VERNIX: an online database of historical varnish recipes

http://www.citedelamusique.fr/vernix

For centuries, transparent organic coatings have been used on artefacts made of wood, paper, leather, metal, paint, to protect their from moisture, wear, dust or to enhance their visual appearance, by modifying the colour, gloss and chatoyancy of their surface.

The VERNIX database enables browsing and searching hundreds through historical varnish recipes. It is an evolutive online tool to contribute to Art Technological research for the varnish materials and preparation processes.

Features and structure

Features
more than 350 recipes
online open-access
multi-lingual simple/advanced search
thesaurus-based
links to other digital libraries/ressources

Searchable terms
The modern French term is used as the authority. It is associated with ancient synonyms found in the recipes, and with its translation in modern European languages.

Thesaurus
→ Advanced cross-search among ingredients, preparation processes, objects to be varnished.

Content

Sources
Among the 17 perused sources, are the Marciana, Paduan and Brussels manuscripts*, the Bonnani (incl. the 1723 French edition), Armenini, Guidotti treatises, Turquet de MAYERNE, POMET, Volpato*, Le Pileur d’Apligny, Hackert works, etc.

From Merrifield (1849)

Repartment of 368 recipes vs. their date and geographic origin

Examples

Oil-based or solvent-based?
Solvent-based recipes became predominant through time. This trend may be linked to the developments of distillation for other uses than pharmaceutical.

Type of varnishes vs. date of the recipes

«Oil-Pinaceae resin» varnishes
Most varnishes on 16th-18th c. lutes and violins are mixtures of a drying oil and a Pinaceae resin*. The search for corresponding/compatible recipes in the VERNIX database resulted in 15 recipes. In 7 of which, the [oil:resin] ratio is indicated, and varies from [1:3] to [2:1]. On-going research for quantitative chemical analysis to determine [oil:resin] ratios in historical varnishes and reconstructions.

Future improvements
The VERNIX database is open for suggestions. One aim is to develop collaborations to improve this online tool:
- improve the (multilingual) thesaurus
- input on accessibility and database organisation
- input of more historical sources/recipes (German origin in particular)