Writing Visual Histories

EDITED BY

Florence Grant & Ludmilla Jordanova

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Writing Visual Histories

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Introduction

'The visual'

Visual agency and apprehension are central to human experience. Significant material resources, meanings and moral force are often invested in decisions about how things look. People form complex judgements about other people and the world around them by engaging visual skills and habits. Matters of vital interest to historians, including individual and collective identities, social processes, cultural change and political conflict, are shaped, not simply recorded or illustrated, in a visual register. All histories are potentially visual histories. In this book we are trying to be as explicit as possible about practices of history-writing that incorporate visual dimensions, and the kinds of histories that can result. By laying bare what we do in this way, including routine aspects that often go unremarked, it is possible to pay closer attention to and thereby refine historical practice. The things we take as self-evident are always worth noting, in order to facilitate critical reflection.

'The visual' is a vast and often unexamined category. Used in a loose way it can give a false sense of coherence to what is a wildly diverse field – methodologically, materially and culturally. We use the term here to refer to certain kinds of focused skill and attention, exercised both by historical actors and by historians. In doing so we are attempting to address historically specific modes of perception and understanding, including the techniques of trained observation exercised by artists, natural historians, anatomists, physicians, connoisseurs, designers and others whose occupations are highly invested in looking, as well as the skills, habits and codes deployed by a far wider range of people in their daily lives.

Accordingly, visual artefacts might be thought of as those objects in which visual interest has become remarkably concentrated. Such objects seem to embody heightened visual skills, attention and decision-making, and for that reason invite and repay close scrutiny. We are not suggesting a hierarchy of media or genres here; such materials might include prints and photographs, maps, paintings, magazines, sculpture, clothing, coats of arms, jewellery, political posters, tobacco labels, websites and so on. Rather, we are describing a kind of focused emphasis, that is, an approach that organizes understandings of disciplines, genres and media around questions of visual interest.

Texts, contexts, materiality

One of the assumptions that is often implied when historians use the phrase 'visual sources' is that this does not include texts. Historians, like readers of all kinds, spend many hours each day looking at text. Perhaps because the act of reading itself is so habitual, they rarely remark on letter shapes, page design or the visual qualities of paper, ink and bindings – as J. J. Long does here in his essay on photobooks – or on digital displays, unless these somehow hinder legibility. Nonetheless visual and textual sources are profoundly connected, and as Marcus Meer's discussion of inverted coats of arms demonstrates, we risk serious misunderstanding if we draw from one to the exclusion of the other. The writing of visual histories involves not only the recovery of such connections but also the use of practices such as description, through which historians link their own written arguments with images and objects from the past.

Visual things, as well as texts, are also material; the boundaries between 'visual' and 'material' histories are fluid. One potent intersection of the material and the visual can be seen in histories of intentional damage and destruction. Physical attacks on monuments, paintings and religious images, as well as the ritualized production and destruction of effigies, such as those still burned on Guy Fawkes Night in Britain, indicate these objects' complex status in relation to power, belief and action. Taking another approach, painted portraits might be addressed through material histories, giving attention to the substances used, such as pigments (lapis lazuli, ochres, soot), mixing mediums (linseed oil, whale oil), grounds (gesso) and supports (wooden panels, canvas, linen), as well as to frames and dimensions. These kinds of analysis underpin work in conservation and technical art history, and are becoming increasingly familiar in the broader art-historical literature.[1]

To focus in this way on painted portraits is to recognize that they are also made through the exercise of visual decision-making, in the expectation that they will receive certain modes of visual attention and within contexts that abound with visual conventions. Painters' and sitters' visual decisions and expected audiences' visual habits jointly shape the appearance of the picture.[2] The quality of concentrated visual interest can accrue in such artefacts as they are made, displayed, observed, commented upon and reproduced over time. For example, provenance sometimes links objects with well-known individuals whose past ownership adds a level of interest. Provenance studies and the history of collecting also enable the reconstruction of networks of objects that

[1] On visual and material culture, see Harvey, *History and Material Culture*; Rampley, *Exploring Visual Culture*. On iconoclasm, see Freedberg, *Power of Images*. On conservation, see Marstine, *New Museum Theory and Practice*, ch. 3. On materials, see Abrahams, *Beneath the Surface*, and Penny, *Materials of Sculpture*.

[2] Woodall, *Portraiture*, contains a range of approaches; the chapter by Angela Rosenthal explores negotiations between artists and sitters.

were collected and valued by a single individual, thus suggesting a kind of visual interrelatedness among potentially diverse items. A case in point is the wide-ranging collection of the eighteenth-century Scottish medical practitioner William Hunter, whose paintings, books and manuscripts, coins, and anatomical and natural-historical specimens were the subject of a recent exhibition at the University of Glasgow and the Yale Center for British Art.[3] Specimens in the natural sciences are selected, scrutinized, described, represented and displayed in ways that change over time, and are thus potential materials for visual histories. The category extends far beyond 'art'. Visual processes are embedded in social relationships; in order to uncover them, historians must engage visual skills of their own, and be attuned to those that were exercised in the past.[4] We advocate using historical contexts to understand visual materials, in order to integrate these materials more effectively into historical accounts, thereby informing new interpretations of their contexts, in an iterative and continuing process.

The ways in which appearances and meanings relate to each other are historically specific and change over time. For this reason, historians' interpretations of visual materials are best constructed through the careful building-up of analytical frameworks, step by step, outwards from the object into its immediate contexts and beyond. Such caution helps us to avoid making assumptions based on our own present-day visual habits and points of reference. Paying attention to genre, medium and context provides ways of building frameworks that usefully break up the 'visual' into smaller, more coherent pieces. Genres are cultural forms with recognizable conventions: the period drama, the portrait, the photobook, the novel, the sonata. Medium is not simply a matter of the materials that make up a particular artefact. Rather, media are recognized categories that entail conventions of representation or presentation, demand specific materials, technologies and skills, are often assigned value in relation to one another, have specific social characteristics and elicit particular expectations in audiences.[5]

A printed book and its digital counterpart pose very different design problems and possess distinct visual qualities, while patently conveying the same content. A portrait might be executed in oil on canvas and then reproduced in other formats: as a print on paper bound into a book, in a printed or online magazine, as a fridge magnet or within a museum's online catalogue. All are recognizable as nominally the 'same' image, even though they are physically distinct and arise from contexts of production that can be chronologically and geographically distant. Each iteration, potentially across a span of hundreds

[3] Campbell and Flis, *William Hunter*, contains examples of items Hunter purchased from Richard Mead, a famous medical collector, who died in 1754 (77–86).
[4] Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, explores such visual habits; we return to this work later in the Introduction.
[5] Harris, *Art History*; West, *Guide to Art*.

of years, invites different audiences and types of interaction, operates within a distinct economic structure and construes a particular kind of relationship with the person portrayed. Comparable items in a given genre or medium form an important part of the context through which the significance of any single example becomes clear – other paintings, books, collections and websites, for example. Hence comparative analysis is essential in identifying what is particular, or not, about a given artefact.[6]

Institutions

Context can be thought of as the web of people, things, circumstances and associations that give an object meaning in a specific place and time. The locations where visual materials appeared and how they were encountered are crucial in this regard. Institutional settings are particularly rich, since they speak to collective identities, combine multiple media, genres and types of activities, tend to persist in time and are often well documented. Recent interest in salon criticism and lectures given in academies as well as projects such as the Paul Mellon Centre's RA 250, which documents every summer exhibition held at London's Royal Academy between 1769 and 2018, demonstrate the scope and depth that an institutional focus can bring to visual histories.[7] Similarly, visual culture can shape our understanding of how institutions develop and how they present themselves to both their members and broader publics.

Museums play a crucial role in the acquisition, preservation, display, documentation and interpretation of visual materials. At their inception and throughout their lives, these institutions have specific purposes that can change over time. Many explicitly aim for social and cultural change. For example, London's Victoria and Albert Museum was founded in 1852 to raise national standards in design and manufacturing, while the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC, opened in 2003 with the goal of transforming public perceptions of US history, citizenship and national identity. The professional activities of museum directors, educators, curators, registrars, conservators, art handlers, designers and others take place within these purposeful frameworks. Some understanding of museums' internal organization and processes is essential for historians working with visual materials. These structures determine the conditions of access to artefacts themselves, as well as what is known about them through catalogues, websites and unpublished object files. They also respond to and shape the audiences that

[6] Jordanova, *Look of the Past*, ch. 5.
[7] See https://www.paul-mellon-centre.ac.uk/about/ra250, accessed 7 July 2019. This is information about the project rather than the site itself.

such institutions serve. Museum websites offer some of the most immediately accessible sources of images of and information about visual artefacts, often extending beyond so-called 'tombstone' details (maker, title, date, medium, dimensions and location) to sophisticated resources such as British Picture Framemakers, 1600–1950, which is an online database developed by the National Portrait Gallery, London. Such documentation tends to have high levels of accuracy and contains physical details about artefacts that are essential if they are to be cited in essays, dissertations and publications.[8]

As Ludmilla Jordanova's case study in this volume shows, the identities of institutions are articulated and shaped over time through visual means. Collections of portraits and other materials, as well as architecture and rituals, such as ceremonial meals, work together to express a collective sense of legacy and of the past. The point serves to remind us that the past is not solely the domain of historians; professionally written histories form just a small part of any culture's sense of the past and its significance for the present. Theatre, film and television, public monuments, museums, cemeteries, historic houses, and battle re-enactments, as well as family albums and other more private sites of commemoration, now play a part in many regions of the world, as do markets in antiques and fashions in vintage and retro clothing and design. Visual styling is central to many of these phenomena, and the look of a thing or an environment holds many cues that viewers use to situate it in time. The complex notion of style plays a fundamental role in these processes, indicated by the fact that terms such as 'baroque' are often used to designate both visual styles and historical periods.[9]

Evidence

The power of context and the sense of period style in shaping visual histories extend far beyond the academic community and reinforce the point that historians need to be thoughtful about periodization and contextualization when approaching visual materials – practices that are always fundamental to historical writing, whether or not they are discussed explicitly. Such self-awareness needs to include a critical understanding of the assumptions built into habitual forms of periodization and contextualization. Description is crucial to both; it provides the links between written texts and the images displayed alongside them, highlighting the salient features and translating them

[8] On museology, see Marstine, *New Museum Theory and Practice*; on the V & A, Baker and Richardson, *Grand Design*; for frame makers, see https://www.npg.org.uk/research/conservation/directory-of-british-framemakers.php, accessed 7 July 2019.

[9] Hills, *Rethinking the Baroque*; Panofsky, *Three Essays*; and Lang, *Concept of Style*.

into terms that enable further analysis. By means of these practices, all kinds of materials are activated, transformed into evidence through which questions may be examined and answered, and arguments supported.

Evidence is anything taken to be an outward sign or proof of something else. It is created or mobilized through the processes of research, from relevant sources. The letters, coats of arms, books, paintings, ephemera, photographs and magazine spreads discussed in the essays that follow have the status of 'evidence' because historians have paid attention to them, focused on them in relation to their concerns and arguments, scrutinized and interrogated them. As the essays by Katherine Bond and Melissa Renn make clear in discussions of early modern ethnographic knowledge and twentieth-century war reporting, respectively, no image can be treated as direct evidence of the thing it portrays. Rather, visual materials should be considered as evidence of past decisions and the social contexts in which they were embedded.

The activation of visual evidence involves complex and layered analyses that integrate visual materials with texts and other types of sources. Recovering the ways in which such materials embody social relationships is key to establishing connections between them and the phenomena that historians are interested in. Within the broad field of history, the history of science and the history of medicine have developed some of the most sophisticated approaches to visual evidence – perhaps because people writing on such topics are interested in the past construction and representation of evidence about nature and human bodies.[10] It is therefore helpful to read widely not only within the broad church that is history but also in other disciplines. Accordingly historians working with visual evidence may draw upon a range of fields, such as art history, visual culture studies, museology, history of photography, and word and image studies, that offer important conceptual and empirical resources.

Disciplinary landscapes

The phrase 'visual phenomena' covers many things – as evinced by the range of examples in Jonathan Conlin's essay on the eighteenth-century politician John Wilkes – from roughly chalked numbers to painted portraits. This inclusivity is helpful in so far as it directs our attention to rich potential materials for historians, who are still generally encouraged to understand their discipline as rooted in the study of documents and the meticulous analysis of language. However, in order to reveal the possibilities that visual culture can offer, a clear focus is required. Considering the disciplines that specialize in visual sources

[10] For example Daston, *Things That Talk*; Daston, *Histories of Scientific Observation*; Smith, *Body of the Artisan*; and Mitman and Wilder, *Documenting the World*.

is one way forward. Even here we note the number and range of fields that rarely occupy centre stage in university-level history courses, such as dress and costume history, print studies, numismatics and architecture. Each has its own history and traditions, modes of operation and institutional settings, with some, such as architecture, yoked to professional training and others, such as numismatics, largely the province of museum curators.

The fields that historians draw upon depend on their areas of specialism. Coins are routinely used by those working on ancient and medieval times. They tend to survive, are visually complex in their own right, and can yield valuable insights for scholars whose sources are necessarily more limited than those available to colleagues working on the more recent past. The scarcity of conventional sources, although in some sense restrictive, can also be a spur to methodological innovation: those working on earlier periods tend to practice more integrative forms of history.[11]

We have noted the distinctly blurred dividing lines between visual and material culture. Two disciplines have been particularly active in the development of material culture studies and hence of interest to those working on visual culture: archaeology and anthropology. Indeed there are subfields called ‘visual anthropology’ and the ‘anthropology of art’. While there are clearly overlaps and affinities between these fields and others concerned with art and visual culture, there are also significant differences. Both archaeology and anthropology involve fieldwork, for example, and the distinctive skills required to carry it out form a central part of the training. Archaeology is rooted in an understanding of space, since the precise location of a find provides clues that are central to its interpretation and the distribution of finds across a whole site is equally revealing. In the case of anthropology, much attention is paid to the demeanour and ethical stances adopted when working with informants and to ways of recording and interpreting experiences.[12]

The prolonged, meticulous scrutiny of items already endowed with cultural, aesthetic and economic value that is characteristic of connoisseurship and of some art-historical approaches differs markedly from archaeological and anthropological practices, and has its origins in discussions of the visual arts during ancient times, Renaissance habits of debating, commissioning and collecting, and more generally in styles of thought characteristic of the humanities. Commitment to a canon – those works deemed most central to specific genres, art forms and cultures – is characteristic of European ways of responding to art, and was exported through processes of colonization and empire building. While there have been fierce debates about the matter, in practice the majority of

[11] For example Nelson, *Visuality*.
[12] For ‘visual anthropology’, see the journal with the same name, 1987 onwards. See also Pink, *Future of Visual Anthropology*. There is no comparable field in archaeology, presumably because visual phenomena have always been integral to the discipline.