

## COMPENDIUM OF QUESTIONNAIRES



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1. *In the last thirty years, images have been a focus of scholarship from many different viewpoints, and they have been pivotal in the many scholarly movements, or “turns”, attempting to methodologically reframe the study of art history in general. Can you briefly explain which was your original focus of interest and in which directions your scholarly approach developed over the course of time?*

My original focus of interest was the Society of Jesus and the ways in which Jesuits influenced and engaged with images and artistic matters in the viceroyalty of New Spain in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At first, this topic (of my dissertation) was meant to be a study on patronage. However, due to the kinds of sources and archival materials discovered, I broadened the focus, finding patronage studies too limiting because they fell short of recovering a sense for how the Jesuit network operated. The aspects that interested me about the Jesuits concerned mediation: how they circulated objects and images, placed them in specific settings, and activated them for a multi-ethnic and layered society through various methods. Since then, my research has moved in other directions: sometimes it returns to the more traditional methodologies of art history, including artist biographies, style, and iconography; at other times, it engages with the recent “turns” in the field, such as the spatial turn. In general, I work from the objects and am not married to any methodology, but rather let the objects and artists that pique my curiosity signal which path might best respond to the issues that seem most pertinent to them.

2. *Please name up to three books that you consider to have played an important role in orienting your research.*

These would be Jonathan Brown’s, *Images and Ideas in Seventeenth-Century Spanish Painting* (1978), David Freedberg’s *The Power of Images* (1989), and Michael Baxandall’s, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (1988). Professor Brown was my mentor, and he taught me both to look closely at painting and to undertake historical research exhaustively. Through a series of case studies, his book did just that, offering an elucidating window onto the past by demonstrating the extent to which style, iconography, ideas about art, and patronage were densely interwoven. Baxandall’s classic study is equally concerned with recovering a sense for how works were made and seen, but his methodology was in its day completely new. To-

day, one would probably characterize him as someone who thought “outside the box”. For someone who was trained in the study of Old Masters but works on Spanish American colonial art like myself, his “period eye” was a welcome stimulus, an invitation to explore specific viewing contexts more deeply. Finally, Freedberg’s study, which engaged with *low* as much as *high* art, has been deeply inspiring for the study of religious images in Spanish America. Although different in approaches, from today’s vantage point these three books and their methodologies seem rather complementary.

3. *What is your assessment of traditional art history, with its emphasis on controversial notions and often rigid distinctions between “style” and “iconography”? What do you see as its hermeneutic limits and advantages? Do you think it should be thoroughly replaced with new approaches, or simply revised and integrated into the present-day art-historical discourse?*

From the replies to the previous questions, it is probably already clear that I consider traditional art history still of great value. In fact, I am often in awe of the depth of knowledge of the foundational figures of the field. Although the time when style analysis or iconographic decoding were an end in themselves is mostly over, it is also true that sometimes current characterizations of those methodologies are reductionist. In an interest in evidencing what is new and different in our own times, we have not always fully recognized previous contributions and the ways in which they continue to be relevant. For the most part, in my area of work, style and iconography are still present in much of current scholarship, albeit as tools which facilitate addressing broader and different questions. As such, their worth should be recognized more openly.

4. *Since the 1990s, our field has experienced many different “turns”, each laying emphasis on one of the multiple dynamics in which images are involved. To what extent did your research benefit from such scholarly debates?*

The field’s “turns” are stimulating because they draw attention to very specific aspects of the visual realm, often allowing us to consider images in a new light. Also, because these “turns” are usually interdisciplinary, originating outside art history, I find that thinking about how they might intersect with art historical research provides a space for creativity. Of these trends, the spatial and the material turn have been the most influential for me. Years ago, authors working on space, a sense of place, and landscape provided a stimulus for research on the painting *Conquista y reducción de los indios infieles de Pantasma y Paracas*, published in *The Art Bulletin* (2012). More recently, I have re-engaged with the spatial turn as a means of positing that distance, as a concept and a reality, needs to be foregrounded more in accounts of viceregal art (*Latin American and Latin Visual Culture*, 2021). At the same time, a source of concern is that while at their best the “turns” allow us to see works in new light, they can also invite simple reformulation of previously well-studied objects, dressing the old in new clothes with little authentically new substance. Whatever the approach, I would encourage more research on entirely new topics: at least for Latin American colonial art most artists and works have still not been the object of any kind of study.

5. *In your opinion, which specific notions have become particularly relevant to our present-day understanding of images, and how have they affected your own approach?*

For anyone working on Latin American art of the viceregal period and interested in doing so in an inclusive and sensitive manner, notions about colonialism are fundamental. Years ago, postcolonial studies and foundational figures, such as Homi Bhabha, raised awareness of the complexity of intercultural relations, posing questions that continue to be necessary when addressing the relationship of the Western world to the rest of the globe in the humanities. At the same time, for those notions to be effective and convincing when applied to specific studies about art and images, it is fundamental that they rest on a solid historical foundation for, as many historians of Latin America have demonstrated, not all colonialist contexts operated in the same way, nor was lived experience the same across the vast geography of those territories. Another widely relevant frame of discussion at present for many fields, and with which I often engage, is globalization. The exchanges and interconnections being uncovered challenge earlier narratives which existed mostly as part of local or national histories. Globalization, despite its pitfalls, has transformed the field, and not just in terms of the production of knowledge: it has brought scholars working in disparate fields into greater contact and collaboration than ever before.

6. *What is your specific understanding of “meaning” in visual objects? How do images manage to convey messages, and what are the implications?*

In general, I believe meaning is conveyed through the “what” and “how”, which is why I feel strongly that we must not renounce to training future generations in how to look closely at objects. This includes not just knowing how to identify and interpret subject matter or iconography, but also formal matters related to style, composition, colour, scale, texture and more. At the same time, meaning is ultimately the result of how those forms and themes are perceived and interpreted by their audiences; and, considering how varied these have been across time and space, but also in any one given moment and place, images will always possess more than one meaning. While fixed, images are tremendously rich and flexible vehicles of communication, and meaning is often the result of the visual and cultural associations that a given public brings to a work. This is quite evident in the study of sixteenth-century New Spanish art: as Alessandra Russo and others have demonstrated, an archbishop’s feather mitre could carry different meanings in Europe than among the indigenous communities of central New Spain and for the *amantecas* (feather-artists) who created it.

7. *To what extent is “meaning” determined by factors not immediately associated with the specific visual appearance of images, such as mise-en-scène strategies, conditions of visibility, and more generally the experiential dimension of viewers?*

Indeed, these are other factors that also affect the production of meaning. Because of traditional academic divisions by media and technique (the dominant triumvirate of ar-

chitecture, painting, and sculpture), art historical specialization has sometimes decontextualized each one of these types of monuments or objects, creating an ideal narrative for them that does not always account for actual visual experience. For instance, we often write about paintings as if they were visible in luminescent museum-like viewing conditions but walking into a church, usually dark, reminds us that perhaps they were seen and even understood in different ways in the past. Of course, there have been scholars working on the issue of experience and meaning for a long time (take, for instance, John Shearman's *Only Connect...Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance*). And, currently in the field of religious images some of these aspects are gaining ground as scholars research processes such as the veiling and unveiling of objects, while others apply new computer technology to reconstructing original viewing conditions. Perhaps one additional factor that deserves greater attention in terms of "meaning" has to do with the role of ornament surrounding and framing images and objects.

8. *In your view, are we now better equipped to reconstruct and more deeply understand the complex relationship between the visual appearance of an image and the expectations of its viewers?*

For the most part I would agree that this is so, although the historiography of practically every field of expertise has repeatedly demonstrated in hindsight that there was always more to learn. Viewer expectation, or the way people connect to images, is ultimately as vast and heterogeneous as the realm of the visual itself. Extracting a satisfying and accurate sense for how reception operated and what the role of the viewer was from sources (especially textual ones) is usually not easy to accomplish because those sources, if found, are rarely as explicit as we would like them to be. Nonetheless, as Baxandall demonstrated years ago, the kinds of sources that may be of relevance for understanding the relationship of images to society needs to be as varied as possible, and in this respect, interdisciplinary approaches have been helpful. It would be wonderful to see these applied more often to the study of viceregal art in Spanish America, where less work has been done on this issue.

9. *To what extent can images contribute to informing their viewers' understandings of other images and other aspects of reality and experience?*

Social history and art have been an important part of our tradition, and it clearly speaks to the potential for images to inform other images as well as overall social experience. Images clearly work in a matrix, and the viewer's understanding is thus also the result of recurrence, repetition, borrowings, citation, similarity and difference vis-à-vis other related works, and the constant resignification that takes place through the relationships in the world's enormous community of images. Furthermore, to the extent that they may be representational – a window or a mirror onto the world – there is no doubt that they provide echoes of other works and experiences.

10. *What is your assessment of the materiality of images?*

The “material turn” has been significant in my research in so far as its questions intersected directly with my study on the Virgin of Loreto and replicas of the Holy House in Mexico. The devotion gained meaning locally not just for what it represented but because of how the materials of the Holy House were described and activated by the Jesuits promoting the cult among Hispanic and indigenous audiences. That said, the materiality of images as a methodology means different things to different people (it is like globalization in this). Currently it seems to cover everything from technical art history to historical research on materials and consideration of them as one more factor that shapes meaning. In any case, I find it important to remember that while material-based study is currently shedding new light and even helping to reconfigure certain areas of research, such as the realm of religious images and objects, awareness of technical and material factors was something that foundational figures in the history of art, such as Henri Focillon, emphasized early on. And, like all methodologies, it is probably more pertinent for certain objects than others; as regards technical studies especially, we need to explore how to relate its findings to the history of art in more direct and meaningful ways.

11. *In your view, how can we approach the “social life” of images? In what sense can we assume that images interrelate with their viewers and users?*

Recently I invited Alejandro Vergara, Senior Curator of Flemish and Northern European Paintings at the Museo del Prado, to give a class in the galleries. Standing before Rubens and Brueghel’s *Five Senses*, he drew attention to the allegorical figure of Sight, sitting at a table and gesturing toward a small painting that a *putto* holds up to her gaze, reminding us that it was often in such a setting that people gathered to talk about paintings and objects. Possession (through acquisition or gifting) and subsequent conversation have always been fundamental aspects of the social lives of images, and there are plenty of sources, both textual and visual, that capture these interactions. Of course, we lack explicit testimony of engagement for most objects, and in the field of Latin American viceregal art sources are drastically fewer than those for European art of the same period. Nonetheless, as many scholars have shown, that absence should not mean that one cannot figure out some type of “social life” for those objects. The biography of things and agency are methodologies encompassed in the broader category of the “social life” of images which, along with many other colleagues in my field, I find quite helpful, especially because we not only have fewer sources but also know less about artists and patrons. Ultimately, these approaches activate the works of art in interesting ways.

12. *Does the experience of images exclusively imply the exercise of sight, or do other senses also play a role? If possible, please cite a relevant case from your research field.*

Besides sight, some images clearly have the capacity to engage other senses, most noticeably touch and sound. As regards the former, in the previously mentioned research about the Holy House of Loreto, it is evident that pilgrimage to the original sanctuary in Italy was as much about seeing the image of the Virgin and Child, supposedly made by Saint Luke, as it was about experiencing and touching the walls of the Holy House. Pil-

grims sought to physically experience the space of the Holy House and touching the brick or stone walls, supposedly the original ones of the house where the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary took place, was a crucial experience. Consequently, many copies of the Holy House also sought to imitate and recover that experience, inviting touch through material imitation as well as through sermons and texts that emphasized touch.

13. *Recent studies have emphasized that “iconicity” (or “visual efficacy”) is not an exclusive property of artistic images but can also be regarded as an attribute of non-figurative objects, such as elements of landscape, natural materials, and living beings. To what extent can such objects be included in an art-historical narrative?*

Although not my field of expertise, Non-Western art history has much to teach in this respect. For example, Inca and Andean societies revered certain sacred mountains and stones, and this was not just a pre-Hispanic phenomenon but rather a tradition that persisted after the Spanish conquest and into the present. Acknowledging the iconicity of such natural formations facilitates writing a history of viceregal art for this geography that is not exclusively about Spanish cultural imposition and local adaptation; it is also about the meeting of different cultures who understood iconicity (and religion) through different forms, both manmade and natural. Beyond the Non-Western traditions and contexts of cross-cultural contact, it may also be true that even in the study of European art, we have neglected this issue. It occasionally comes up, as when Palomino, the Spanish treatise writer, notes a few examples of local devotion being expressed to images people “see” and find in an odd-shaped rock or other natural object. Rather than delimiting such accounts to theoretical analysis about materiality and religious images, one could also take such anecdotes as a window onto a broader arena of belief, popular beliefs, that persisted locally even as orthodoxy was rigid. Although typically researched by anthropologists, such considerations are still underexplored by art historians.

14. *Many studies have focused on the dynamics by which images originally meant for a specific viewing context come to be transferred to, appropriated by, and transformed and reshaped in another. Which hermeneutic tools can be useful in our analysis of such phenomena?*

The field of Latin American viceregal art has a wealth of studies that address these issues, many from theoretical perspectives grounded in postcolonial theory and often applying but also transforming those theoretical models to fit the specific historical situations of each case. At the same time, for Latin American studies terminology – finding the best word to describe these processes – has been a source of much discussion and some debate. Should we call it hybrid, mestizo or syncretic? Does the metaphor of “translation” satisfy the field of art history for tracing such movements and transformations? Is it only apt for cross-cultural contexts or can it be used in a European context as well? When should we use each one of these (and other) terms (the list is long)? And are they interchangeable? Although they most certainly are not, they do sometimes seem to be used with laxity and without full consideration for the differences involved. At the same time, it is worth considering the extent to which the terms we choose may determine the out-



come of the research. Are we missing other artistic dynamics by foregrounding these processes? What do we push into the background?

15. *English is more and more the lingua franca of global art-historical scholarship. To what extent may we avoid applying to non-European contexts notions drawn from an essentially Western European understanding of images and their materiality and meaning?*

Avoiding the Western lens if one has been formed by it (and, as we all know, art history as a field has been shaped by it) is almost impossible, and it seems important to acknowledge this and move forward from there. The investigation of non-European contexts seems to require a double task: the specialization in the culture of choice, as in any other field, combined with the critical analysis of an earlier historiography that projected and imprinted European art historical models worldwide. The latter task has, of course, already been undertaken, and there is much to learn from reading authors such as Craig Clunas or Susan Vogel. Ultimately, to avoid applying these Western European notions it seems necessary to learn more about other cultures and artistic traditions, something easier said than done. How many specialists in non-European cultures are there in European or Latin American universities? At stake is not just a greater understanding of non-European contexts but also the legitimacy of studies that pursue a global focus (or, more commonly, connections between two or more culturally distinct geographies). For those interested in working with the non-Western artistic traditions, the highest of academic standards must be met and engagement must be professional and not episodic or the result of an academic trend.

16. *Finally, what are we still lacking? In which direction should we pursue our studies in the following decades?*

A couple of thoughts. First, as regards English as a *lingua franca*, one of the risks involved is that it generates a larger bibliography in this language than before, and while beneficial, this may also result in future generations relying more on it than on the bibliography these texts cite in other languages. To what extent does English run the risk of making scholarship in other languages invisible in the future? Will younger generations foster the fallacy that they no longer need other languages besides English? Maybe this will not happen, but some grade of vigilance may be wise in the pursuit of a balance between the bridges we are building and the foundational blocks they rest on. Secondly, in terms of the age of globalization and interdisciplinary ambitions, we must work harder to meet their challenge because they require both specialization and deep knowledge of cultures and societies that we are not always as versed in as it might be desirable. Finally, I hope we do not leave expertise – the traditional kind – aside. Knowing how to look and interpret images in terms of condition, materials, and techniques which, along with style, make them look the way they do, are defining skills of the art historian.

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