

Back to the bolts? Engaging materially in a globalizing discipline

Organizers:

Jonas van der Straeten, Eindhoven University of Technology

Josh Grace, University of South Carolina

Especially since the cultural turn, attention to technical details has rarely topped the list of quality criteria for academic work in the history of technology. In this session, we argue that technical details matter more than ever for a field that aspires to become more globally and socially inclusive. Recent scholarship has shown how close attention to the specifics of situated material practices around the world can destabilize Western-centric innovation narratives. Such practices of making, repairing, and repurposing are not mere acts of copying or appropriating ideas and objects developed elsewhere and subsequently inscribed; they must instead be understood as creative acts on their own terms. However, these material details often remain invisible—both in official archives and within the English-language technological lexicon. In this session, we therefore explore and discuss unconventional methods for recovering and incorporating such practices into historical investigation—for example, through participant observation, technical apprenticeship, experimental archaeology, and design research. We invite scholars who have experimented with such methods to share their experiences and to discuss them as a possible way forward for a globalizing discipline.