

Book Review: Wicked Intelligence: Visual Art and the Science of Experiment in Restoration London

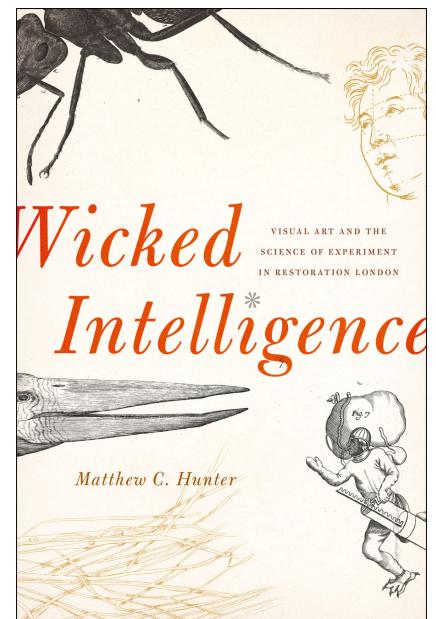
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*In late seventeenth-century London, the most provocative images were produced not by artists, but by scientists. Magnified fly-eyes drawn with the aid of microscopes, apparitions cast on laboratory walls by projection machines, cut-paper figures revealing the “exact proportions” of sea monsters—all were created by members of the Royal Society of London, the leading institutional platform of the early Scientific Revolution. **Wicked Intelligence** aims to reveal that these philosophers shaped Restoration London’s emergent artistic cultures by forging collaborations with court painters, penning art theory, and designing triumphs of baroque architecture such as St Paul’s Cathedral. Reviewed by **Alice Marples**.*

Wicked Intelligence: Visual Art and the Science of Experiment in Restoration London. Matthew C. Hunter. University of Chicago Press. October 2013.

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Restoration London is famous within British history for the bawdy behaviour of its population and their indulgent social attitudes towards culture, encompassing the ‘pendulum swing’ of society away from the previous decades’ puritanical morality. It was also the setting for the foundation of one of the world’s greatest scientific bodies, [The Royal Society](#) (est. 1660). The experimental-philosophers of the Society espoused ideals of empiricism and enlightened thinking, developing what would become our modern scientific method in a direct response to the corruption of human production they saw all around them. How, then, does the one relate to the other, and how might that influence our relationship with science in the present day? *Wicked Intelligence: Visual Art and the Science of Experiment in Restoration London* seeks to answer these questions and many more.

[Matthew C. Hunter](#) is part of an international network of academics across a number of disciplines and cultural institutions exploring the origins of our very visual modern science in terms of the link between practical and cognitive processes involved in the making of knowledge. This book contributes to a growing body of work concerned with exploring science within culture, and specifically interrogates the relationship between ‘art’ and ‘science’. The arguments it presents should be of great interest and use to students and scholars of art history, architecture and urban planning, sociology and philosophy (especially those concerned with scientific knowledge), anthropology and early modern history, as well as anyone interested in London’s history.

It offers the interpretive framework of ‘craft and craftiness’ to rethink discussion of scientific visual imagery in a way

that pays more attention to the evolving nature of the 'experimental entrepôt' of Restoration London. Rather than the usual picture of informative imagery attenuated by logic – commonly juxtaposed to the rich mimesis of the Renaissance *episteme* – what Hunter sees evolving in this period constitutes 'less a semiotically polarized epistemological field than intelligence fashioned and refashioned through manifold hybrid fusions of visualization techniques' (p.16). His emphasis is on spontaneous improvisation, cognitive and creative deconstructions, and the ways in which individuals drew on a number of different intelligences to supply the Royal Society with information. Managing such representational diversity was, according to Hunter, 'of fundamental practical and conceptual importance to the elite, polymathic figures who unpacked those transmissions in the capital' (p.18). Such figures are the focus of this work, and are used to explore the bricolage of techniques employed by members of the Royal Society, such as Robert Hooke and Christopher Wren.

'Wicked Intelligence', therefore, refers to the particular mode of 'ruthless cleverness' which experimental-philosophers developed in order to manage the many forms of visualisation, embodied by their images, objects, and spaces. It captures the ingenuity of such techniques as well as the ways in which London experimentalists courted shady reputations in their efforts to amass knowledge. By portraying the 'hurly-burly' involved in the creation of knowledge in early modern London – the ways in which the experimental-philosophers practised, organised and conceptualised their project – Hunter is able to outline an experimental visual practice which simultaneously disseminated and demolished the traditions of art and science upon which it was built.

In doing so, he succeeds in contributing important complications for the ubiquitous historical image of the polite gentleman 'scientist' of this period. He charts, instead, the ways in which these individuals handled the controversial union between 'Mechanical Hand' and 'Philosophical Mind' in an age where intellectual authority and social status was measured by its distance from manual labour. By focusing on the sprawling representation diversity created by the interrelated actions of drawing, collecting and building from around 1650 to 1720, Hunter seeks to demonstrate both the unprecedented dynamism and the dangers of early modern collaborative enterprise as it was manifested within – and understood through – those images, artefacts, and buildings produced by experimental-philosophers.

Two methodological chapters based on Hooke himself give the book its firm foundation, from which the myriad concerns of the subsequent chapters unfold. The first displaces assumptions regarding the cognitive force of Hooke's most famous publication, *Micrographia* (1665), by comparing the draughtsmanship with the 'fragmentary, tortured visual forms' of his later work (p.24). This is particularly successful with regards to his astronomical drawings, where Hooke's desperate struggle to portray invisible features such as the exploding instability at the centre of a comet emerges from a mess of scribbled information, deliberate smudges and perforated lines. The second intensifies this focus on Hooke's draughtsmanship uses a microhistorical approach to expand the explanatory possibilities found in one single object: a paper model of a telescopic micrometer, created by Hooke from a drawing in the fall of 1667. By describing the various conflicts surrounding the production of this model, and then discussing the problematic ontological relationship between this object and what contemporaries called 'art', Hunter fixes the notions of ad hoc problem-solving and conceptual shape-shifting at the heart of this study.

The subsequent chapters expand on these key themes within the realms of image, objects and architecture, each contributing to the overall narrative in a unique and exciting way. Of particular interest are chapters four and five, which directly with the ways in which the mobilisation and management of a 'philosophical army' increasingly conceptualised and discussed through visual forms. Chapter four explores the individual histories of a number of corresponding contributors from the Royal Society's network of agents, and plots their personal interests in making the representations against the experimental-philosopher's purposes for their production and collection. Chapter five expands upon this theme, and turns it towards the discussion of the wealth of weird and wonderful artefacts of material culture found in the Royal Society's Repository.

The processes by which individuals within the collective dealt with problems arising from the arbitration of such diverse forms are defined by Hunter as representing a philosophical model for cognition – 'the senses of the experimental body which would deliver ontologically fragile, unreliable objects to the centralised laboratory of the mind' (p.27). Information was there to be collected, questioned, reconfigured, and re-transmitted back out as knowledge. Hunter here produces the intriguing proposition that the Royal Society's infamous inability to effectively maintain their Repository or adequately look after the objects within it, is actually due to the fact that 'handling, disassembling, and remaking museum artefacts were *exactly* the kinds of procedures London's experimentalists would come to theorize as cognitive activities – indeed, as intelligence itself (p.177).

This book is vibrant and richly detailed, intellectually stimulating in its argument, and gives us an exciting glimpse of the future of truly interdisciplinary historical research. It certainly does deliver its promise to provide an 'unprecedented exploration of stunning cognitive techniques and stylized strategies through which London's experimentalists pursued knowledge.' (p.7) One can only hope that Hunter similarly succeeds in making the link

between the social construction of knowledge and method as important to the history of art and architecture as they are for the history and philosophy of science.

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