Computer Vision and Image Analysis of Art

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Editors

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# Contents

vii Conference Committee  
ix Introduction  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SESSION 1</th>
<th>DIGITAL IMAGING AND ART HISTORY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 7531 03   | Experimental study of canvas characterization for paintings [7531-02]  
B. Cornelis, A. Dooms, A. Munteanu, J. Cornelis, P. Schelkens, Vrije Univ. Brussel (Belgium) |
| 7531 05   | Inferring Caravaggio’s studio lighting and praxis in The calling of St. Matthew by computer graphics modeling [7531-04]  
D. G. Stork, Ricoh Innovations, Inc. (United States); G. Nagy, Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc. (United States) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SESSION 2</th>
<th>IMAGE RECONSTRUCTION AND 3D IMAGING OF WORKS OF ART</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 7531 06   | Recognizing characters of ancient manuscripts [7531-05]  
M. Diem, R. Sablatnig, Vienna Univ. of Technology (Austria) |
| 7531 07   | Document reconstruction by layout analysis of snippets [7531-06]  
F. Kleber, M. Diem, R. Sablatnig, Vienna Univ. of Technology (Austria) |
| 7531 08   | 3D acquisition of historical coins and its application area in numismatics [7531-07]  
S. Zambanini, Vienna Univ. of Technology (Austria); M. Schlapke, Thüringisches Landesamt für Archäologische Denkmalpflege (Germany); M. Hödlmoser, M. Kampel, Vienna Univ. of Technology (Austria) |
| 7531 09   | Text recovery from the ultraviolet-fluorescent spectrum for treatises of the Archimedes Palimpsest [7531-08]  
K. Bloechl, Rochester Institute of Technology (United States); H. Hamlin, Pittsford Sutherland High School (United States); R. L. Easton, Jr., Rochester Institute of Technology (United States) |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SESSION 3</th>
<th>DIGITAL IMAGING AND STYLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 7531 0A   | Digital analysis and restoration of Daguerreotypes [7531-09]  
X. Tang, P. A. Ardis, R. Messing, C. M. Brown, R. C. Nelson, Univ. of Rochester (United States);  
P. Ravines, R. Wiegandt, George Eastman House (United States) |
| 7531 0B   | Discovering salient characteristics of authors of artworks [7531-10]  
P. Bajcsy, M. Moslemi, National Ctr. for Supercomputing Applications (United States) |
| 7531 0C   | Stylometrics of artwork: uses and limitations [7531-11]  
J. M. Hughes, D. J. Graham, D. N. Rockmore, Dartmouth College (United States) |
SESSION 4  APPLIED ART HISTORY AND IMAGE ANALYSIS

7531 0D  **Standardized system for multispectral imaging of palimpsests** [7531-12]
R. L. Easton, Jr., Rochester Institute of Technology (United States); K. T. Knox, Air Force Research Lab. (United States); W. A. Christens-Barry, Equipoise Imaging, LLC (United States); K. Boydston, Megavision Inc. (United States); M. B. Toth, R. B. Toth Associates (United States); D. Emery, Emery IT (United States); W. Noel, Walters Art Museum (United States)

7531 0E  **Advanced image analysis for the preservation of cultural heritage** [7531-13]
F. G. France, The Library of Congress (United States); W. Christens-Barry, Equipoise Imaging, LLC (United States); M. B. Toth, R. B. Toth Associates (United States); K. Boydston, Megavision Inc. (United States)

SESSION 4  APPLIED ART HISTORY AND IMAGE ANALYSIS

7531 0F  **Analysis of painting materials on multimodal microscopic level** [7531-14]
B. Zitová, M. Beneš, Institute of Information Theory and Automation (Czech Republic); J. Hradilová, Academy of Fine Arts (Czech Republic); D. Hradil, Institute of Inorganic Chemistry (Czech Republic)

7531 0G  **Inferring compositional style in the neo-plastic paintings of Piet Mondrian by machine learning** [7531-15]
D. Andrzejewski, Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison (United States); D. G. Stork, Ricoh Innovations, Inc. (United States); X. Zhu, Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison (United States); R. Spronk, Queen's Univ. (Canada)

7531 0J  **Reflections on Parmigianino's Self portrait in a convex mirror: a computer graphics reconstruction of the artist's studio** [7531-18]
D. G. Stork, Ricoh Innovations, Inc. (United States); Y. Furuichi, Consultant (Japan)

7531 0K  **Pigment identification based on spectral reflectance reconstructed from RGB images for cultural heritage investigations** [7531-19]
J. A. Toque, Y. Murayama, A. Ide-Ektessabi, Kyoto Univ. (Japan)

SESSION 5  INTERACTIVE PAPER SESSION

7531 0L  **Integration of high-resolution spatial and spectral data acquisition systems to provide complementary datasets for cultural heritage applications** [7531-20]
C. Simon, Univ. de Bourgogne (France) and Mainz Univ. of Applied Sciences (Germany); U. Huxhagen, Mainz Univ. of Applied Sciences (Germany); A. Mansouri, Univ. de Bourgogne (France); A. Heritage, Cologne Univ. of Applied Sciences (Germany); F. Boochs, Mainz Univ. of Applied Sciences (Germany); F. S. Marzani, Univ. de Bourgogne (France)

7531 0M  **Color signatures in Amorsolo paintings** [7531-22]
M. N. Soriano, C. M. Palomero, Univ. of the Philippines (Philippines); L. Cruz, National Historical Institute (Philippines); C. M. K. Yambo, J. M. Dado, J. M. Salvador-Campaner, Univ. of the Philippines (Philippines)

7531 0N  **Analytical imaging of cultural heritage paintings using digitally archived images** [7531-23]
J. A. Toque, Y. Sakatoku, A. Ide-Ektessabi, Kyoto Univ. (Japan)
Multifractal comparison of the painting techniques of adults and children [7531-24]
J. R. Mureika, Loyola Marymount Univ. (United States); M. S. Fairbanks, R. P. Taylor, Univ. of Oregon (United States)

Author Index
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Daniel N. Rockmore, Dartmouth College (United States)
Robert Sablatnig, Technische Universität Wien (Austria)

Session Chairs

1 Digital Imaging and Art History
Jim Coddington, Museum of Modern Art (United States)

2 Image Reconstruction and 3D Imaging of Works of Art
David G. Stork, Ricoh Innovations, Inc. (United States)

3 Digital Imaging and Style
Anna Bentkowska-Kafel, King’s College London (United Kingdom)

4 Applied Art History and Image Analysis
Jim Coddington, Museum of Modern Art (United States)
Introduction

The technical conference Computer Vision and Image Analysis of Art was part of the IS&T/SPIE Electronic Imaging symposium, held at the San Jose Convention Center in California between January, 17th and 21st, 2010. The papers, demonstrations and posters presented at this larger symposium reflected the state of the art in three-dimensional visualization and multimedia, stereoscopic displays, computational photography, smart phone applications and much more. The future of image analysis applied to the visual arts should be considered in this wider context.

Computer methods have supported art analysis, interpretation, education and dissemination for over a quarter century. A number of collaborative projects carried out in the 1980s involved joint expertise of computer scientists and art historians; for instance the pioneering work enhancing visualization of space in Piero della Francesca’s paintings, led by Marilyn Aronberg Lavin; the IBM UK Scientific Centre work on Winchester Solid Modeller (WINSOM) for heritage visualization; and the Morelli content-based retrieval system for images, devised by William Vaughan and implemented in collection databases in the 1980s, subsequently incorporated into the VAN EYCK project (Visual Arts Network for Exchange of Cultural Knowledge). Projects of this kind paved the way for advanced techniques such as those presented in this volume.

Yet a different thread is computer-aided generation of art, such as Harold Cohen’s early work on the Aaron automated drawing program and A. Michael Noll’s computer generation of “faux” Mondrians. All of these shed light on compositional principles in the visual arts.

While documentation and visualization in support of curatorial efforts continues, in the last few years there has been an additional emphasis of computer researchers addressing problems in art: This newer work eschews its traditional supporting role for technical art history, and looks to the computer as an aid to analysis, to help make some of the decisions about an artwork. Thus, algorithms developed for forensic photography analysis now reveal subtleties in lighting within painted tableaux. These new algorithms employ subtle statistical analyses of brush strokes or dripped paint for authentication studies. Sophisticated optical ray-tracing analysis software applied to artists’ studios reveals whether or not such artists used optical devices. One of the benefits of these approaches is that they can be shared and scrutinized openly by a broad community of scholars.
Such points were stressed in the keynote address delivered by David M. Stone, Professor of Art History at the University of Delaware. He set a theme for the conference by proposing a new, computer-aided approach to connoisseurship. He spoke as if following the footsteps of eighteenth-century authors “on behalf of the science of a connoisseur” (Jonathan Richardson, 1717). This approach prioritizes visual evidence and focuses on formal features of art, rather than meaning, expression, personality or imagination, all of which are difficult to rationalize. Stone spoke of two nineteenth-century champions of connoisseurship, Giovanni Morelli (Italian Painters, 1890s) and Bernard Berenson (The Rudiments of Connoisseurship, 1894). Morelli’s method for identifying the work of individual hands was based on the comparative analysis of ears, eyes and other anatomical features of the depicted sitters. Berenson, who defined connoisseurship broadly as “the comparison of works of art with a view to determining their reciprocal relationship,” developed a theory based on Morelli’s approach. A number of papers included in this volume are concerned with digital methods for identification, authentication and attribution of an artwork (its technique, materials and composition) to artist, place or period. Some of these methods may be seen as a development stemming from a Morellian belief that characteristics of an individual artistic style can be separated from means of expression and therefore formalized, quantified and verified. The name given to the above-mentioned early pattern recognition system for computerized matching of art images was not accidental.

A reaction against the idea of connoisseurship as an academic pursuit, partly caused by Berenson himself, led to its long-term dormancy. In recent decades mainstream art historians have generally rejected formalist perspectives and have lost interest in the object in favor of iconography, social history, semiotics, psychoanalysis and other more theoretical approaches. Attribution and authentication have nonetheless remained a critical part of any scientific examination of art, especially in a museum context, and are paramount in art documentation, restoration and valuation. Technical art history, or heritage science, has emerged as a modern discipline that bridges traditional practical skills and scholarship with the latest developments in digital technologies. Electronic imaging, in particular, is proving invaluable in art analysis. This collection of papers presents case studies in application of laser- and structured-light scanning, x-rays, multimodal microscopy, spectral analysis and other techniques that allow for a better understanding of artifacts.

If computer science is to continue to support art analysis, we must ensure that the insights gained benefit both disciplines. This can only happen if and when research questions are formulated through dialogue and collaboration. Parallels
have been drawn, by David Ebitz in 1988 and others, between scientific enquiry and connoisseurship. We now need to connect a modern connoisseurship—one that makes full use of computer methods—to art history, and connect art history to the object. A virtual artifact may become a vehicle for mediating this process within the ever more popular collaborative virtual research environment (VRE), though computer methods and digital media can never, and will never, replace close reading of actual art works.

While the authors are grateful for the opportunity to present their research and have the papers published, we hope these proceedings will stimulate discussion and new collaborations between scholars in computer science and the arts.

We editors would like to thank all the contributors, reviewers, attendees, and the staff of IS&T/SPIE for making the conference a success, and we are especially glad that IS&T/SPIE recognize the value of the interdisciplinary research that appears in this volume.

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