

Understanding Visual Culture

The Newsletter of Art History & Visual Studies at Manchester

ISSUE ONE

MAY 2008

Art History
and Visual Studies
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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Visions of Blake	2
Dressing for Heaven	2
Jaina Art and Architecture in India	2
James Stirling Post-War Ar- chitecture	3
Roman Mosa- ics in Britain	3
Italian Forum	3
The "Lives of Chinese Objects"	4
What have you blogged today?	4

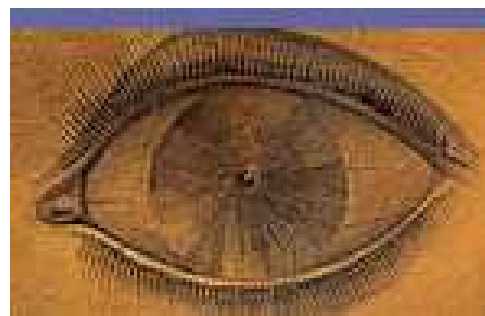
Centre for Studies of Surrealism

Art History and Visual Studies has a Centre for Studies of Surrealism and its Legacies. Salvador Dali and Rene Magritte are two of the most popular Surrealist artists. Surrealism was inspired by Sigmund Freud's idea about dreams and the unconscious. It involved not only painters, but also photographers and filmmakers, and was as influential in poetry and literature as in the visual arts. Surrealism as an art movement began in France, but it was taken up in many other countries, including England, the USA, Spain, and Latin America. It had an impact in such areas as philosophy and anthropology, and continues to be an influence on a number of leading contemporary artists. There is much demand for a research centre that is devoted to Surrealism to study!

The Centre for Surrealism and its Legacies is a partnership with the University of Essex and Tate Modern. It has been in existence for about five years. As well as hosting conferences, and carrying out art historical research on aspects of Surrealism, the Surrealism Centre has collaborated with artists on projects exploring the relationship between their art and Surrealism. The American artist, Mark Dion, produced a rather extraordinary bureau in the Manchester Museum. Dion and an assistant spent a long time sifting through the collections of the Museum locating the kinds of odd and unclassifiable objects that appealed to the Surrealists: a six-legged hamster, a collection of buttons that had been gnawed by rats, images recording the footprints of a fly, and so on. These objects have found a home in the Surrealist bureau, which had been *in situ* for two years now. A visit to the bureau is always popular with students studying on Surrealist courses who are permitted to enter this magical space and explore.

Currently, the Surrealism Centre is organising a major exhibition of Surrealist and contemporary art that will open in January 2008 at the Whitworth Art Gallery, the University of Manchester, before travelling to two other venues in the UK. The exhibition will include a new commission by the German artist Gregor Schneider, who is best known for rebuilding the interior of his house, parts of which have been displayed in museums all over the world. Schneider's uncanny and unsettling spaces have an evident affinity with Surrealism.

Surrealism Centre staff teach a range of courses on Surrealism. There is also a sizeable group of postgraduate students carrying out research on Surrealism. Students benefit from the busy programme of academic conferences and events hosted by the Centre, including an annual PhD student symposium at Tate Modern which attracts students working on Surrealism from many countries. Because of its connections with Tate and other UK museums, the Surrealism Centre is able to provide excellent opportunities for students to carry out research on Surrealist art. The Surrealism Centre has just been awarded a major grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Council for a project on 'Surrealism and Sexuality' that will ensure its activities continue into the foreseeable future. The project will begin with a conference at Harvard in August 2008 and will run for three years. The Surrealism Centre produces an online journal called *Papers of Surrealism* where some of our students have published articles and reviews.



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More information about the Centre for Studies of Surrealism and its Legacies can be found by visiting our website (www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk).

Informal queries about study opportunities can be directed to the Surrealism Centre director, Dr David Lomas: david.c.lomas@manchester.ac.uk

<http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk>



Ancient of Days, Wm Blake
© Whitworth Art Gallery,
Manchester

Colin Trodd is currently completing a lengthy book entitled *Visions of Blake: William Blake in the Art World 1830-1930*. This project involves examining how different artists, poets, designers and critics set out to celebrate, resist or collaborate with Blake and his art. The main purpose of the venture is to understand how, why and

under what cultural and historical conditions Blake has been remembered, re-evaluated, revered --- or rejected. These concerns were pursued in *Blake's Shadow*, the exhibition that Trodd devised and curated for the Whitworth Art Gallery (Jan-April 2008), which showed how Blake's art and ideas have been remodelled by a variety of

artists, designers, illustrators and musicians. His next project, *Victorian Art Since 1901*, looks at the afterlife of Millais, Rossetti, Brown, Leighton, Watts and others during the period when Blake begins to emerge as a 'national' artist.

Jaina Art and Architecture in India

Since 2005, Julia Hegewald has been heading a research project which examines the culture of the Jains in south India. Besides Hindus and Buddhist, the Jains represent one of the oldest religious groups in the subcontinent. This relatively small community developed an entirely distinct culture and looks back upon more than 2500 years of changing history.

The Jains in the south experienced a period of great political and cultural flourishing from about the 5th century CE.

In the early 12th century, their influence appears to have come to a sudden end. The reasons for this change have never been examined in detail.

In this interdisciplinary team project, combining research from the areas of art history, history and religious studies, political changes as well as their immediate affect on art and architecture are studied for the first time together. Particularly important are the examination of Jaina pilgrimage centres, which expanded

after the loss of power, and the forcible conversion of Jaina into Hindu temples.

This project presents this intriguing and so far widely neglected period in the history of south India for the first in a more holistic and complete way.



Jaina Temple at Mudabidri,
Karnataka

Dressing for Heaven

Religions have different beliefs relating to what happens to the body after death. Dr Cordelia Warr has been working on a project exploring Christian beliefs about the importance of dress and clothing in the afterlife. Looking at Italian art between the thirteenth and the sixteenth centuries, as well as literature from the period, the following questions have been considered:

- What do people wear after they die?
- Do people need clothing in the afterlife?

- If people do need clothing after they die will these clothes bear any relationship to those that they own and wear in this life?

- Can clothing move between this life and the next?

- What messages does clothing convey about heaven or hell, reward or punishment?

- How should artists depict the clothing of people in heaven or hell?

These questions may ap-

pear trivial or superficial when placed against some of the important questions asked during the middle ages and renaissance about salvation. Yet for those struggling to understand and explain the relationship between the mortal and immortal worlds, dress represented a means through which people could be rewarded or punished after death. It is these uses of clothing and adornment which are the main focus of the project.



Paradise, Giovanni di Paolo
Image © The Metropolitan
Museum of Art, New York

James Stirling and Post-War Architecture

James Stirling (1924-1992) was probably the most important British architect of the second half of the twentieth century. As well as designing housing, university buildings and museums in Britain he also worked extensively abroad, particularly in Germany and the United States. A larger than life character on the architectural scene, his work was both highly controversial and highly influential. Several of his iconic

sixties buildings endured endless technical and environmental problems, causing litigation by the clients in one case. But the buildings were always striking additions to their environments, provocatively contrary in their use of materials and faceted geometries, seeming to capture both the character of the times (from austerity to affluence, from wartime boffinry to the sixties' 'white heat of technology') and

their relation to a deeper and longer past than modernism in architecture had usually been prepared to accept.

In this research project Mark Crinson asks whether Stirling's earlier work in the 1950s and 1960s can be reinterpreted as a form of positive nostalgia: for an earlier modernism, for the Victorian city of terraced houses and bye-law streets, and for the industrial buildings of the nineteenth century.



Roman Mosaics in Britain

The most spectacular artistic remains from Roman Britain are its mosaic pavements. Over 2000 examples are now known. Composed of hundreds, thousands, even in one case 3/4 million small cubes of coloured stone, glass or terracotta, they formed 'carpets' in the best rooms of well-appointed houses and villas in the southern and eastern parts of the province. Most adopt geometric patterns - some of dazzling complexity - but a sizeable proportion display figures and figure-scenes.

Roger Ling has been working for more than 25 years

on Romano-British mosaics and since 2000 has been Chairman of the Association for the Study and Preservation of Roman Mosaics, which is the British branch of the International Association for the Study of Ancient Mosaic. His particular interest is the interpretation of the figure-scenes. Many of these are, for various reasons, controversial: they may have survived in an incomplete or damaged state which makes them difficult to 'read', or they may be known only from unreliable drawings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In other cases, they are complete but their meaning is lost to us be-

cause we don't have the 'code' to unlock it, or the ancient mosaicist himself may have misrepresented the subject-matter through a lack of understanding. It is evident, however, that the favourite subjects were scenes from Greek mythology. Less popular were Roman legends and scenes from contemporary entertainments - chariot-racing and the wild-beast-hunts and gladiatorial combats of the amphitheatres. Professor Ling's research involves (a) identifying the subjects, (b) determining what these tell us about the tastes and aspirations of people in Roman Britain. Why did the natives of a province on the

fringe of the civilised world hanker to decorate their houses with stories of the Greek gods and heroes? More especially, since the majority of examples date to the last years of the Roman occupation in the 4th century AD, why did they exercise these choices at a time when the province was under pressure from barbarian tribes and Christianity was rapidly supplanting traditional paganism? The research has already yielded new insights and a forthcoming book, to be published by Cambridge University Press, will summarise progress.

Italian Forum

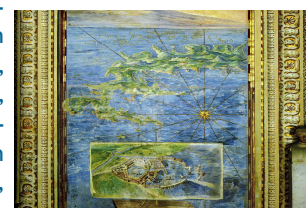
ITALIAN FORUM provides students and researchers alike with the possibility of meeting new people, encountering novel ways of looking at the arts, and fascinating ways of building bridges between art history and the exciting variety of disciplines at the University of Manchester. Here are two recent examples of its conferences:

Italy & the Romantic Imagination asked what Romantic and Post-Romantic artists and writers imagined when they encountered "Italy". What places, things and notions did they think were central to experiencing Italian culture, and where did they get these ideas? Did they find their artistic

and critical engagements with Italy liberating or stifling? In what senses did these encounters help to form new visual, cultural or literary traditions? Building on the Whitworth Art Gallery's Blake exhibitions in early 2008, this Italian Forum workshop explored these questions by considering representations of Italy during the period 1780-1880, by writers such as Shelley and Henry James and by figurative artists such as Fuseli and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Each contributed to the imagined picture of Italy's physical appearance and visual culture that so captivated nineteenth-century observers north of the Alps, and some went so far as to test their mental pic-

tures of Italy by visiting it, and then reacting to the experience in their works.

Waters East & West: Italy, the Eastern Mediterranean and South Asia brought together experts on ancient Italy and India, on Mughal gardens and Renaissance territorial landscapes, and on city-states with maritime empires, such as Venice and Florence. Together they explored the ways in which waters were channelled, stored, managed and experienced, and how the visual arts were exploited for these purposes; in paintings, prints and maps; cisterns, fountains and ports; guidebooks, sea-charts and gardens.



The Lives of Chinese Objects

In 2006, the discovery of a watercolour depiction of five large Buddhist sculptures at the Great Exhibition of 1851 led to a new research project in the Centre for Museology entitled the 'Lives of Chinese Objects'.



© National Museums Liverpool, World Museum Liverpool.

Louise Tythacott is researching the biographies of the five sculptures, which are presently displayed in the World Museum Liverpool. These images originate from China's most popular pilgrimage island, Putuo, the key devotional centre for the Goddess of Compassion, Guanyin. The largest figure in the group is an almost life-size image of this deity, with twenty-two outstretched arms, and it dates to the early fifteenth century – as such, it is probably the oldest surviving bronze

from the island. Louise visited Putuo in 2007 to interview Buddhist monks and research the origins of these sculptures.

The five statues were taken by a British soldier during the First Opium War (1839-42). After being displayed in Great Exhibition (1851) and the Crystal Palace in Sydenham (1854), the sculpture of Guanyin was exhibited in the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857.



All five were sold for a high price at Sotheby's two years later. The sculpture of Guanyin was exhibited in the Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857. By the 1860s they formed part of the Joseph Mayer collection, which was donated to Liverpool in 1867. Over the years they were placed in evolutionary displays and an 'Oriental' art gallery. Louise was responsible for reinterpreting the sculptures when she worked as Curator of Asian collections at the Liverpool Museum (1996-2003), although by that time they had lost all historical documentation. Three of the images were placed on display in a World Cultures Gallery, which opened in 2005.



Louise's research charts the changing meanings ascribed to the sculptures as they pass through multiple spheres of representation, and examines the past, present as well as the possible future lives of these sacred objects.

What have you blogged today?

Blogs (short for web logs) are websites that function usually as online diaries or notebooks of individuals or groups of people. The most recent entries ("posts" in blogging language) appear on the top of the page followed by older posts. As Blogger (one of the providers of blog websites) says, "In simple terms, a blog is a web site, where you write stuff on an ongoing basis. New stuff shows up at the top, so your visitors can read what's new. Then they comment on it or link to it or email you. Or not."

Blogging has taken the world by storm. Currently there are more than 70 million blogs out there, some of which are used in a school or university context. Dr Kostas Arvanitis and Art Gallery and Museum Studies postgraduate students have been exploring the use of blogs for teaching and learning. Over the last year they have been using the "Digital Heritage blog" as another, 'virtual space' of the course, a 'virtual class'. The blog has offered Kostas and the students an online notebook, where they continue the class discussion on museums and galleries. Every week

one student writes on the blog a summary of the class discussion or any activities that the class has been doing, such as fieldtrips to museums. Other students then add their comments on that and discuss online any further thoughts they have had. The blog has added to the learning experience of the students. It has also given them their own online 'space' and it has offered them an opportunity to engage in discussion with other visitors of the blog, such as museum curators and other students.

<http://digitalheritage.wordpress.com/>

For Admissions to Art History & Visual Studies courses, please contact:
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