



Artisans of the Surface in Early Modern Europe, 1450–1750

20–21 September 2018
King's College London

Call for papers

The surfaces of natural things invite observation, manipulation, measurement, and reconfiguration, with the promise to unveil the knowledge of depths. In early modern Europe, artisans of all kind used their hands to work on, and with, the surfaces of human and non-human matter. They captured the attention of everyday and learned contemporary commentators, but traditionally, historians have failed to consider them when establishing the ways in which knowledge was produced in that period. But in recent decades, historians have placed new emphasis on artisanal knowledge procedures and on what has been termed 'vernacular science'. Today, the Scientific Revolution is characterised by an exchange between humanist erudition and a passion for practice, or between 'high' and 'low' arts. Much work has been done to show how in the seventeenth century the so-called 'mixed mathematics' (military sciences, engineering, navigation sciences, etc.) contributed to the development of the fields of mathematics, astronomy, and geometry. Equally, alchemical procedures and metallurgy informed the theories of contemporary canonical heroes.


In the same spirit, this workshop focuses on the practices of artisans such as tailors, barbers, cooks, cheesemakers, gardeners, and agronomists, and on their relationships with the fields of meteorology, botany, natural history, medicine, earth sciences, and veterinary medicine. All these artisans and artisanal practices shared a set of skills on how to observe and manipulate human and non-human surfaces – from skin to bark, from rinds to animal flesh, from the surface of a landscape to dyes, or from cloth to hair. We are interested in exploring how, and if, practical knowledge about the surface of things and bodies (and their storage and preservation in relation to specific environmental conditions) led to the concept of nature and matter as composed of layers, and how such a framework contributed to the demise of traditional Galenic and Aristotelian views on nature.

This workshop also aims at moving beyond the dichotomies between quantitative and qualitative knowledge and between natural philosophy and the arts, and so we intend to broaden the focus to include a set of artisans who have traditionally remained invisible from accounts of this 'age of the new'. We will explore the many different ways in which 'modern science' emerged, the relationships between social and cognitive practices, and the contribution that non-mathematical sciences gave to the mental habits of observing, collecting, experimenting with, and manipulating natural matter.

Confirmed speakers are Emanuele Lugli (York) on tailors, Elaine Leong (MPIWG, Berlin) on domestic health practices, Bradford Bouley (UC Santa Barbara) on butchers, Maria Conforti (La Sapienza) on the surface of the earth, and Carolin Schmitz (EUI) on barber-surgeons. Sandra Cavallo (Royal Holloway) will offer final remarks. We welcome proposals that complement these topics, in particular those that address the relationships between gardening, natural history, and medicine; cooking and knowledge; work on animal skin; leatherwork; or veterinary medicine. Presentations will be followed by ample time for discussion and reflection, and so we are happy for works in progress.

Proposals (up to 250 words) for 20-minute papers should be sent to Paolo Savoia at renaissanceskin@kcl.ac.uk by 8 June 2018. We may be able to provide speakers with reasonable accommodation and travel costs. Please indicate when you apply if you will require assistance with expenses.

The two-day workshop is organised as part of the Renaissance Skin project (www.renaissanceskin.ac.uk).

Follow us  @RenSkinKCL and use #surfaceartisans