

Sven Dupré and Christoph Herbert Lüthy, eds. *Silent Messengers: The Circulation of Material Objects of Knowledge in the Early Modern Low Countries*.

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Things are all the rage. Studies on material culture abound in anthropology, sociology, history, literary studies, art history, and history of science. Anthropologists argue for the entanglement of humans and the material world, perhaps none more eloquently than Tim Ingold, speaking of flows of matter and materials in place of bounded, discrete objects, as he attempts to break down the binary oppositions of subject and object and nature and culture. Bruno Latour and other writers on actor-network theory (ANT) argue for the agency of mute material objects and nonhuman entities, what they name quasi-objects, in the constitution of scientific facts and theories. In *We Have Never Been Modern*, Latour argues that the objects of science do not exist apart from human culture, but are instead entirely embedded within and constituted by that culture. He contends that the conventional mode of viewing the objects of science as pure nature, rather than as “nature-culture hybrids,” removes science and its objects from the sphere of questioning and political dispute. Another way to say this — inflected by the work of Nietzsche and Michel Foucault — is that knowledge always exists as one component of a knowledge-power amalgam, as true for scientific knowledge today as for humanists’ knowledge of the ancient corpus in the Renaissance. In order to understand the intellectual stakes of a scientific (or any knowledge) controversy, we must understand the social networks that form around the material and conceptual objects of knowledge; but because the knowledge of nature has been conceived to involve only matter and material nature, it has been difficult to recognize this.

Recent work in the history of science reflects these currents. It has been impelled in part by a desire to unmask science as the conceptual product not just of the minds of individual men, such as Copernicus, Kepler, and Newton, but also

of the bodies of women, artisans, and others. (Such a project of unmasking is happily no longer necessary among professional historians, however: among the general public, the view that great individuals make science still reigns almost unquestioned.) Much recent history of science focuses on the intellectual and social dynamics of networks and communities, sometimes following scientific actors around, charting their circulation around and among labs, workshops, and learned societies. There has been a flurry of activity on the circulation of knowledge (broadly conceived as objects, texts, practices, theories, information), tracing the transformations effected by its movement. This motion can be geographic, for example, between colony and metropole, or it might be epistemic, moving between different knowledge systems or social groups in a single locale. Many of these studies have been devoted to explicating the paths by which the knowledge of local informants is transformed by this movement into the universally certain knowledge of science. Often this local knowledge emerges out of engagement with matter and materials, but is transformed into objects of thought as it becomes science. The meter, for example, is a universal standard of measurement, a mathematical concept, a matter of societal consensus, but also an object. And these networks of circulation often emerge around objects, networks of commerce, collecting, readers, botanists, and so on. One of the foremost early modern networks, the Republic of Letters, converged around ideas, books, and letters, as well as objects of scientific interest.

Silent Messengers combines all these strands from recent history of science, and suggests many more areas of inquiry not just for scholars in that field, but also for art historians and cultural historians. All essays in the volume include some connection to the early modern Low Countries and all focus on “objects that in some way entered into the domain of knowledge claims” (1), but from there on, they diverge widely. Some essays focus on the geographic migration of measuring instruments, botanical specimens, and people between Spain and Flanders, while others chart the epistemic movement of, for example, mathematical knowledge in Leiden (which itself depended on gathering manuscripts in the Levant). A few emphasize individual movement, such as the travels of Cornelis Drebbel, his texts, perpetual motion device, and claims to natural knowledge, while others focus on the circulation of material objects of knowledge among communities of collectors, anatomists, and savants debating the powers of the dowsing rod. Many reveal how the meaning and power of objects changed as they moved between places and communities. One of these, Claus Zittel’s contention that posthumous illustrations to Descartes’s *Traité de l’homme* determined Descartes’s reputation as a mechanist, deserves close attention. In titling the collection *Silent Messengers*, the editors wished to emphasize their view that objects do not speak for themselves but instead acquire meaning as they move. In its focus on material objects of knowledge, the volume contributes much that is new and valuable to the effort of bringing together the intellectual and the material in the history of science.

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