Melissa Alexander

Travel Report

Thanks to the generous support of the Robert Baldick Memorial Prize I was able to travel to Paris to attend the Third International Conference of the French Society for Modernist Studies. This event, which took modernist objects as its central theme, further stimulated my own research into the significance of objects in Virginia Woolf’s oeuvre by featuring the most current scholarly research on modernism’s relationship to objects and demonstrating the efficacy of object-oriented methodology in enlivening literary criticism and illuminating key facets of modernism. The seven panels I attended took for their subject a wide array of object types (such as the textile, the prosthetic, furniture and fragments) treated from a variety of perspectives, ranging from the aesthetic, the economic to the ontological. Not only did the conference papers on modernist authors persuasively establish that objects were crucial to the practice of modernists across the twentieth-century – helping me to recognize where Woolf’s use of objects links to, and diverges from, the wider praxes of her contemporaries – but the panellists also thoughtfully engaged with the challenges and potential of this burgeoning area of literary studies.

Since I am in the early stages of writing up my DPhil research, this conference was a wonderful opportunity to hear about upcoming publications on modernist objects and to develop research networks with other scholars in my field which is (as yet) still fairly niche. As an international forum, I had the exciting opportunity to discover how my research findings intersected with the findings of scholars from universities in France, the United States, Canada as well as the UK. Through the conference, I made plans to collaborate with other researchers on themes that align, and pose useful contrasts to, my own work. For example, I spoke about my own research into Bloomsbury applied arts with a panellist who gave an exciting paper on the Omega Workshops and domestic modernism and later discussed how Bloomsbury art objects stand out against the aesthetics of continental Bauhaus with another expert in that field. During the conference dinner I was also able to discuss my research with keynote speaker Douglas Mao, whose works have been formative to the development of my thesis and who is an outstanding expert in the field of modernist objects. Many of the papers directly tied into the topics I plan to engage in my thesis. For example, the conference’s focus on ordinary objects and their social relations has helped me to better contextualize the second chapter of my thesis (which I am currently writing up) on Woolf’s deployment of everyday objects.

Following this conference, I have the tools and networks to more effectively carry out my research and a better sense of how my research can be situated in the scholarly field. Meeting the panellists gave further impetus to my work and I am grateful to Pembroke College for this valuable learning experience. The Robert Baldick Memorial Prize was essential to my ability to gain the information, knowledge and confidence to more assertively articulate what is distinctive about my approach to Virginia Woolf and objects and how object studies enrich the literary field.