

A Material World

As a group, the disciplines that make up the humanities are often considered rather heady and immaterial, and for a time in the late 20th century, this was especially true. As Caltech history and literature professor John Brewer, the Eli and Edye Broad Professor of Humanities and Social Sciences, says, “Everybody was interested in what everything symbolized, which was rather abstract and metaphysical and linguistic.” But now humanists are coming to see a more down-to-earth aspect of their work. A painting by Leonardo da Vinci, for all its intangible meaning, is, as Brewer points out, “made up of linseed oil, wood, and paint, and an enormous amount of effort goes into conserving it, making sure that it’s okay as a tangible object.”

In recognition of this new focus on materiality, or the physical mediums of objects studied in the humanities, Caltech and the Huntington Library, home to the largest and most competitive fellowship program in the humanities in the United States, have joined forces to create Materialities, Texts, and Images (MTI). A two-year interdisciplinary pilot program, MTI will examine the role the material plays in the subject matter of the humanities disciplines by bringing two visiting associates to town, one with an office at Caltech, the other with an office at the Huntington, just a few blocks from campus. Midway through the year, they will swap locations. This spring and summer, each postdoc will design a workshop featuring speakers from a variety of different disciplines to discuss what happens to humanities research when one concentrates on materiality.

This year’s associates, selected with an eye to their differences rather than similarities, are Alexander Wragge-Morley, a historian of science looking at the interplay of science, art, medicine, and literature in late 17th- and 18th-century Britain, and Stefanie Sobelle, an English professor examining the overlap of literature and architecture in 20th-century America.—*CE*