

UC SANTA BARBARA

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UCSB Art History Ph.D. Student Receives Rare Book School Fellowship

For her dissertation project, Sophia Rochmes, a doctoral student in the history of art and architecture at UC Santa Barbara, is researching 15th-century manuscripts in ducal and noble libraries of present-day France and Belgium. She will be assisted in her work through a fellowship awarded by Rare Book School (RBS) at the University of Virginia.

Rochmes is one of 20 early-career scholars to be recognized through the Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship of Scholars in Critical Bibliography program, which aims to reinvigorate bibliographical studies within the humanities. The 20 RBS-Mellon Fellows were selected from a field of 250 applicants in the humanities, affiliated with institutions throughout the United States.

The fellows will receive advanced, intensive training in the analysis of textual artifacts. Led by a distinguished faculty drawn from the bibliographical community and professionals in allied fields, fellows will attend annual research-oriented seminars at Rare Book School and at major special collections libraries nationwide. They will receive stipends to support research-related travel to special collections, and additional funds to host academic symposia at their home institutions.

"This is the first year Rare Book School has offered the fellowship, and I think it's a fantastic model, encouraging those in academia to learn alongside archivists, curators, and antiquarians. We not only supplement our more theoretical academic training with practical knowledge, we also form broader connections with people outside our field who are working with the same objects but approaching them with different questions, methods, and knowledge bases," Rochmes said.

Founded in 1983, RBS provides continuing education opportunities for students from all disciplines and levels to study the history of written, printed, and born-digital materials with leading scholars in the field. RBS moved to its present home at the University of Virginia in 1992.

As an art historian, Rochmes is primarily concerned with the images in the 15th-century manuscripts that are the focus of her dissertation project. In order to contextualize them, however, she searches for evidence in how books were used by their original owners. "The RBS seminars will help me identify what a book's format, its structure, its binding, its signs of use, or its inventory description can tell us about reading practices," she said.

She considers manuscripts as physical embodiments of the relationship a bookmaker -- or artist or a scribe -- has with his patron, a function the books display through their very format and structure. "I'm interested in the ways the bookmaker inscribes a book with reminders of his presence, his intellect, and his creativity," Rochmes explained. "For example, through the use of inventive formats, labyrinths and rebuses, self-portraits, and falsely modest declarations of his work of composing and/or translating a work -- all common motifs in 14th- and 15th-century court manuscripts."

Finally, Rochmes said, the fellowship will provide the training she needs to realize two long-term goals: to integrate book history and art history into her teaching career, and to develop a collaborative program at her future academic home, akin to UCSB's Material Texts Group, in order to foster ongoing interdepartmental conversations and promote the study of book history across disciplinary divides.

"Book history tends to be the domain of history and English departments," she said, "but books are so much a part of visual culture. They ought to be considered alongside paintings, sculpture, and other visual arts."

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