

MATERIAL OBJECTS AND CIRCULATION OF KNOWLEDGE IN EARLY MODERN LOW COUNTRIES

Sven Dupré and Christoph Lüthy (eds.), *Silent Messengers. The Circulation of Material Objects of Knowledge in the Early Modern Low Countries* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2011)
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This volume is a collection of ten essays on the problem of the circulation of knowledge in the Low Countries in sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The editors picked up cases of dissemination, transformation, and production of ideas that are linked to the material objects. A common premise of these studies is that material objects reveal aspects of the seventeenth-century thought that cannot be easily discriminated by a mere contemplation of ideas. In Vittoria Feola's and Mária Luz López Terrada's chapters these objects are seeds or plants. Koenraad van Cleempoel, Vera Keller, and Sven Dupré examine instruments of scientific use. Manuscripts are discussed in the chapters written by Jan Dijksterhuis and Claus Zittel. Eric Jorink's chapter is about all sorts of objects gathered by the Dutch collectors. Dániel Margócsy looks at anatomical recordings in close connection to seventeenth-century debates on the methods to preserve and transmit direct medical observation through the use of anatomical preparations. Koen Vermeir presents a debate about the use of dividing rod. These ten studies are followed by some closing remarks of Harold Cook. For Cook, such studies are exemplary as they support "the recent move from seeing the history of science as an aspect of the history of ideas and culture to something more encompassing. ... Histories of science, medicine, and technology are not, therefore, simply a subset of the history of philosophy. Philosophy was only one of the resources available to students of nature. ... By being attentive to the ways in which material objects could be both foci for scientific study and embodiments of contemporary knowledge, the authors are contributing to the fresh and important corpus of studies on how a new understanding of nature emerged from certain kinds of engagements with the material world." (p. 329). However, I would consider Cook's downplay of the history of philosophy just as an attempt to move the spotlight on other interesting aspects of the early modern science – in this case the various material objects – but not a dismiss of the intricate (and why not, philosophical?) meanings ported by these things. It is, in fact, one of the merits of this collection of essays to reveal (hidden) meanings in an age of constant reevaluations of knowledge production and changes of the early modern philosophical thought. This has been recognized by

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Sven Dupré and Christoph Lüthy, the editors of the volume, in their introduction: “although material objects of knowledge are silent messengers according to the title of this book, it was often impossible for contemporaries, as much as for historians today, to catch objects without their envelopment in a web of words and meanings” (p. 12).

Anyone interested in the early modern period will find valuable resources in the ten essays collected in this volume. Moreover, each contribution comes with several illustrations that help the reader to get acquainted with objects discussed in the text. This mixture of the historical discourse with images is a good strategy that makes each study case more convincing and reinforces the claim that material objects are carriers of meanings that go beyond their use in a particular context.

Although the geographical boundaries of the selected case studies are limited to the Low Countries, most of these essays reveal important conclusions for the whole Republic of Letters. For instance, Vermeir’s discussion of superstition and the mixture of occult and corpuscular views in the explanation of the divining rod is relevant not only for the Dutch context – where his analysis is based – but for the general skeptical attitude that spread across the continent at the end of the seventeenth century. Claus Zittel’s comparative study of Florentinus Schuyf’s *De homine* (1662) and Claude Clerselier’s *L’homme* (1664) is an innovative discussion about the importance of Clerselier as the editor of Descartes’s writings and I would expect more similar studies to follow on the reception of Cartesianism in the seventeenth century. Keller focuses on one of the most fascinating characters of the early seventeenth-century natural philosophy, Cornelis Drebbel, “a wonderworker” (p. 147), equally proficient in natural philosophy and mechanical arts, and who, although writing in Dutch, had become famous in many European countries. López Terrada, van Cleempoel, and Dupré reveal complex cultural connections between historical actors that are based in the Spanish Netherlands, but collaborate and exchange information with people from other regions. Moving objects lead to new knowledge, as Dijksterhuis nicely shows in his story of how Golius came into possession of Apolonius’s manuscript on the *Conics* and how this manuscript further changed the geometry taught in Leiden. Eric Jorink discusses also the case of the University of Leiden in the seventeenth century, where objects of various geographic origins are collected. How a particular type of objects is conserved for further observation is the topic of Margócsy’s comparative study of the anatomical specimens produced by Govard Bidloo and Frederik Ruysch. Feola’s interest in heraldic signs connects her case study of Jean-Jacques Chifflet to the larger issue of the reception of classical sources in early modern period.

All these essays contribute with new examples and insights into a new trend in the history of science: to examine more closely the production and organization of material culture. The interplay between “silent” things and active minds (whether they are of scholars, merchants or avid collectors of curiosities, to name just the main social categories discussed in this volume) reveal important aspects that are often missed by the analysis of philosophical and scientific texts. New studies, such as the ones collected in this volume remind us of the multiple layers of the early modern period, which require different research strategies that should not only take into

account the printed material, but also examine the larger context. By moving from the big picture of change in the early modern thought to such focal analyses of the 'silent messengers', this volume will entertain both the specialist and the general reader.

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