

Literature, Art and Learning (1300 -1700)

Research Programme of the Medieval and Early Modern Studies

Introduction

Between 1300 and 1700 European culture went through particularly far-reaching changes in a large number of connected areas of art, learning, literature and religion: the emergence of humanism and the sciences, the Great Schism in the West, the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, spectacular developments in the art of painting, sculpture, architecture, arts and crafts, graphic art, and the coming into existence of an art market. Decisive developments were accelerated by increasing literacy, the invention of the printing press, the rise of grammar schools in the towns, the remarkable growth of universities, and the use of vernacular languages alongside the scholarly Latin, which facilitated the participation of laymen in the formerly exclusive scholarly culture. Besides, radical changes were taking place in politics (the emergence of nation-states; a dichotomy in Europe as a result of religious wars and confessionalism; the battle against Islam), in the conduct of war (the discovery of gunpowder), in demography (the consequences of the bubonic plague), in economics (overseas trade) and in geography (the discovery of the New World). All of these factors resulted in the emergence of a completely new European “world” between 1300 and 1700.

The research programme focuses on the processes in literature, art and scholarly culture connected with these changes, either as causes or as consequences. The major developments in European culture between 1300 and 1700 were the result of a complex interplay between religion, art and scholarship. Therefore, the study of late medieval and early modern culture requires an interdisciplinary approach by literary scholars and art and book historians; it also requires a cutting across traditional periodizations, such as late medieval versus early modern. The Pallas Research Institute has a research staff of 60, all with their different specialisms. This makes interdisciplinary study of the entire era between 1300 and 1700 possible. In order to study the processes outlined above optimally, Pallas focuses its attention on three areas: *Cultural identity and self-formation* (1), *Media and intermediality* (2) and *Fashioning, transmission and appropriation of knowledge* (3). These areas of attention have been formulated so as to make both separate and combined studies possible.

1. Cultural identity and self-formation

As a result of the massive changes that took place between 1300 and 1700, cultural identity was no longer a natural constant. New social, religious, intellectual and artistic communities were developing identities of their own, in a varying interplay of forces between resistance by the established order, on the one hand, and energetic attempts by new communities to secure a position of their own, or radically to change and even overthrow existing structures, on the other. Processes of identity formation are all the more interesting because they are connected directly to innovations in politics, religion, literature and art. Besides, new notions of selfhood could circulate on a larger scale and across large areas, as a result of the dissemination of writing, increasing literacy, the rise and development of literature in the vernacular and the production of printed books. Moreover, innovations in art (such as, in painting, oil paint, perspective, anatomy) led to a spectacular expansion of visual culture that, among other things, helped to foster private devotion. In architecture, from c.

1450 in Italy and c. 1550 elsewhere, traditional styles were no longer self-evident, and began to function as manifestations of religious, political, cultural and artistic identity.

It is through the development of literary, artistic, scholarly, religious, and political discourses that new forms of self-reflection emerged. Pallas research in this area studies new notions of the self as they emerged in various genres of literature and art, as well as historiography, poetics (including the poetics of art in paintings), the new genre of the printed (and therefore much more readily accessible and more widely circulating) architectural treatise, scholarly publications, dramatic performances, ego documents, travel books, diaries and collections of arteficialia and naturalia.

2. Media and intermediality

In the late medieval and early modern period the *Materialität der Kommunikation* changed decisively. The dissemination of knowledge, outside the traditional centres of learning such as the Church and the universities, was characterized by radical changes in media culture. In non-academic circles, where the vernacular played a more important part than Latin, age-old oral and visual cultures were eclipsed by a written culture which, as a result of increased literacy, gained acceptance among ever-widening strata of the population, especially in the towns. When the manuscript explosion (after the introduction of paper) and the invention of the printed book occurred, there was already a much greater demand for the written word than in the preceding centuries.

The introduction of the new medium of the printed book amounts to a revolution in the transmission of knowledge. The invention of the printing press made it possible to reproduce identical texts and images and to circulate them on a large scale. The identical text page offered incomparably better methods of access to, control over, and authorization of information (for example, through indices, or through textual emendations), and more effective ways of influencing the reader. At the same time, the possibilities of manipulation, propaganda and censorship grew. The invention of the illustrated printed book – a bimedral form – created particularly interesting developments, such as large-scale description of all sorts of objects and themes in variable combinations of text and image.

Pallas research in this area looks at how different literary and learned texts, as well as drawings, paintings and engravings, objects of applied art and buildings functioned in a period of fundamental changes in media culture. What were the implications of these changes for the invention and reception of texts and works of arts and crafts? To what extent is there evidence of a new reading and viewing culture? A point of special attention is the question of how bimedral books functioned, that is to say, the respective effects of text and image, and the relationship between them.

3. Fashioning, transmission and appropriation of knowledge

This area of interest concentrates on the transmission, organization and fashioning of knowledge. Research in this area looks both at continuous developments from the late Middle Ages into the early modern period, and at new processes that resulted from the increasing production of manuscripts in the late Middle Ages, as well as the introduction of the printing press and the rise of humanism and the Reformation in the early modern era. The early modern period saw an explosive increase in knowledge (and in its dissemination), as a result of powerful developments in learning (humanism, philology, the natural sciences, the discovery of the New World), the introduction of printed texts and

images, and the intensifying of communication that resulted from the expansion of written culture and increased mobility.

The interaction between the vernacular languages, visual and material culture of various lay communities on the one hand, and the Latin as the domain of scholarship and the Church on the other, led to constant changes in the relationship between “high” and “low” culture, as well as to a growing appreciation of certain areas of knowledge. These relationships can be characterized in terms of conciliation or annexation on the one hand, and alienation and the forming of elites on the other. In literature, learning and visual arts, knowledge was used to give meaning to one’s own existence, and to give shape to the past through ideologically determined perceptions of history. New genres, and new formal principles and discourses arose, in which traditional knowledge was adapted, authorized and commented on, or new knowledge constituted and opened up. Pallas research in this area focuses on the ways in which the acquisition and assimilation of knowledge took place: in what ways was knowledge structured and fashioned in literary and learned texts, works of art, text collections (literary compilations, manuscript miscellanies, libraries), and material collections (*Kunst- und Wunderkammer*, art collections, naturalia collections, menageries)?

Each of the areas of interest studies texts, art objects, books and manuscripts in a broader context, in order to study both the changes and the continuity in the use of arts and texts in the late medieval and early modern period. These processes of change and continuity are linked to material, as well as to also social, functional, technological, religious, political and economic factors.

Research in the fields of literature, the visual arts, arts and crafts and architecture serves an academic as well as a social purpose. This is especially true for the fields of architecture and arts and crafts, with their links to the protection and study of the cultural heritage, which comprises not only material culture, monuments and arts and crafts, but also (academic) collections.