, and interaction—past and present—that should properly be part of scholarship concerning art practices?

Securing a place for flux in historical narratives is never straightforward. In the first instance, it involves a style of scholarly thinking and writing that dwells in zones of unverifiability. Katie Bank develops a technique of “active imagining” based on the suppositions that live musicians filled in missing attributes of wall paintings in a seventeenth-century English manor home during festivities there (contribution 1). Mari Yoko Hara explores embodied modes of viewing early sixteenth-century frescoes in Agostino Chigi’s villa in Rome, through which the beholders themselves are metaphorically made into stony sculptures (contribution 4). Eugenio Refini argues for a material history of Ovid’s Echo—a case of extreme immateriality if there ever was one—by reimagining past performances of Italian madrigals and operas full of echo effects (contribution 5). Lauren Cannady wonders who brought the seed of a black locust tree to Paris sometime around 1620 and whether it came from Virginia via England, impossible to know for sure (contribution 2). The magnificence of the tree, a centuries-old landmark, occludes much of its own history through its very vitality and naturalization as part of the landscape in central Paris. Eleanor Chan presses on passages in a late sixteenth-century English painting of four child musicians, two of whom hold books of music (contribution 3). The notation in one of the depicted partbooks has been identified as the *Domine ne in furore* by Josquin de Prez, but Chan dwells on the adjacent partbook in the painting, whose intentional illegibility renders impossible any such reading.

All of these studies incite disciplinary “breakdowns” as the material remains that traditionally have been the object of investigation reveal their incompleteness, falling apart as missing pieces, voices, bodies, aesthetics, meanings, and ideologies are conjured by our authors. During the peer review process, the executive editors of *Arts* expressed occasional discomfort with the ways our authors disregarded evidentiary standards rooted in the positivistic study of material objects (paintings, edifices, stonework, literary texts, musical



Citation: van Orden, Kate, and Lisa Pon. 2024. Im/Materiality in Renaissance Arts. *Arts* 13: 39. <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts13010039>

Received: 4 November 2023

Accepted: 8 February 2024

Published: 19 February 2024



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scores, archival documents). In the end, we realized that our testing of limits was where the limitations of standard historiographies suddenly become most vivid, and we embraced it all the more fully as intrinsic to the Im/Materiality that concerns us. These studies are not “just the facts,” and while they may provoke moments of disciplinary vertigo, they also offer new disciplinary footings for scholars eager to step off familiar paths of well-worn thinking.

Making historiographic space for change and uncertainty in our accounts also means including the historian’s own processes of encounter with the past, taking stock of how analyses came into being and the pre-history of these deliberately open-ended studies, full of experimental modes of investigation. It is not by chance that so many of our authors are scholar-performers, scholar-creators, scholar-horticulturists, or some otherly hyphenated scholarly being. Bank is a musicologist who “sing[s] a lot” in choirs and for whom the social experience of musicking has always been a central point of reference. Cannady just finished a residency at the Oak Spring Garden Foundation in Upperville, Virginia, working alongside ecologists and gardeners. Chan thanks two ballet dancers, a seamstress, and a joiner in her 2022 book for helping her understand mathematical notation as something “felt in your body and held in your mind’s eye” (Chan 2022, p. xiii). Refini trained as a violinist and continues to play chamber music with friends; he now collaborates with opera singers as part of his research. Hara explored curatorial work and art conservation before becoming an art and architectural historian. Similarly, so many period actors also confound our clear-cut modern categories and were engineer-musician-painters (Leonardo), poet-linguist-cardinals (Pietro Bembo), and composer-kings (Henry VIII, Louis XIII), whose physical labors as makers should not be dismissed (on the artist’s laboring body, see Loh 2015).

Our editorial partnership is also hyphenated in beautiful ways that contributed to bringing this project into being: van Orden specializes in the cultural history of early modern France, Italy, and the Mediterranean, popular music, print culture, and cultural mobility. Pon is an art historian interested in Renaissance *copia*, whose 2015 book examined not only a fifteenth-century woodcut and its copies in paint and print, but the commemorative architecture and civic devotional rituals that arose around it, including a procession for it held in 2014 (Pon 2015). We first met in 2018 in the café of the Harvard Art Museums for a free-wheeling conversation about New Materialism and the techniques employed by musicologists and art historians to address the somatic realities of the past. Lisa asked for practical approaches to thinking about Renaissance polyphony, and Kate suggested learning to play the viola da gamba, an instrument she plays for fun alongside her professional performances on baroque bassoon. Lisa took up the viol in 2019 despite having no prior musical training whatsoever, beyond what she had gleaned during professional ballet training as a teenager. Suffice to say that we both find theory and practice to be deeply intertwined in our own lives. These sympathies inspired the panel we organized for the 2023 Renaissance Society of America conference in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on our issue’s theme (which included two papers not presented here, by Florence Gétreau and Morgan Ng). Our co-editing of this Special Issue of *Arts* has provided a virtual meeting spot for continued conversations about art, music, and history that have been greatly enriched by our collaborations with Bank, Cannady, Chan, Hara, and Refini.

The “Im/Materiality” rubric we arrived at for this Special Issue expresses a shared desire to better address the huge array of invisible, inaudible, missing, lost, and unspeakable elements that have long haunted our own work, the phantom ways of knowing relegated to suggestive footnotes or hinted at in acknowledgements crediting classroom experiments with our students and attempts at historical reconstructions that never claimed to be authentic but nonetheless told us so much about the ways things came together in the past. In our exchanges, we found that we share an analytic process of tacking back and forth between the obdurate objects that now remain and the long-gone, evanescent handling they once inspired. Although we both generally abhor slashes in academic prose, we acknowledge their occasional usefulness, as noted in a recent *New York Times* review of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s *Manet/Degas* exhibition (Cotter 2023), and here we embrace the slash as

emblematic of our scholarly agenda. Typographically, “Im/Materiality” symbolizes a critical tightrope, one from which it is all too easy to fall into pre-determined ways of thinking. Even as the slash trips us up, the multiple readings of this word/these words are also held together by a slash that charts the potential benefits of walking a line amid and between the Material and its negation with “Im.” The slashing effect is intended to be deliberately and positively disturbing by disrupting a seamless reading of “immaterial” and confusing any straightforward approach to “material” that might allow it to be separated from actions and being.

Some of these beneficial disturbances are built into the disciplinary encounters staged in this issue; from the start, we found ourselves comparing the research methods specific to musicology and art history, and the predispositions of our individual disciplines to repress or evade somatic knowledge. In the case of early musicology, which established itself as a science based on textual study, iconography, and organology, the relevance of performance was always limited, and scholars concentrated on studying material remains (manuscripts, printed books, paintings, and instruments). Indeed, bibliography, paleography, philology, textual criticism, editing, and archival research are foundational to the discipline. Accounts of past performers occasionally hovered around life-and-works studies of composers such as Georg Friederich Händel, who often wrote operatic roles with specific singers in mind, while interest in historical performance practice established a research area in which organology, fabrication, and interpretation led to real-time experiments designed to bring us closer to the sound of things in the past. But on the whole, as Carolyn Abbate observed in 2004, “musical performance has been seen, analyzed, and acknowledged, but not always listened to” (Abbate 2004, p. 508).

Literary historians will recognize these same tendencies to focus on the text and the conundrums they pose for historians of early modern theater. For—as with music, where we can safely assert that notated texts are not the music itself—playbooks are not plays (Orgel 1996, p. 23; Wistreich 2011, pp. 230–33). The same applies to dance: choreographic instructions are not dance (Franko and van Orden 2019). And yet, the magnetism of texts distracts us from dwelling as fully as we might (and should) in sound, sight, touch, smell, proprioception, and taste. We might also want to preserve space for past imaginings, visualizations, and visions. As Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht explained in *Production of Presence*:

Interpretation alone cannot do justice to the dimension of ‘presence,’ a dimension in which cultural phenomena and cultural events become tangible and have an impact on our senses and our bodies. (Gumbrecht 2004, cover description)

Gumbrecht’s emphasis on presence evokes Susan Sontag’s call for “an erotics of art”: “What we need now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more” (Sontag 1966, p. 14). Honoring presence through renewed sensibilities in our research seems all the more urgent in our current historical moment. It demands a willingness to hold aside the material text or score long enough to sense, analyze, and describe such dynamic visceral reactions should we want to integrate them into our research.

This turn to the sensorium is especially challenging for art history, particularly when studying the Renaissance (though studies of contemporary art have been more nimble; see, for example, Jones 2008). Art history has deep roots in museums and auction houses, where art objects have ostensibly been kept for posterity or changed hands in frankly economic transactions. These institutional settings developed practices of connoisseurial discernment and cataloging, and of assessing condition and value that focused on and often isolated the material object. In the twentieth century, museums literally became machines for maintaining at proper temperature and humidity their chosen “objects of care,” while in our own century, the limits of such care, given war and climate change, are becoming ever more apparent (Marshall 2023; see also Domínguez Rubio 2020, pp. 50–52). Art history in the academy has also always had text-based forms of interpretation, whether the texts in question come from historical archives or from critical theory. How to bring together cared-for art objects, the specter of material things beyond our care, and texts (including ours!) that would speak for wordless pictures and music? How to consider the artworlds

of early modern artists and composers, as well as the horizons of five centuries of viewing and playing?

In recent decades, Renaissance art history has begun to address these issues. In a 2001 collaboration with Graham Larkin, Lisa offered some initial responses by calling for a “sociology of images,” an expansive field of art historical interpretation that, even if unable to fully recapture Gumbrechtian “presence,” might embrace the spatial, technical, ritual, and institutional framings of any work of art, as well as its materiality (Pon and Larkin 2001, pp. 1–6; Pon 2015, pp. 1–10). No work of art is permanently fixed, no matter how well-controlled its physical environment. Just as manuscript annotations in an early printed book might literally have been washed away to make a clean copy, additions to a finished work that might have been removed as overpainting a generation ago are now studied for their own cultural significance (Stoddard 1985; Jasienski 2023).

Early modern books and paintings—along with the textiles, prints, trees, and sculptures our authors bring together in this issue—may seem to be unyielding material objects. Yet they are not. Like more obviously durational art forms such as music, dance, theater, and literature, experiences of such things unfold in time, an unfolding that can be witnessed in many media by patient historians (Abramson 2016; Hinterwaldner et al. 2016). We advocate for this kind of unhurried sensitivity, for using all our senses while grounded in careful attention to and robust description of the soundless, invisible reverberations a material object may trigger. In this Special Issue of *Arts*, for instance, Katie Bank actively imagines the sensual experiences of party guests arriving at Knole House, Kent, in the early seventeenth century: as they ascended the Great Staircase, they would have been treated to galliards from the musicians’ galleries overhead, light streaming in from picture windows or shadows cast by candelabras, perfumes and scents of the banquet wafting down from the Great Hall above, and perhaps met with the temptation to reach out and touch the sculpture of the Sackville Leopard on the landing (contribution 1). Attention to these experiences would have been incited by the paintings of the Five Senses in the staircase, which Bank interprets as prescriptive cues for past party goers as well as remnants of past sensualities, whose meanings, hierarchies, and interactions have been opened for study by present-day historians. Mari Yoko Hara explores how early modern “situated viewers” in the Villa Farnesina in Rome might have felt when looking at paintings of Medusa, given the ubiquitous theme of petrification in poetry they would have known. Within the partly enclosed space of a loggia overlooking a garden and gazing upwards at a ceiling fresco depicting the starry sky, they would already be attuned to processes of material transformation (contribution 4). Eugenio Refini honors the interpretive insights of modern-day stage directors Jean-Pierre Ponnelle and Paul Agnew, whose gendered choices of voice type for Echo and decisions about whether echo effects should be seen or just heard are highly revealing of the interaction of Im/Materiality at stake in early modern poems and operas based on Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* (contribution 5). By concentrating on a figure without substance, Refini exemplifies the kind of literary-historical questions that can only be addressed fully through performance studies. Lauren Cannady begins by examining a single black locust tree and then branches out to consider a social network of gardeners, horticulturalists, “physician-professors,” merchant adventurers, and successive French kings across two continents (contribution 2). The tree that opens her article grows in Virginia, where she wrote her text. This conscious circling between our present and the pasts we study, between our sensing and our interpreting, turns inward as Eleanor Chan questions the scholarly mandate to make sense of texts in ways that ignore the pleasures of the eye, the delights of typography as a graphic form, and the enticements of text blocks as sheer texture at a time when broadsides were used as wallpaper (contribution 3). As varied as they are in subject and method, each contribution instructs us to remain present, to come to our senses, and to welcome the power of presence into our scholarship.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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1. Bank, Katie. 2023. “Amphions Harp gaue sence vnto stone Walles”: The Five Senses and Musical-Visual Affect. *Arts* 12: 219.
2. Cannady, Lauren. 2023. On the Persistence of the Organic: The Material Lives of the *Robinia pseudoacacia*. *Arts* 12: xx.
3. Chan, Eleanor. 2023. Notation: The In/Visible Visual Cultures of Musical Legibility in the English Renaissance. *Arts* 12: 75.
4. Hara, Mari Yoko. 2023. Petrified Beholders: The Interactive Materiality of Baldassarre Peruzzi’s *Perseus* and *Medusa*. *Arts* 12: 246.
5. Refini, Eugenio. 2023. Echo’s Fluid (Im)materiality Across Text and Performance. *Arts* 12: 249.

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Short Biography of CO-EDITOR BIOS

Kate van Orden is Dwight P. Robinson Jr. Professor of Music at Harvard University. She specializes in the cultural history of early modern France, Italy, and the Mediterranean, popular music (mostly 16th-century, but also in the 1960s), and cultural mobility. Her latest project is *Seachanges: Music in the Mediterranean and Atlantic Worlds, 1550–1800* (I Tatti Research Series 2), an edited volume. Her prize-winning publications include *Materialities: Books, Readers, and the Chanson in 16th-c. Europe* (Oxford, 2015), *Music, Discipline, and Arms in Early Modern France* (Chicago, 2005), and articles in *Seachanges*, *Renaissance Quarterly* and *Early Music History*. In 2016, she received a French Medaille d’Honneur. van Orden currently serves as President of the International Musicological Society (2022–2027), editor-in-chief of *Oxford Bibliographies of Music*, and co-edits the series *Musics in Motion* (Michigan). She also performs on baroque and classical bassoon, with over 60 recordings on Sony, Virgin Classics, and Harmonia Mundi.

Lisa Pon studies the mobilities of art; artistic authority and collaboration; and the Renaissance concept of *copia* or abundance. She wrote *Raphael, Dürer and Marcantoni Raimondi: Copying and the Italian Renaissance Print* (Yale, 2004; ebook, 2020), and *Printed Icon: Forlì’s Madonna of the Fire* (Cambridge, 2015, paperback 2022); this is her fourth co-edited/-authored volume. Pon leads an interdisciplinary project, *Bibliotheca Iulia Instaurata* = Immersive Raphael Project, to digitally reconstruct the library of Julius II, virtually returning the experience of Julius’ books to their intended site in the Vatican Palace, the Stanza della Segnatura. She is Professor of Art History at the University of Southern California, where she heads Collaborations in History, Art, Religion and Music (CHARM), a collective of faculty, staff, students,

and campus neighbors exploring scholarship in community. In the 1980s, she danced Balanchine's *Concerto Barocco* as a member of the corps de ballet of the Garden State Ballet.

Short Biography of CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Katie Bank is Leverhulme Early Career Fellow at the University of Birmingham. Her work reflects an interdisciplinary attention to the role of recreational song and visual culture within the intellectual history of early modern England, particularly music's intersection with natural philosophy, the passions, and concepts of sense perception. Publications include a monograph, *Knowledge Building in Early Modern English Music* (Routledge, 2021), as well as articles in journals such as *Early Music*, *Journal of the Hakluyt Society*, and *Renaissance Studies*. She is co-editor of *Byrd Studies in the Twenty-First Century* (Clemson, 2023) and has recently discussed her work on podcasts and radio, including BBC Radio 4. She has been awarded major grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities/Newberry Library, Arts Council England, the Leverhulme Trust, AHRC, and the British Academy. Katie is also an avid choral singer and enjoys frequent collaboration with professional and amateur ensembles alike.

Lauren R. Cannady is a scholar working at the intersections of art history, intellectual history, and the environmental humanities. In her research and teaching, she explores artistic production and taxonomies of knowledge within interrelated histories of science, religion, technology, and labor in the early modern Atlantic world. She holds a PhD in art history from New York University and was previously Assistant Clinical Professor in the Honors College at the University of Maryland, College Park, and Assistant Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute. Her research has been supported by postdoctoral fellowships at the Huntington Library and the Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte (Paris). She is co-editor of *Crafting Enlightenment: Artisanal Histories and Transnational Networks*, which appeared in the Oxford University Studies in the Enlightenment series in 2021, and is completing a book on early modern patterned gardens as sites of knowledge production and transmission.

Eleanor Chan is a Frances Yates Fellow at the Warburg Institute, University of London, and a BBC/AHRC New Generation Thinker. She specializes in cultures of graphic notation and abstract visualization (mathematical, musical, anatomical) in early modern England. She received her PhD in History of Art from the University of Cambridge and has held fellowships from the Leverhulme Trust, the Paul Mellon Center for Studies in British Art, and the Society for Renaissance Studies. Her first book, *Mathematics and the Craft of Thought in the Anglo-Dutch Renaissance*, was published by Routledge in 2021; her second, *Syrene Soundes: False Relations in the English Renaissance, a Visual, Material, Musical, Cultural History*, is due to be published by Oxford University Press in 2024.

Mari Yoko Hara is Assistant Professor in the School of Architecture at the University of Notre Dame. She is a specialist on early modern Italian art and architecture, particularly as it relates to histories of media practice, knowledge production, and cross-cultural exchange. She is the co-editor of a volume of interdisciplinary essays on the Sino-Jesuit exchange in the early modern period titled *From Rome to Beijing: Sacred Spaces in Dialogue* (Brill, 2024). Her current book-length project, *The Painter-Architect's Practice: Baldassarre Peruzzi and the Transmedial Renaissance*, will explore the intersections of architectural knowledge and the culture of making. Her research has appeared in journals such as *Renaissance Studies*, among others, and her work has been supported by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, the Renaissance Society of America, the American Academy in Rome, and the Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa.

Eugenio Refini (PhD Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa) is Professor of Italian Studies and Chair of the Department of Italian Studies at New York University. His research focuses on reception, translation, and forms of adaptation, which he explores through the intersections of rhetoric, poetics, and voice studies. His most recent publications include two monographs: *The Vernacular Aristotle: Translation as Reception in Medieval and Renaissance Italy* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), and *Staging the Soul: Allegorical Drama as Spiritual Practice in Baroque Italy* (Oxford: Legenda, 2023). He has received research fellowships from institutions such as Harvard University's Villa I Tatti, the Bodleian Library at Oxford, and the Warburg Institute. More recently, he was awarded the NEH Rome Prize in Renaissance and Early Modern Studies from the American Academy in Rome. He is one of the co-editors of the "Classics After Antiquity" series of Cambridge University Press.

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