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ABSTRACT

Electrotypes of Historic Metalware Objects in the Collections of Museums for the Applied Arts of the Nineteenth and the Beginning of the Twentieth Century (working title)

In the second half of the nineteenth century, countless electrotypes were becoming part of the collections of the museums for the applied or decorative arts. Based on a mould, electrotypes allowed an easy and even serial reproduction of objects that had previously been made by hand. The process had been invented following a scientific observation of the late eighteenth century, but attracted a more widespread attention due to the industrialisation. In the nineteenth century it became important for the newly founded museums of applied arts: In order to encourage both the traditional crafts and the budding industrial design, these institutions sought to acquire – often encyclopaedic – collections of objects that could serve as models both for the study of techniques and of formal solutions.

Electrotypes provided a means of acquiring metalwork objects that were hardly available otherwise – metalwork objects of all descriptions were generally expensive, and the acknowledged masterpieces preserved in church treasuries and princely collections were difficult to access. Introducing reproductions into their collections, the museums transferred and adapted an industrial technology to their purposes; on the other hand, the availability of reproductions had a strong impact on the use of the collections and of individual objects within the museums.

The project aims at analysing the collecting, handling and use of electrotypes in the museums of applied arts in the nineteenth century, and at reviewing the transnational discourse (both professional and public) developed in this context. In particular, I propose to study the aims and strategies that defined collecting practices, and the effects of transfer processes between industrial technology and museums. With a view to the objects, the study will consider materiality and its perception both in historic objects and in their reproductions.