Building a Virtual Renaissance Library:  
Julius II’s Stanza della Segnatura

Coordinator
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Outside Advisors
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Special Guests
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Summary

Students in this collaboratory will research, design, and build a digital reconstruction, in virtual reality, of the library of Julius II (b. 1443-d. 1513), the Renaissance pope and patron of Michelangelo and Raphael. This library was housed in the Vatican Palace room covered by frescoes painted by Raphael between 1509 and 1511 for Julius, now known as the Stanza della Segnatura. The main frescoes depict gatherings of great polymaths from Greek antiquity to the Julius’ time, from Homer and Plato to Gregory the Great and Raphael himself. The frescoes' themes—Philosophy, Poetry, Theology, and Jurisprudence—pictorially synthesize relationships between these four major disciplines from the period. Surviving inventories demonstrate that Julius collected books from all these fields. The collaboratory’s external faculty advisor Tracy Cosgriff has identified almost two hundred extant books that had been kept in the Stanza as part of the Julian library, most in the Vatican Library today.

We have chosen ten of these books in order to demonstrate the broad universe of knowledge created by Julius' library in the Stanza. The selected books were written between the fourth century BCE and the sixteenth century CE, by authors ranging from Aristotle to Julius’ own librarian and biographer Lorenzo Parmenio. They treat subjects spanning the spectrum of Renaissance humanist learning from canon law to poetry, ethics to history. The books vary as physical objects: some are heavy folio volumes while one, less than seven inches tall, can be easily held aloft in one hand. Nonetheless all the books show how important the library was: many are exquisitely illuminated with miniatures and border decorations, and all were once beautifully bound.
This collaboratory will explore Julius II’s polymathic library in two intersecting approaches. Along an art history-material culture-literature axis, you will learn about manuscript production and book history by analyzing books in USC Libraries’ Special Collections. You will also learn about the selected authors and texts, as well as late medieval and Renaissance practices of book collection and reading. Finally, you will find correlations between these books kept in the Stanza, and the pictures painted on that room’s walls. Along an interactive media-game design-digital fabrication axis, you will iteratively model the Stanza and its paintings, mock up shelves and create digital assets for each of the ten books. When selected, each asset could virtually exit the shelf and open to reveal your work describing the book, its author, its current location and its ties to Raphael’s frescoes.

These interpretative axes together transform the Stanza’s built environment into a commensurate digital stage. Raphael’s paintings are famous for their use of Albertian perspective – Renaissance painting’s contribution to the modeling of three-dimensional space. As we study the mechanics of Renaissance perspective, we will also consider its theoretical applications and legacy using digital tools to build a 3D model of the Stanza’s walls and contents. Furthermore, as we engage both virtual and material objects to categorize, process, store, and generate knowledge, you will be prepared for further urgent discussions about what a library has been, is now and will be.

Skills

While all students should apply, we are looking for at least one or two students with particular skills in 3D modeling, Unity3D, and VR development.

Meeting Time

This collaboratory will meet on select Wednesdays from 12:30pm – 2:00pm throughout Fall 2019 (Sept. 25; Oct. 16; Oct. 30; Nov. 13; Nov. 20; Dec. 4). The Spring 2020 schedule will be determined in consultation with participating students.