

Patterns of reception: analyzing the artistic reception of early nineteenth-century British genre painting with phylogenetic systematics

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Art can be understood as a process of action and reaction, in which tradition and the evolution of novelties go hand in hand. The development of styles, genres and particular themes as well as the consequent delineation of art into different groups has always been a key area of art-historical research. Until well into the twentieth century, the division of various “schools” of art was made predominantly on the basis of regions and nationalities. Over the past few decades, modern art history has shown a growing interest in themes that transcend such borders, such as the international workings of the art market, the travel of artists, and especially the (in)direct influence between artists from different backgrounds.

My research focuses on mapping the influence of nineteenth-century, British genre painting (the painting of scenes from everyday life) on its contemporary continental counterpart. This is done using phylogenetic systematics – a quantitative technique derived from evolutionary biology that represents a new method within the field of art history. In this talk, I show that this new application is a hallmark example of how the digital humanities can complement classical areas of research.

My analysis of the influence of British genre painting on its contemporary continental counterpart involves tracing the reception of British paintings in reviews and reproductions, as well as the identification of continental pictures whose chief characteristics may have been derived from highly-regarded British examples. These classical art-historical approaches inevitably invoke a certain degree of subjectivity and could therefore benefit from quantitative methods to strengthen the resulting hypotheses and conclusions.

I have employed phylogenetic systematics to systematically determine and map the scope of the British influence manifested in particular continental genre pictures. Evolutionary biologists use this method to determine the evolutionary relationship between different species that share certain characteristics. It consists of a logical set of rules and algorithms by which similarities between subjects are evaluated. Computational methods can subsequently be used to derive the most probable hypotheses of kinship and visualize these as dendrograms. Outside of the exact sciences, phylogenetic systematics is already used in fields like textual criticism, linguistics and anthropology. Within the field of art history, it represents a new method that has the potential to provide the first quantitative evidence for specific patterns of reception in samples of art objects. The method would be particularly helpful when – like fossils – the art itself is the little evidence that is left of a certain art-historical development.

After presenting the first results of testing phylogenetic systematics in art-historical research, I will use these to indicate the successes and shortcomings of the method, also identifying potential solutions. I conclude by commenting on the method’s long-term potential. By systematically testing the applicability of phylogenetic systematics to well-chosen art-historical examples, I aim to provide a standard tool kit for addressing a broad range of art-historical questions that concern the “common ancestry” of works of art.