Material Practices of Art and Design

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Getty Research Institute
Fridays, 10:00 a.m.—5:00 p.m.
Orientation: Friday, December 4, 2015
Seminars: January 15, 22, 29, February 12, 19, 26, March 4, 11, 2016

Materials exert themselves powerfully in aesthetic experience, whether through the rapid motion of crisp details flitting across a flat-screen monitor or the weathered and fractured surface of an ancient stone artifact. While the modernist dictum “truth to materials” promotes respect for the qualities believed to be inherent to specific materials, processes such as translation from one medium to another and skeuomorphic design are also significant modes of material practice. Materials are deeply colored by conventional associations that far exceed their physical properties—such as the fibrous nostalgia of a certain type of wood grain or the official, commemorative functions of bronze—but creative and interpretive engagement with materials fosters chance discovery and innovation. What is the significance of the difference between the vibrations felt by the hand when cutting wood with a saw and the absence of such vibrations when making a thermal cut in steel? Such material effects possess agency of a kind that directs the acts of the artist, designer, or architect.

In addition to theoretical and descriptive readings in art history, media studies, and philosophy, this seminar will draw on illustrative anecdotes and episodes from conservation, literature, and myth to investigate histories, potentialities, and behaviors of materials of art. Participants are encouraged to introduce topics and texts to broaden the range of comparative study across cultures and historical periods. In modern Japan, for example, an aesthetic of “natural materials” underlies multiple material practices today such as museum displays of semidecomposed ancient artifacts preserved by heroic conservation techniques, and architects’ surfacing of buildings with thin veneers and digital simulations of rustic materials. These practices take form in the context of an expanding repertoire of synthetics and nanomaterials under the increasing threat of radioactive and toxic materials. Indeed, the changing scientific and environmental conditions of today’s material world invite a reassessment of the roles played by materials throughout the history of art and design.

To apply to participate in this seminar, please submit the following:

1) Personal information
   - Name, home address and phone number, campus address and phone number, e-mail address

2) Graduate transcript
   (not required for students in their first term)

3) Statement of interest
   - No longer than one page (double-spaced) about your reasons for wanting to participate in this seminar

4) Reference
   - A brief recommendation (a paragraph is sufficient) from a faculty member who is familiar with your work, sent by e-mail to the address below

All application materials should be sent to the Getty Research Institute by November 2, 2015.

E-mail materials to: Sabine Schlosser (sschlosser@getty.edu)

Questions about course content may be directed to Bert Winther-Tamaki at dewinthe@uci.edu.