Call for Papers: Accessibility and Access to Dutch and Flemish Art

Art invites exploration and interaction, which takes on many forms. The Center for Netherlandish Art (CNA) invites graduate students, PhD candidates, and recent post-doctoral scholars to explore the topic of Accessibility in Dutch and Flemish art and material culture from the long seventeenth century (1560-1800).

Topics might include but are not limited to:

- The accessibility of display (in present and pre-modern periods)
- Interaction between audience and materials
- How a person’s identity or physical abilities impact their access to artwork (in present and pre-modern periods)
- Possibilities and limitations of different modes of accessing an artwork: digital, physical, photograph, etc.
- Research accessibility to private collections and museums
- How the effects of time (e.g. degradation) change modern scholars' access to artworks
- How impaired access to objects (e.g. veiled paintings, closed diptychs, etc.) can increase their value

Three papers will be selected for presentation during the 2024 CNA Colloquium, scheduled for Friday, May 10th, 2024. This day-long event offers a platform for selected emerging scholars to share original research with the international community of experts in the field. The program will be held in a hybrid format, allowing for both in-person and virtual participation. Further details will be shared closer to the event date.

How to apply

We invite contributions from MA and PhD students, PhD candidates, and postdoctoral researchers (no more than 2 years post-degree). As we amplify our efforts toward becoming truly inclusive, ensuring that diversity and equity are lived values, we actively encourage candidates from all backgrounds and in any discipline that interacts closely with art or material culture.

Please submit a title and abstract (300 words maximum) and a CV in one PDF file to cna@mfa.org, with ‘Call for Papers’ included in the email’s subject line. Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis through Monday, February 19. Selected participants will be notified by Tuesday, February 27. Selected candidates will have the opportunity to workshop their papers during a rehearsal presentation one week before the event.
Background
A recent trend across art institutions is a reexamination of current practices and a push to make spaces and collections more easily accessible to all visitors. However, questions regarding accessibility are not limited to our modern times and exist in multifold discourses related to Dutch and Flemish Art during the long seventeenth century.

Access to an object was often dependent on its preciousness and material. Dollhouses commissioned by upper-class women could be opened and closed to admit only privileged guests a look at the miniature masterpieces. Yet, impaired access was not always regarded negatively. For instance, placing a curtain before a painting could increase its spiritual or interactive value for the beholder. Removing a barrier to gain access to an artwork created time for contemplation, an effect at play in diptychs, triptychs, amulets, and screw thalers.

The accessibility of objects in the seventeenth century also impacts their condition and sometimes their interpretation in modern scholarship. Prints protected in an album limited their accessibility in past centuries but increased their preservation for modern scholars. Meanwhile, many artworks face natural degradation processes over time, which affect not only their condition but also how we perceive them today. To what extent can modern technical art historical techniques grant us access to original compositions? Along with advances in conservation and technical art history practices, virtual access to art continues to broaden its potential audiences. With this shift, how does digital access relate to access in other forms?

Different levels of accessibility are further revealed when considering agency in the roles of the artist and subject. Early modern Dutch and Flemish artists regularly depicted individuals and groups on the margins of their society, for example, Frans Hals’s depiction of “Malle Babbe” (whose actual name was Barbara Claes, a local hospital resident; “Malle” could be translated as “crazy”) or the members of the Jewish community in Amsterdam thought to model for Rembrandt. When considering the role of subject and artist, whose perspective is more often the focus? When centering the perspective of marginalized communities, what new perspectives and access points are revealed? How does considering different levels of agency change how modern audiences approach Dutch and Flemish art?

Questions of accessibility are visible in an artwork's materiality, the effects of technological advances, and shifts in perspective regarding varying levels of agency in seventeenth-century society. A traditional approach is to focus on defining limitations, rather than focusing on the possibilities of alternative access points. The Center for Netherlandish Art’s 2024 Colloquium seeks work that rethinks narratives of inaccessibility and is oriented towards possibilities and accessibility.

Organized by Jessica Sternbach and Tanne Bloks, in partnership with the Center for Netherlandish Art (CNA) at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.