

Touching Visions

Afterword

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An exquisite double portrait from 1872 brings the themes of this special issue into focus (Fig. 1). It depicts Henry Fawcett (1833–1884), who had become blind as a result of an accident in early adulthood, accompanied by his wife Millicent, née Garrett (1847–1929).¹ They are both seated, her arm around his shoulders, their left hands entwined. His lowered eyelids and sunken eyes offer hints to viewers concerning his loss of sight. In any case, her protective arm and downward gaze alert us to her supportive role, perhaps as an amanuensis, given that paper and a writing implement are present. The picture, by the prominent artist Ford Madox Brown (1821–1893), offers a touching vision of care, companionship and coupledom. Beholders see the absence of sight. They apprehend not only the tactile qualities of paint, but the manner in which two gendered bodies are touching as well as textured materials, such as hair, clothing and upholstery fabric. To further direct viewers' attention to the nature of touch, the forefinger of Henry's right hand is extended as if he were about to touch the piece of paper that forms one of the bridges between the two figures. Since his lips are slightly parted, he might be emphasising a point.

This painting with its distinctive composition cannot help but be historically specific in capturing two prominent individuals at one moment in their lives; it was executed by an artist who was close to members of the Pre-Raphaelite

1 The painting (inventory number NPG 1603) entered the National Portrait Gallery in London following the death of Sir Charles Dilke, their friend and ally who had commissioned it, in 1911. It measures 108.6 cm by 83.8. There are twenty-three other portraits of Henry and fourteen of Millicent in the collection.

Brotherhood.² Brown's attention to precision might almost be deemed "scientific," a point that is perfectly consistent with the emphasis on nature and on realism amongst contemporaneous artists. The connection with science is biographical too. Henry Fawcett studied mathematics at the University of Cambridge, where he became Professor of Political Economy and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1882. This couple's only child, Philippa (1868–1948) was an outstanding mathematician; her many interests and accomplishments included teaching mathematics and educational administration, building on the major work of her mother as a leader of campaigns for women's suffrage. Her aunt Elizabeth Garrett Anderson (1836–1917) was the first woman to qualify in medicine in Britain—she too was a suffragist, active in public life.

Touch and vision are inseparable in this canvas as indeed they are in all artefacts, especially those that invite close attention by virtue of their beauty, skill and striking properties. Here clothes, hair, and flesh allow viewers' imagination to move between sight and touch in an explicit way, since it is widely understood that blind people become especially reliant on sound and touch in a world where they can also deploy their sense of smell. Further, portraits of married couples are especially likely to bring aspects of gender difference to the fore. Henry Fawcett displays a number of conventionally masculine features, including short receding hair and sombre attire. His academic gown is a further marker—in this period women could study but were not able to take full degrees at Cambridge. Millicent Garrett Fawcett cuts a feminine figure with her long hair, clothes with lace trimming and warm-toned skirt. We might characterise Ford Madox Brown's approach as forensic, evident in his drawings of family members and his preparatory studies for oil paintings. I use "forensic" here as a metaphor to convey a sense of precision and exactitude, which is crucial in legal settings and in any context where evidence has to be as rigorous as possible, such as knowledge of nature and the human body. Thus the very notion "forensic" is helpful since it points in the direction of both medicine and science, as do several of the articles included here. Defining these key categories in and through historical practice remains a challenge. One advantage of a focus on intersensoriality is that it invites a recognition of embodied experience in which gender necessarily plays a constitutive role. The point applies both to historical actors and to us as historians who are constantly integrating

2 Brown was not formally a member of the Brotherhood, although he is commonly referred to as a Pre-Raphaelite. Julian Treuherz's exhibition catalogue, *Ford Madox Brown: Pre-Raphaelite Pioneer* (London: Philip Wilson Publishers, 2011), 235, includes the portrait of the Fawcetts, where it is described as going "beyond portraiture into modern history painting," and the Fawcetts as "intellectual equals." *Ibid.*, 254–255.



FIGURE 1 Ford Madox Brown, *Henry Fawcett and Dame Millicent Fawcett*, 1872, oil on canvas, 108.6 × 83.8 cm, National Portrait Gallery, London
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an array of sensations, experiences, thoughts and feelings as we strive to make sense of the past. Readers will notice that over the course of this paragraph a shift has occurred between a number of levels, starting with the approach of one artist and features of his sitters, then moving on to broader issues for which a more abstract language is required. Such discourse is productively grounded in specific examples.

We bring these general points about intersensoriality, gender, science and historical practice into sharper focus through case studies such as the ones in this special issue and it is worth being explicit about why such an approach,

which can be characterised as integrative, is worthwhile. Much of the existing literature on the history of the senses proceeds through a mixture of generalisations and anecdotes, making broad claims about periodisation along the way. The concerted attention to particularities evident here is far from being the kind of mindless empiricism that historians are sometimes charged with practicing. To the contrary, as the invocation of Michael Baxandall in the introduction shows, carefully conceived case studies generate types of specificity that enable analytical levels to be convincingly linked together, stepwise. It is not lost on historians of science that “empiricism,” one of the features that at some times and places has underwritten the authority of “science,” has a crucial place in their own practices, which need to do full justice to the people, ideas and activities under scrutiny. Other fields—the history of art, for example—must operate with comparable attentiveness and be similarly explicit about its conceptual moves. In these respects Michael Baxandall was a master. One of the thrusts of his work is the value of attending to practices of looking and the ways these arise from and are connected to other contemporaneous activities, such as gauging, dancing and preaching, that is, to activities that involve many senses at once. It is a manner of thinking about practice that is also well-established in the history of science, present here in the meticulous case studies of contributors, whether they focus on a person, an artefact such as a book, a building, an experiment or a cross-cultural encounter. The result is the presence of a node in each chapter, a dense conceptual cluster, capable of acting as both counterbalance and underpinning to generalisations, especially those that are commonly made concerning gender or the senses, and that rely on a sketchy sense of prevailing mentalities. Case studies act not only to reveal historical complexity, but as occasions for testing broad claims, examining the evidence and inferences deployed as well as the conceptual scaffolding that may be as much implicit as explicit. We might say that such focused attention enables historians to be forensic, by paying attention to detail without losing sight of the argument it serves.

One relevant instance of implicit assumptions, here elevated to a theme demanding careful consideration, is the nature of metaphor, raised in the introduction along with the injunction that historians need to read sources with a literary imagination. It might be added that it useful to scrutinise our own prose with the same points in mind. As Hansun Hsiung has noted, I have found the notion of somatic affinity useful when examining the ways in which items of visual and material culture touch people.³ “Affinity” offers an idiom for think-

3 In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes used “punctum” to evoke the way in which a particular ele-

ing about subtle forms of connection as well as more palpable types of kinship. In the case of portraits it is clear that they invite beholders to grasp and interpret expressions, gestures and postures by drawing on their own experience as embodied beings who depend on the skills required to “read” bodies. Every article in this special issue explores the point. Such readings necessarily involve the senses, although they often occur without conscious deliberation. The contributors have deployed rich, diverse forms of evidence that permit these processes to be pulled into focus, thereby encouraging critical scrutiny. In each contribution the human body takes centre stage. And in several instances the broader framework is as much religious as it is what might be called scientific. This comes as no surprise since organised religions not only engage the sensory responses of participants, but do so within a framework that structures, we might say coordinates, touch and vision, indeed all the senses, to affirm specific understandings of the world, within which gender play a central role. As does that phenomenon we call “science.” Historians, and historians of science in particular, search for ways of grasping these complexities.

Take, for example, fingerprints, where touch is essential if the visual evidence they constitute is to be usable. Since the advent of fingerprinting and especially its deployment in criminal investigation, we have a commonly understood model of the relationships between touch and vision. So much so that the metaphorically-rich idea of a person’s fingerprints being all over something has become a familiar way of thinking about cause and effect. In fact this mode of thought had been well-established within Christianity centuries earlier as we know from claims that a footprint of the Virgin Mary existed and was to be venerated, for example. The story of Veronica’s handkerchief or veil, wiping the sweat from Christ’s face as he was carrying the cross, thereby capturing his portrait, offers another instance. And looking at and touching a relic was deemed efficacious because the relic in turn had been in direct physical contact with a holy person.⁴ Body parts themselves were frequently treated as relics. Such world views and belief systems underpin the historical phenomena that contributors discuss. While this comes as no surprise given our familiarity with the centrality of cosmologies, whether secular or religious, for scientific and medical endeavours, it does reaffirm the value of studies that operate at a number of analytical levels all at once and that are generously contextualised.

ment within a photograph can touch us, grip our attention. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981) originally published as *La chambre claire: note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980).

4 Cf. Marco Beretta, Maria Conforti and Paolo Mazzarello, eds., *Savant Relics: Brains and Remains of Scientists* (Sagamore Beach, MA: Science History Publications, 2016).

Philosophical models of mind–body relationships, like conceptualisations of the senses, are in dynamic interaction with social hierarchies that are played out in a range of settings, which historians laboriously reconstruct. Gender is present everywhere in the past as it is in historians' own formations, assumptions and practices. In the third decade of the twenty-first century, it is possible to take these general points as read, while it remains essential to add to the case studies through which we apprehend, in detail, precisely how these matters have worked in practice in a range of times and places, enabling explicitly comparative analysis. Precisely the same can be said about the senses—we understand their constitutive status, but are continually enriched by studies that contextualise, compare and conceptualise their historicity, most particularly with respect to the production of knowledge that they enable.

Ways of knowing, then, is a theme that runs through this special issue. The interplay between touch and sight as foundational for knowledge comes to the fore most obviously in certain fields and domains, such as the whole array of activities we tend to lump together as “medical.” It also arises in connoisseurship, collecting and museum studies. Students are taught how to handle artefacts and not just to ensure their safety but to build up a tactile repertoire that enables them to understand better how they are made and used. In fact, this repertoire is composed of a *mélange* of vision and touch and may well involve sound and smell. Such instruction is all the more important since in most museums touch is strictly forbidden. Thus sight becomes a proxy for touch. It is not possible to run fingers over paintings with *impasto* to feel the thickness and contours of paint, hence careful, attentive looking must take its place. In undertaking such intense visual inspection, constant translation is occurring between the senses. Because the stakes are so high when it comes to highly-valued artefacts that cannot be handled, it is no surprise that historians who study them devise ways of writing that restore, in so far as words accompanied by pictures can do so, their haptic qualities. I am suggesting that touch, vision and the other senses can hardly be separated, and further that those fields in which their commingling is especially significant can be valuable helpmeets for historians of science and medicine.

This special issue, then, provides food for thought and not just through the rich case studies that they provide. Taken together these contributions affirm some broad points about the value of scholarship that is open-minded with respect to methods, sources, approaches, conceptual frameworks, types of evidence and the times and places we take to be most relevant to our own practices. Far from being a specialist area, the study of gender infuses everything we do and it is to be hoped that it is no longer necessary to make the case for its centrality in all historical practice. Just the same might be said about the senses

as a productive optic for historians, although it remains unintegrated into many historical approaches. Another, rather different theme emerges from the materials presented here—the intricate and labile relationships between the history of science and the history of medicine. Separate professional organisations and learned journals notwithstanding, it is arguable that they are inherently entwined. People laboriously make science and practice healing through their minds and bodies, doing so in ways that are moulded by prevailing habits, conventions, hierarchies and modes of thought. “Medicine” broadly defined is a major zone for exploring human existence—it cannot be separate from “science,” however much we stress changing forms of professionalisation, the power of institutions and political interests in the health of populations. It is not necessary to keep inventing new sub-disciplines, such as the history of the body, in order to appreciate the value of historiographies that are what we might call integrative. In stressing what the contributions have in common, I am not arguing for new specialisms, but simply pointing out that the nature of embodied experience runs through them all. In uniting touch, sight, gender, science and medicine through immersive case studies, this special issue exemplifies the theme of integration: it invites readers to comment and critique, to modify and extend what is presented here.