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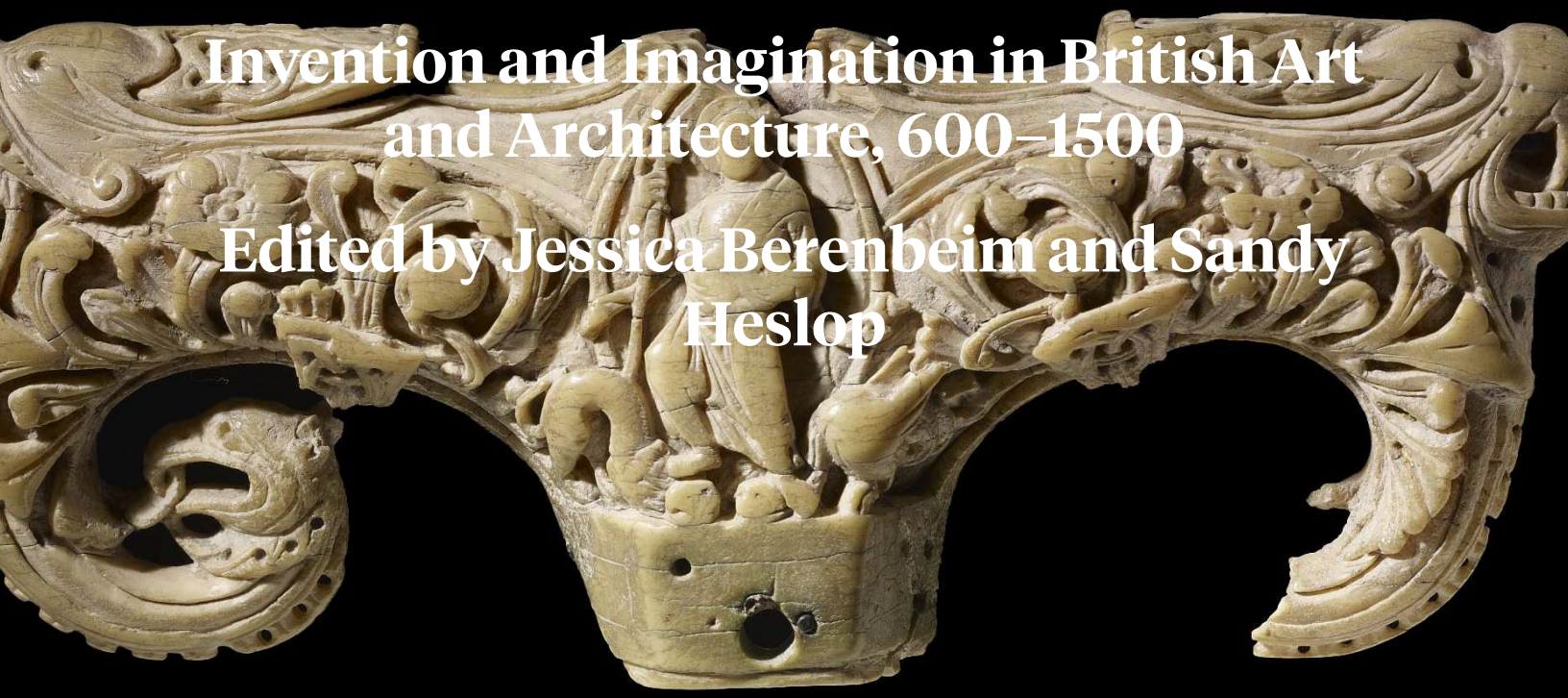

Invention and Imagination in British Art and Architecture, 600–1500

Edited by Jessica Berenbeim and Sandy Heslop

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Cover image: Unknown maker, Ivory Staff Terminal from Alcester, 11th Century, ivory, 14 x 5 cm. Collection of the British Museum (1903,0323.1).. Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum

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Handling Digital Objects

Lloyd de Beer and Naomi Speakman

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Lloyd de Beer is the Ferguson Curator of Medieval Europe at the British Museum. He is jointly responsible for all non-ceramic late medieval European collections made between the late eleventh and early sixteenth centuries.

Naomi Speakman is the curator for late medieval European collections at the British Museum. Her current research interests are medieval ivory carving, late medieval metalwork, and the history of collecting. She is the lead curator for the British Museum touring exhibition “The Pillars of Europe” at CaixaForum. Naomi is also undertaking a collaborative doctoral award at the Courtauld Institute of Art and the British Museum, researching the nineteenth-century collecting of the museum’s medieval ivory carvings.

Cite as

Lloyd de Beer and Naomi Speakman, "Handling Digital Objects", British Art Studies, Issue 6, http://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-06/object-sessions

The present project was borne out of the collaborative partnership fostered by the 2014 conference, ”Invention and Imagination in British Art and Architecture, 600–1500”. The British Museum’s medieval collections were embedded into the fabric of the conference through a series of gallery talks and handling sessions that explored the conference’s themes of experimentation, the exceptional, envisioning, process, and the roles of response. Making the British Museum’s collection accessible and freely available to all “studious and curious persons” has been at the core of its mission since the eighteenth century, and it was important that there was an opportunity for conference delegates to engage directly with objects.

A variety of objects of different sizes, media, and functions were selected in order to tie the conference themes to the widest possible range of medieval objects. Several are not normally removed from permanent display, but were made available for close analysis. Through this level of access, it was hoped that new types of discussions could be fostered by allowing delegates to view the objects in the round, to gauge their size, weight, and condition at first hand. The importance of 360-degree study of objects cannot be overestimated, and the four objects which have been rendered in digital 3D format here aim to recreate the spirit and ethos of these object-focused sessions. These are the Alcester Crozier, an eleventh-century walrus ivory tau-cross shaped crozier terminal; one of the Warden Abbey morses, a fourteenth-century enamelled plaque related to Abbot Walter Clifton; and two badges: the first an enigmatic lead alloy badge depicting a hood filled with a harvest of cherries, the second, a pilgrim's ampulla from the shrine of St Thomas Becket. However, 3D reconstructions of these four objects allow for a different type of engagement than would normally be possible either in the gallery or in a 2D image. For those with access to a 3D printer the objects can theoretically even be recreated anywhere in the world; the data being made freely available. The wider potential for both scholarly and public engagement applications has only just begun to be explored.

For museums, 3D models are currently being promoted as a proxy for physical handling. The digital model is a modern player in the long history of reproduction, encompassing prints, drawings, casts, photographic and photomechanical technology. Digitization projects, such as the British Library’s online catalogue of illuminated manuscripts, have been in progress since the early 1990s. However, 3D modelling can allow for a more tailored experience because of the user’s freedom to manipulate the digital image in space and the “tagging” facility which allows the institution to guide the viewer around the object through numbered annotations. At the British Museum, 3D collections are made available via the online platform SketchFab, which features models of the collection ranging from one of the earliest known human footprints from Happisburgh in Norfolk to the colossal head of Amenemhat from the Temple of Bastet in Egypt. This allows anyone

with internet access to experience objects at the museum from the miniature to the monumental, although in some cases, the monumental becomes the miniature on the computer or smartphone screen.

The four medieval objects featured here are rendered on most screens only slightly larger in size than real life; all four are small enough to fit into the human hand. The density of detail is an element which connects them all, from the textile embellishments on Becket’s collar, to the minutely gilded figures on the morse, and the carved foliate tendrils on the crozier. The impact of 3D modelling on scholarship, museum curatorship, and collection stewardship is currently a point for debate, a topic addressed by the Conversation Piece published in this special issue. This “digital handling” section is also conceived as a contribution to that discussion, allowing the digital reproductions of these historic objects in the British Museum’s collection to circulate beyond the walls of the institution and participate in new and expanding digital worlds.

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