

José Beltran
***Scribal Scholars: Information Management and Imperial Natural History
in 17th and 18th Century France***

Guest lecture: Saturday 26 May 2018, 3 p.m.

Venue: Faculty's Main Hall

Abstract

Most of the traditional, positivist narratives in the history of science stood upon the fateful concurrence of two revolutions that lay at the roots of European modernity: the “Scientific Revolution” and the “print revolution.” The story went as follows: by allowing scholars to leave behind scribal forms of reproduction, deemed intrinsically corruptive, the novel technology of print allowed doubts to develop on ancient authority and thus paved the way for new forms of learning about the natural world. Both so-called revolutions have been actively dismantled by the historiography over the last thirty years or so, and yet much is still unknown about the unquestionable endurance of manuscript culture among European savants long after the impact of print. Deemed empiricists par excellence, naturalists were actually paper masters: they took and managed notes and observation records, cut and pasted from printed books, read “pen in hand, acquired and even plundered archives. Doing natural history in early modern Europe was about handling paper just as much as it was about observing, collecting, experimenting, authoring books, or corresponding with peers. In the history of early modern global science, a vast a varied world of scribal practices lurked below the neat surface of print culture.

In this presentation, I will look at some examples of manuscript artifacts as well as quotidian scribal practices in the work of European naturalists during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. Mining principally the exciting and largely overlooked holdings of the Muséum national d’histoire naturelle in Paris, I will attempt to address in particular these scholars’ efforts to gather and stockpile a knowledge of the wider world’s nature with the deceptively simple tools of ink and paper.

Brief Biographical Note

José Bertrand is a lecturer (*attaché temporaire d’enseignement et de recherche*) at the École normale supérieure at the rue d’Ulm in Paris, where he teaches early modern history and the history of science. He recently obtained a PhD from the European University Institute with a dissertation that attempted to trace the story of botanist Charles Plumier’s iconographic archive, from its partial composition in the West Indies at the end of the seventeenth century to its multiple appropriations through Europe during the early nineteenth century. He is currently working on a new project on the role that scribal and archival practices played in naturalists’ daily work during the eighteenth century. Before coming to the ENS, he has held visiting positions at HPS,

Cambridge University, and the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science in Berlin, and worked during short-term periods at the CSIC in Madrid and Columbia University.

Organizer

Doctoral Programme in Premodern History, Department of History