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# Art History 40

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# Reading, Writing, Remembering

Tabula – Rasa

In Spring 2016, archaeological excavations around London's Mithraic Temple brought to light a cache of ancient writing tablets exceptional in bearing still-legible text. Immediately dubbed 'ancient ipads', 87 of these wooden tablets once covered with dark beeswax for ease of inscription revealed clear traces of the letters etched on them at the time of their historic deposit. These included evidence of a scholastic exercise of learning the alphabet, a very early London address line – "In London, to Mogontius" – and the earliest known handwritten document in Britain, a financial record dated 8 January 57 A.D **(fig. 1)**.[1] Collectively, they bear witness to a historic community of authors and readers, and the many cultural uses of notation as a tool of remembering. They are also today, as museum pieces, objects that form and inform our knowledge of the past.

The figure of the wax tablet has since antiquity served as an enduring emblem of written memory, and indeed of the mind's recollective processes **(fig. 2).** As a cultural sign it allegorises the mental function of memory as writing, while representing the capacity of notation to carry meaning. The reverse state, *tabula rasa*, or a slate scraped clean to allow for the application of a new layer of wax, conversely configures loss or clearance of memory. Uses of the writing tablet across antiquity were varied – for accounts and financial transactions, as instruments of pedagogy, for correspondence, and as clusters of tablets laced together by leather thongs to form 'books'.[2] It has often been constated that ancient cultures, without the ease of recording methods brought by the advent of paper and the

printing press, far less our own electronic information storage and retrieval systems, placed much greater value on the cultivation and capacity for oral memory in ways that vastly exceed those of print cultures. In comparative terms, scholars of memory have argued that modernity's surfeit of documentary means has produced a culture of amnesia. By contrast the ancient art of training the memory, comprising an aspect of rhetoric, was devoted to the development of oratorical recall without the written word, instead using a system of mnemonics based on a visual conceptualisation of memory 'places', or *loci*, as a mental system of information retrieval. Thus the ancient poet Simonides of Ceos, mythically credited with the invention of these spatial mnemonic techniques, could describe his system as a series of mentally-imagined *loci* in which to store images from memory:

> Persons desiring to train the faculty [of memory] should imagine places in which to store memory… like a wax writing tablet and the letters written on it. For the *loci* are very much like wax tablets, or papyrus, the images like the letters, and the arrangement and disposition of the images like the script.[3]

The system of memory Simonides apparently envisioned was both visual, in its series of recollective *loci*, but also like writing as a sequence of letters marked on the 'wax tablets' of the mind. The image of the wax imprint of script on tablet, even within memory systems developed precisely to obviate the need for the written word, was understood from early antiquity as the paradigmatic sign of the mind's recollective capacity.

In 5$^{th}$-century BC, the age of Simonides, the wax tablet was already a commonplace, the acknowledged method of annotated information storage and recall, and the figure of speech used to denote memory. The tablet remained a preeminent technology of memory across antiquity, with continued use into the Middle Ages and beyond. Its occasional recurrence as a method of documentation extends as late as the nineteenth century in

places with particularly humid conditions unsuitable for paper, for example, by sellers at the fish market in Rouen, or for the account books from the salt mine towns of Central and Southern Germany. A bundle of seventeenth-century tablets from the archives of Halle, now restored, but originally preserved like a sheaf of 'papers' within a loose book cover, exemplifies the figure of the archive as a space of materialised historical recollection **(fig. 3).** [4] The question of material memory has preoccupied scholars of the archive and of the museum alike.[5] In particular, the figure of the wax tablet also calls to mind descriptions of the great libraries of antiquity – the lost papyrus scrolls of Alexandria to be sure, but also the very early collections of inscribed bricks that constituted the libraries of Mesopotamia.

Tablets, bricks, scrolls, papyrus and parchment, manuscripts and printed books, pdfs and open access links, all these material and virtual things that are both cultural artefacts and touchstones of memory, may be collected and stored, but also retrieved and read, in archives, libraries, museums, studies, and the worldwide web (**figs. 4, 5)**. Within these physical and virtual spaces they are the loci of reading and viewing communities, of social groups often completely unknown to each other yet sharing common sets of interest, knowledge, and memory.[6] So with journals.

The collected papers of this volume mark just such a reading community. Together, they celebrate *Art History*'s 40th birthday, as a commemoration of a journal's history over 40 years of publication. Founded in 1978 by John White as the first chair of the newly-instituted Association of Art Historians, and led by John Onians as its inaugural editor, *Art History*'s publications over those years, and the ongoing changes of which it is a testament, chart not only the history of a journal but of the discipline whose name it bears. Changing intellectual developments, new editorial vision, shifts in publishing methods and

technologies, have and continue to shape its content and design. Above all, the journal embodies a community of readers.

*Art History* 40

In the spirit of reading, writing, and remembering, the collected papers of this volume are those of the journal's history of editors 1978-2017, gathered together for the first time. Dedicated to a collective engagement with the image and the problem of memory, as arguably key to defining the conceptual practices of the discipline, these papers celebrate 40 years of publication. Their enquiry stems from the recent transition of journal publishing from print into electronic copy, and the complications this has posed in a subject quintessentially founded upon photographic reproduction of the objects it studies as the lodestones, or *loci*, of our collective memory and understanding.[7] The question of image and memory is indelibly tied to an art-historical understanding of visual 'survivals', or the migration of forms across time and place. Such processes of visual memory, in their network of affinities, connections, but also cultural oblivions, were the primary focus of one of the discipline's leading early intellects, Aby Warburg, whose research institute and graduate training would later constitute John Onians's intellectual formation. Warburg's great collection of photographs organised as a pictorial atlas, which he titled *Mnemosyne*, was, like the organisation of his book library, material testament to his conceptualisation of image and memory. Consisting of some 70 panels and approximately 2000 photographs, Warburg's 'Image-Memory Atlas' was the tool of his theory of the typological functions of human pictorial memory **(fig. 6).** Similarly he ordered his library as a 'conversation' of books and subjects, mirroring the collage/montage form of the image atlas. "Like an early neural network model of the growth of connectivity", the library's arrangement links together otherwise hidden resemblances and connections between different

fields of enquiry.[8] It is surely in this intellectual light that John Onians introduced *Art History* as a forum in which to practice art history “according to a wider definition”.[9]

This volume’s papers study questions of art-historical or visual memory across a broad spectrum of interdisciplinary concerns, viewed through a wide range of images and objects. They pursue issues of recollection and reminiscence, such as the affect of nostalgia, the play of temporalities, echoes and reflections, oblivions and forgettings, or conversely the afterlives of forms, whether ephemeral or archival, in their survivals and half-lives, absences and presence; monuments, anti-monuments and memorials, mnemonic objects or displays, mementoes, replicas and reproductions, fragments and ruins. As inaugural editor, John Onians opens the volume with a reflection on the founding era of the journal during the intellectual tide of the ‘New Art History’, and beyond to current exchange between Art History and the sciences. His concern is the issue of neural linkages within the circuits of visual memory, arguing for a scientific analysis of the nodes of recollection, while understanding the processes of artistic memory as governed by the social construction of cultures and the affects of experience. Neil McWilliam turns to the early history of the discipline in the late nineteenth century, and to the concomitant history of nineteenth-century nationalism. He links together the question of collective identity with the cultural roles that artistic cultures, particularly those constructed as ‘classical’, might play in such debates. Marcia Pointon takes the example of the drapery fold in male dress in late nineteenth-century portraiture, both painted and photographic. Attending to the representation of creases and folds as markers of the presence of the body and the passage of time, she suggests the ways in which portraiture simultaneously ‘immortalises’ or confounds, yet also bears witness to, the degradations wrought by time. Dana Arnold studies the semantic work of the ruin or fragment within the architecture of early nineteenth-century London, notably in the practice of Sir John Soane. She argues that the ‘modernity’ of the metropolis was

configured in relation to the ruin, as the allegory of its future historicity and of the timelessness of an urban monument, to rival the cultural imaginary of Rome. Sam Bibby turns to the example of *Art History* itself, using its archives to expose the ways in which the history of a journal is shaped by productive tensions between its past and its future, and by the historical conditions of production, both intellectual and technological. He examines the changing place of the visual image within this history, now thrown into newly-sharpened relief by the advent of online publishing. In a study of George Bellows' representations of urban development in early twentieth-century New York, David Peters Corbett describes the 'gaping wounds' of urban excavation as a painted aetiology of destruction, an obliteration of memory within the construction of modernity. He uses the example of Bellows to repose the question of 'decreation' posed by Agamben, to draw a parallel between the processes of excavation, and those of artistic memory in the act of artistic creation. Gavin Parkinson considers the critical revival of Gauguin in the mid-twentieth century as tied to rising interest in the history and myth of the Celt, and so to the landscapes of his native Brittany. He brings to bear the cultural interest in the 'primitive' as the powerful myth that constructed Gauguin's vision of the land, and shows how our own cultural memory of this landscape is still today inflected by this artistic legacy. Genevieve Warwick studies the figure of the sleeping cupid in ancient and early modern sculpture, painting and poetry as an example of the 'afterlife' of a gestural form. Focussing on Caravaggio's depiction of the subject for Florence, freighted by the legacy of Michelangelo's earlier example, she considers how this painting vexes and ruptures the very notion of art-historical memory by an artist who claimed not to have one. In an analysis of the paradox of historical narratives of the avant-garde from the mid-twentieth century, Natalie Adamson studies Herbert Read's writings on Edouard Pignon as troubling the history and future of painting in a post-war era. 'Tradition cut to pieces' made the question of memory, and its destruction, pressing across avant-garde cultural forms.

Read posed these questions about the history of the future of art in a series of journal articles. His thoughts inflected, challenged, and in turn responded, to the writings of other critics such as Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. Their points of difference and consonance in a discussion of historic rupture and synthesis, the cultural fragmentation of memory and tradition, and the burdened future of new art, were played out across the pages of journals such as *The Arts, New Age, Art and Letters, Cahiers d'Art*. The history of art journals is greatly variegated, in a cultural field configured by those titles closely tied to particular historical moments and concerns, while others take up the intellectual paradox of longer historical-futures. So with *Art History* at its 40th birthday. This volume is a collective celebration of a journal's distinctive past, its present worldwide community of authors and readers, and its continuing future as leader of the field.

**We dedicate this volume to the readers of *Art History*.**

**Illustrations**

1. **Wax tablet, Museum of London**
2. **Poet Sappho writing with stylus on a tablet, Pompeii**
3. **Bundle of wax tablets, Halle Archives**
4. **Library of Celsus, Ephesus**
5. **Clay tablet from Library of Ashurbanipal, Epic of Gilgamesh**
6. **Aby Warburg, *Mnemosyne***

**Notes**

[1] http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2306443/The-Bloomberg-Place-Construction-Site-Archaeological-dig-London-heralded-capitals-important-excavation.html

[2] Albertine Gaur, *A History of Writing*, exh. British Library, London, 1984; Anne-Marie Christin, ed., *Histoire de l'écriture: De l'idéogramme au multimedia*, Paris, 2001.

[3] Cicero, *De Oratore*, II, lxxxvii, (LOEB), 355. On the ancient history of mnemonics, Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory*, London, 1966; and Mary Carruthers, *The Memory Book: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, Cambridge, 1990; Anne Whitehead, *Memory*, New York, 2009. See also Walter J Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, London, 1982; *Language, script, image: Approaches to our cultural memory*, exh., Berlin, 2007.

[4] Büll, R., 1977. Wachs als Beschreib- und Siegelstoff. Wachstafeln und ihre Verwendung. In: *Das große Buch vom Wachs*. Vol. 2, 785-894; Lalou E., 1992. "Inventaire des tablettes médiévales et présentation genérale". In: *Les Tablettes à écrire de l'Antiquité à l'Epoque Moderne*, pp. 233-288; esp. p. 280 and fig. 13.

[5]Susan A Crane, ed. *Museums and Memory*, Stanford, 2000.

[6] On the history of reading, Roger Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors ad Libraries in Europe between the 14th and 18th Centuries*, Stanford, 1994; Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading*, London, 1996; Roger Darnton, *The Case for Books: Past, Present and Future*, Philadelphia, 2009.

[7] Costanza Caraffa, ed., *Photo archives and the photographic memory art history, Italianische forschungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, I, 14, Berlin, 2011; *Doubletake: Collective Memory and Current Art*, exh. Hayward Gallery London 1992. On Open Access and *Art History*, http://www.aah.org.uk/press-and-policy

[8] *Common Knowledge*, *The Warburg Institute. A Special Issue on the Library and its Readers*, 2012, http://commonknowledge.dukejournals.org/content/18/1/1; *Aby Warburg 150 Conference*, The Warburg Institute, 2016, http://warburg.sas.ac.uk/events/aby-warburg-150-work-legacy-promise

[9] John Onians, Editorial, *Art History*, 1, I, 1978, v-vl.