Abstract:

By the 1850s London had evolved into the primary location in the broader European market for antiques and curiosities. The London trade, the dealers and their antique and curiosity shops, were an important nexus in the supply of historical objects. It was through these new spaces of commercial exchange that historical material was woven into new and distinctive patterns of consumption.

Within London, Wardour Street in particular was invested with discrete social and functional connotations. Wardour Street attracted scores of dealers and a number of significant collectors, such as Ralph Bernal (c.1783-1854), regularly undertook pilgrimage to this important site. Descriptions of Wardour Street consistently appear in contemporary accounts of the antique and curiosity shop, it figures in trade literature, descriptive reports of visitors to London and is a constant presence in letters and exchanges between dealers and collectors. Indeed, by the 1850s Wardour Street had become a metonym for the antique and curiosity trade itself, with assessments of its identity oscillating between its pragmatic benefit to collectors as a primary source of authentic historical material and its problematic status as a signer for the spurious and the inauthentic, exemplifying the tension between the objectives of the collector seeking the legitimate object and the problematic associations that often arose as a result of the commercial mode of acquisition.

About the speaker:

Dr. Mark Westgarth is lecturer in art history and museum studies in the School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies and the University of Leeds. He is Programme Director for the BA History of Art with Museum Studies and Deputy Director of the Centre for Critical Studies in Museums, Galleries and Heritage at the University of Leeds. His research is focused on the histories of the art market and the agency of the dealer; his is author of A Biographical Dictionary of 19th Century Antique and Curiosity Dealers (RFS 2009), and ‘Florid-looking Speculators in Art and Virtu’: the London Picture Trade c.1850’. in Pamela Fletcher & Anne Helmreich (eds.) The Rise of the Modern Art Market in London, 1850-1950, (Manchester University Press, 2011); and his latest book, The Emergence of the Antique and Curiosity Dealer 1815-1850: the commodification of historical objects is due to be published early 2012.