

Call for Papers

University of Delaware's 5th CMCS Triennial Conference in Material Culture

April 2-3, 2027

“The Matter of Description: History, Theory, and Practice in Material Culture Studies”

Keynote Speaker

**Susan Stewart
(Princeton University)**

Long considered a distinctive concern for literary specialists, description in fact informs all the arts and humanities and, no doubt, the natural sciences as well. Any object of inquiry—from texts to paintings to other modes of representation or from raw materials to consumer goods or from stars to dark matter—requires some level of description. While description has been and remains a mainstay of Western reflective thought, its valence has fluctuated over time, with some thinkers finding description to be paralyzing or pedantic, extraneous, misleading, even deceptive, and generally unwelcome. Others, reflecting on description specifically in relation to material culture studies, theorized description as a kind of second substance through which we make sense of objects, “reality reconstituted,” as T.H. Breen put it, whereas Jules Prown thought that textual description was, inescapably, the thing itself.

The symposium, “The Matter of Description,” welcomes submissions from all disciplines concerned with description and the way it interacts with material culture. Papers should offer new perspectives on questions regarding the powers and practices of description, including—perhaps especially—those times when we take descriptions for granted and let them stand unexamined. On the one hand, how does the description of an object inform and transform what can be grasped of it? On the other hand, is there a uniquely material culture approach to description, one that takes material agency seriously and presumes an iterative relationship between describer and described?

Topics may include (but are not limited to) to one or more of the following themes:

• **Histories of Description**

Ekphrasis, Realism, Mimesis, *Ut Pictura Poesis* and the Imitation of Nature, Word and Image

• **Missions of Description**

Expeditions, Experiments, First Descriptive Encounters, Taxonomies and Classification, Collecting and Archiving, Laws and other Codes, Memorialization, Education

• Protocols of Description

The Camera Eye, Impressionistic Description, Thick Description, Processual Description, Translation, Rules, Textbooks, Witness and Meditation, Memory and Remembering

• Media of Description

Oral Traditions, Personal Records, Print, Visual Media, Diagrams, Schematics and Maps, Photography and Film, Audio Media, Data Visualization

• Ethics of Description

Observational Objectivity, Phenomenological and Hermeneutic Approaches, Colonial and Imperial Gaze, Reparative Description, Politics of Description

Please send abstracts of max. 300 words, with brief CV of no more than two pages, by **July 15, 2026** to Martin Brückner (mcb@udel.edu) and Sandy Isenstadt (isnt@udel.edu). The conference takes place on April 2-3, 2027, at the University of Delaware and the Winterthur Museum, DE.