Introduction

Researching the material history of an artefact is the objective of what is presently called technical art history, a relatively young field of research involving art historians, conservators and scientists but also reaching out to other disciplines such as economic and social history, anthropology and aesthetics. The interdisciplinary character of technical art history combines a variety of expertise into a holistic research approach that concerns the creative process from idea to artwork, at any one time and place, and from any culture.

In the conservation field, the introduction of scientific research on artworks in the 1930s initiated the development of new analytical methodologies, which especially in the last decades has resulted in highly sophisticated applications that have provided revealing insights into the material composition of artworks and their deterioration processes, and have led to new approaches in conservation treatments. The new data thus gained are imperative for understanding the present condition of the artwork including the traces of the history of the object through ageing, through changes inherent to the materials and techniques used, and through conservation treatments or other external impact. The original voice of the artist found in diaries, correspondence, treatises, and other contemporary writings on techniques is crucial for an insightful interpretation of these experimental data.

Is technical art history therefore a quest for the authentic artwork? Or does it examine plural authenticities, namely ‘the state of the object in which it exists’ at various moments in the artwork’s history, accepting contextual impact as part of the objects ‘life’ and thus of its authenticity?1 Is it a method for understanding these authenticities through the examination

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of the creative process from idea to artwork, using a holistic approach when addressing the material object that includes internal and external evidence obtained by interdisciplinary research?

This chapter discusses the development of technical art history, which goes hand in hand with an increasingly scientific approach in conservation research and methodology, rapidly developing scientific analytical applications, and a growing interest in documentary sources on techniques and materials past and present.

Dark Pictures

A ubiquitous but very apt illustration of the eighteenth-century debate that marked the beginning of discussion of the effects of time on paintings is represented by William Hogarth’s print *Time Smoking a Picture* from his *Analysis of Beauty*, published in 1753. Hogarth ridicules and attacks connoisseurs and art dealers who support a trade in old masters of dubious quality and encourage a taste for ‘dark pictures’, thus disadvantaging contemporary British artists through a misplaced emphasis on the past. A continuing veneration of classical sources, rooted in a rule of thumb naturalism that ignored what was happening elsewhere in Europe, came at the expense of the development of a modern British art. Hogarth’s critique also addresses the debate on aesthetics in which either the harmonizing or mellowing effect of ageing—darkening of oils, yellowing of varnish—that characterizes the old masters are praised, or the distortion of the artist’s original intent is deliberated on. Hogarth takes a stand against this so-called beneficial effect of time and the aesthetic theories based on it, opposing what is so adequately explained by the essayist and critic Joseph Addison’s text ‘A Dream of Painters’. Addison describes how he dreams of a gallery with new and old pictures where, on the side of the old masters, an old man is retouching many ‘fine pieces’, with a pencil that worked ‘imperceptibly’. However, after incessant and repeated ‘touch after touch’ it seemed that ‘he wore off insensibly every little disagreeable Gloss that hung upon a Figure. He also added such a beautiful brown to the shades, and Mellowness to the colours, that he made every picture appear more

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