

Introduction: New Directions in Making and Knowing

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This special issue on new directions in making and knowing follows on the recent publication of *Ways of Making and Knowing: The Material Culture of Empirical Knowledge* (2014), coedited by Pamela H. Smith, Amy R. W. Meyers, and Harold J. Cook, published in the Bard Graduate Center series Cultural Histories of the Material World. That volume and the interdisciplinary conference in 2005 that gave rise to it aimed to show the ways that “making” and “knowing” are not just related or part of a multistage process—that making constitutes knowing over time—but that making is actually constitutive of knowing in a scientific sense. The five-day conference involved more than seventy participants, and it included scholarly lectures and—more unusual ten years ago—object-based breakout sessions that brought academic scholars together with museum scholars, curators, conservators, and practitioners of the arts. The attendees gathered around objects brought from multiple collections of the great London museums to discuss the modes of making and knowing that had been employed in the objects’ fabrication, as well as to examine the ways in which natural materials had been used and the means by which nature and its materials were represented in those objects. The long process by which that conference and its many insights were whittled down into a standard-length book format filled largely with scholarly essays proved to be long and somewhat dispiriting. We found, as any early modern artist knew, that text just was not an optimal vehicle for object-based interdisciplinary discussion of making processes. To his credit, the glassmaker Ian Hankey submitted his contribution to the volume in the form of a wonderfully instructive video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sSBY6Lc2-hU>), which, however, could not be successfully integrated into the book format.

Despite difficulties involved in bringing that volume into existence, I try again in the essays that follow, but this time the goal is simply to bring to light some of the many research directions that have emerged in the last ten years. These new investigations into making and knowing are bringing new perspectives and frames of analysis to the study of objects and their making, and the following four essays demonstrate that engaging with “making” in a variety of ways leads to “knowing” of various novel kinds. Many of these new projects engage with the tremendous potential of digital production for engaging with objects, images, and making processes in media other than print texts. The use of collaborative digital platforms, the visual recording of making practices in place of textual description, the possibility of including many more images and illustrations, and the connecting links among images, objects, and texts that can be made in the digital world promise a rethinking of the scholarly text, which, if not by any means realized in this special issue, is at least hinted at by some of its essays.¹

Ulinka Rublack’s focus on early modern clothing demonstrates the importance of examining techniques of tailoring and dyeing in order to provide an understanding of the full meaning and significance of what we see when we look at images—and especially portraits—of an earlier time. She shows the ways in which the art historical period eye of today has obscured a full view of the early modern period eye, and her essay gives new insight into early modern attitudes toward color, both in aesthetic and in epistemological terms.

Rublack’s conclusion that “suggests an epistemology which argues that we can enrich our understanding of the effect of past objects by experiencing their sensory, tactile qualities and unique properties” is taken up by the following essay on the Making and Knowing Project, established two years ago at Columbia University. Through the Making and Knowing Project team’s historical reconstructions of sixteenth-century materials and techniques, insights are gained into both a practitioner’s “material imaginary” and the ways that modern disciplinary lenses constrain our own historical imaginary of the early modern past.

Shifting gears somewhat, Matthew Hunter shows how close attention to the making of a drawing by Frederic Edwin Church in 1857 and its subsequent preservation reveals layers of reciprocal influence and transference among different realms of making and knowing, including skilled graphic practices, commercial and actuarial calculation, and political and anthropological assumptions. Hunter’s essay shares with the others in this special issue what appears to be one of the important byproducts of this new attention to the relationship between making and knowing: namely, the reflection that it provokes in the researcher about the presentist, and often anachronistic, frames in which our disciplinary histories have been written, frames that have constrained the categories of research and analysis for those who study the material culture of the past, whether they be historians of art, historians of science, or curators of museum objects. Hunter’s own reflection is stimulated by the unusual form in which the drawing by Church has been transmitted to us today. Its material history turns out to reveal dimensions of making and knowing unsuspected by a discipline-based examination of this relict of the past.

The essay by artist Jane Wildgoose concludes the volume by showing how immersion in the study and remaking or re-creating of making practices—even, or perhaps especially, making practices that have been derided or trivialized—can lead to profound insights for both historians and makers. For historians, the affective life of human beings is among the most difficult of historical phenomena to reconstruct from documents, and it is the power of Wildgoose’s insight as a maker that reveals how a view into this hidden life can be gained by considering not just the objects of commemoration and memory but also the affective power of engaging with the materials that go into making those objects. Wildgoose’s essay makes clear, as do those by Rublack and the Making and Knowing team, that the skill of makers must be taken seriously as a form of knowledge and that collaborations between makers and scholars are one way to break down the extremely pervasive and long-enduring partitions between mind and hand and between making and knowing.

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¹ Among the many wonderful projects that could be cited, here are just a few: *Mapping the Republic of Letters*, based at Stanford University (<http://republicofletters.stanford.edu/>); *Cultures of Knowledge: Networking the Republic of Letters, 1550–1750*, based at Oxford University (<http://www.culturesofknowledge.org/>); *The Recipes Project*, founded by Elaine Leong (<http://recipes.hypotheses.org/>), which includes a blog and an experiment in research-led pedagogy, the “Early Modern Recipes Online Collective” (<http://emroc.hypotheses.org/>); the *Global Middle Ages Project—G-MAP*, “an international collaboration of scholars to see the world whole, c. 500 to 1500 CE, to deliver the stories of lives, objects, and actions in dynamic relationship and change across deep time”—founded by Susan Noakes and Geraldine Heng in 2007, the initiative aggregates digital projects of the Global Middle Ages (<http://globalmiddleages.org/>).