BRITISH ART STUDIES
Issue 6 – June 2017 – June 2017

Editorial

Introduction by **Sandy Heslop**Introduction and **Jessica Berenbeim**
WORD COUNT:1,667

All discussions of artistic invention involve seeing an object as different from similar objects that came before it. In effect this means that the analysis of invention is predicated on assumptions about similarity and difference, assumptions which are themselves not always fully theorized. What kind of difference are we talking about—visual, material, conceptual, or some combination of the above? And on what criteria can one work be judged as meaningfully different from another? Since we are specifically speaking about medieval art and architecture in this special issue of *British Art Studies*, these ideas of difference can also be situated historically.

Invention, in its original meaning and its medieval Latin root, did not in and of itself imply innovation—or more specifically, novelty. However, its modern English meaning does, and it is in this sense that many of the articles in this special issue take the term. Many involve analyses of the development of something new, different, and exceptional, and of changes in visual culture over time—that is to say, novelty and change as perceived by art historians today. These investigations in turn suggest a further important problem: the distinction between our perceptions of novelty and those of medieval viewers.

It is a significant question for the study of visual culture more broadly, because notions—even if unarticulated—about what makes something different have been central to artistic theory and practice at so many points in time. The concepts of the copy, the print, the photograph, the readymade, the replica, the discourse of pseudomorphism in abstract painting: all engage with this idea of difference. Thinking about invention in medieval art brings a distinctive outlook to the conversation, as these are some of the works that to most modern eyes look "the same". People who study medieval art probably understand this as a matter of familiarity. But it is worth questioning similarity and difference in conceptual as well as perceptual terms, as the bases for understanding what invention might have meant historically. The context of *BAS* also inflects this discussion in a particular way (compared to, say, a journal of medieval studies), as it presents its implications in a diachronic perspective: treating art in Britain before 1500 in ways that might resonate with later concepts of invention.

A few examples drawn from the history and historiography of medieval art can serve to demonstrate the point. The tradition of typological study—think of Francis Cheetham's *English Medieval Alabasters* (1984)—indicates one way of understanding visual difference, even if that difference is not explicitly conceptualized, but rather demonstrated by grouping things together according to particular characteristics. Any such typology, in grouping objects in this way, makes a statement about their essential features. Or take the example that one of the editors, Jessica Berenbeim, spoke about at the conference that started this project (about which more below): a series of secular ("livery") badges now at the British Museum. Badges particularly lend

themselves to this conversation, because the deliberate manipulation of similarity and difference is fundamental to their mode of expression: their design related to affinity, while their materials related to status. Finally, the cathedral and the "great church" are notable examples: a monastic church can become a cathedral with (at least in theory) no physical change; or a cathedral can be razed to the ground, and rebuilt with no institutional change. Which is the more radical transformation?

In effecting this kind of change, in creating a work that differs from its predecessors, there needs to be some conception of—some manner of envisioning—a work that does not yet exist. In other words, the consequence of invention is imagination. The necessity of imagining something comes from it not being before our eyes; where rays of light bearing visual information fail, the way of seeing must be internal. An image has to be invented, that is to say discovered (from *invenire*, to find) in the mind as much as in the block of stone. Much of the work of medieval artists involved picturing the unseen past from biblical or hagiographic sources or secular histories. The scenes had to be imagined. Other outwardly invisible information, such as the structures of abstract thought, could be presented in diagrammatic terms, but their appropriate schema also had to be found—and almost always adapted to changed circumstances. Inventing and representing were fundamental intellectual processes in this endeavour, but they also provided scope for eliciting emotional responses from spectators: to imagine they were with the shepherds adoring the newborn Christ child; to pity the martyrs shown tormented for their faith as if before their eyes.

Medieval Christian theology understood creative imagination and invention in distinctive terms, which would have been more or less familiar to those creating the works discussed in this issue. The location of these operations through the senses in the mind, itself part of the soul, gave them flavours unique to the individual—whether makers or audience. The soul was understood as a chip off the divine block, as it were, but all souls were different, through nurture, experience, and discipline. Novelty, originality, and creativity were part of exercising one's birthright, of being created in the image of the Creator. Paradoxically, human artists had the power to create original works—to invent—because they themselves were seen as copies after the divine. Human creation was furthermore an active demonstration of free will, a gift which theologians such as St Anselm argued it was our duty to exercise in ways that honoured the Creator. Seen in these terms, simply to accept an existing visual image, to copy it automatically, was a failure of the imaginative and inventive faculties with which God had endowed us. Yet there is a lingering suspicion in the history of art that to invent or to be imaginative is a post-medieval phenomenon, associated with the recognition of the artist as a genius possessing extraordinary inventive abilities.

The *Invention and Imagination* conference held at the British Museum between 30 October and 1 November 2014, where the papers here were first presented, aimed to explore contexts in which innovation occurred in medieval British art and architecture, to see what prompted the creation of new ideas, or the reappropriation, reworking, and re-presentation of old ones. "Great Britain", a concept developed in the period to distinguish the island from "Lesser Britain" (Brittany), is well placed to be a laboratory for exploring these issues. "Odd" imagery was first identified here by scholars from Europe and America, who noticed anomalies such as the entrance to Hell depicted as a gaping mouth, or the "disappearing" Christ at the Ascension, rising into cloud with only his lower limbs still visible. And what about cylindrical or polygonal chapter houses, another Insular phenomenon? None of this should be taken to suggest that people in Britain were especially inventive or imaginative, but it does prompt questions about the circumstances and

stimuli for doing things differently, and the reasons for the popularity (or unpopularity) of the invention that resulted. For better or worse, the conference hardly addressed issues of the afterlife of new developments—a theme for another occasion, perhaps.

One of the guiding ideas and scholarly contexts framing the conference was "a return to the object". We were fortunate indeed that collaboration between the Paul Mellon Centre and the British Museum enabled direct access to various kinds of medieval artefact. This encouraged a focus on materiality and facture. The conference included two kinds of session: those with traditional academic papers, and object sessions. Handling sessions allowed participants to see an object from all sides, to articulate its form by moving it in the light, to perceive its size, and to feel its weight. How is the tooling of the back, which was not meant for display, different from that on the front and sides, and how is the transition between the two managed? What are the sculptural differences between cutting an image in reverse intaglio (for a seal matrix or a mould for a pilgrim's badge) and carving a unique image in positive relief? How do we understand the usually lost matrix or mould from impressions or casts taken from it, apart from the fact that the former, like a photographic negative, promotes "mechanical reproduction"? In keeping with the format of the conference, this special issue includes both articles and virtual objects. The spirit of object handling is captured by digital imagining, accompanied by a "Conversation Piece" discussing the conceptual, practical, and theoretical issues produced by such new technological means of reproducing and recreating medieval objects for the digital screen.

Too intense an engagement with facture, however, might seem to place the power of invention and imagination in the domain of physical crafting. In several of the case studies explored in these papers there is another important locus of decision making: the person paying for the product, for whom there was always more at stake than mere expense. If the object was to be acknowledged in the world as a result of a patron's initiative, then that patron would be seen to have approved it—at least tacitly, even if their endorsement was not overtly displayed in inscriptions or heraldry. A wise patron would almost certainly exercise some control—through a conversation with the artificer(s), a written brief, or through monitoring the work's progress. So it is not the imagination and invention of makers alone that requires scrutiny. Patrons in medieval Britain are not well conceived of as "clients", the term used by Michael Baxandall in discussing fifteenth-century Italy. They often play a generative role in many of the most inventive episodes in the art and architecture of Britain in the Middle Ages. The dynamic interplay between the pre-formed "idea" of the finished object—in the minds of various participants—and its physical realization, is usually hidden from us now. But conceiving of it as imaginative as well as technical is a crucial part of locating the art and architecture in a social, economic, and communicative domain quite different from today's, when so much more of the authorship is (rightly or wrongly) attributed solely to the creativity of artists.

About the authors

Jessica Berenbeim is Lecturer in Literature and Visual Culture, Faculty of English, University of Cambridge. She is the author of *Art of Documentation: Documents and Visual Culture in Medieval England* (2015). She has been a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Paul Mellon Centre, a Junior Research Fellow at Magdalen College, Oxford, and a Long-term Fellow in Cultural and Intellectual History at the Warburg Institute.

Sandy Heslop is Professor of Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia, where he has worked as a teacher and researcher since 1976. He publishes widely on the art and architecture of medieval England from around 1000 to the Reformation. Recent

research interests include studies on St Anselm's Canterbury (in *Anglo-Norman Studies*, the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, and the BAA Canterbury Conference Transactions). His main project at present is the medieval parish churches of Norwich, funded for three years by the Leverhulme Trust: norwichmedievalchurches.org. Publications on other topics include a book on the Eadwine Psalter, another on Norwich Castle Keep, and an exhibition and catalogue: *Basketry: Making Human Nature*.

Imprint

Author	Sandy Heslop Jessica Berenbeim
Date	29 June 2017
Category	Introduction
Review status	Not Peer Reviewed
License	
Downloads	PDF format
Article DOI	https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-06/editorial
Cite as	Heslop, Sandy, and Jessica Berenbeim. "Editorial." In *British Art Studies: Invention and Imagination in British Art and Architecture, 600–1500 (Edited by Jessica Berenbeim and Sandy Heslop)*. London and New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale University Press, 2017. https://britishartstudies-06.netlify.app/i6-editorial/.