Session at Int. Congress on Medieval Studies (Kalamazoo, 12–15 May 2016)

University of Western Michigan, Kalamazoo, May 12–15, 2016
Deadline: Sep 15, 2015

Ittai Weinryb

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Rethinking the Wearable in the Middle Ages

Organizers:
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Elizabeth Williams (Dumbarton Oaks Museum, Washington DC)

Covering, protecting, and adorning the body count among the most fundamental of human concerns, at once conveying aspects of an individual's persona while also situating a person within a given social context. Wearable adornment encompasses materials fashioned by human hands (like fabric, metalwork, or even animal bones) and modifications to the body itself (such as tattoos, cosmetics, or hairstyles), which beautify the body while simultaneously conveying social, political and protective functions and meanings. The wearable is thus the most representational and at the same time most intimate product of material culture.

This session seeks to expand our current understanding of the wearable in the Middle Ages. Current scholarship on the topic in western medieval, Byzantine, and Islamic traditions tends to encompass clothing and jewelry, and is frequently medium-specific, with minimal regard to the interrelatedness of different aspects of appearance. On the one hand, work on medieval textiles has tended to approach questions of identity, consumption, and appearance by comparing textual sources and visual depictions with surviving textiles. The study of medieval jewelry, on the other hand, largely focuses on the classification and attribution of precious metal pieces from excavations and museum collections, as scholars make sense of pieces long removed from the bodies they once adorned. Tattoos, prosthetics, cosmetics and headgear are almost entirely absent in our understandings of medieval dress practices. This separation was not always so, however, and indeed nineteenth-century art historians such as Gottfried Semper integrated all aspects of bodily adornment in their considerations of the nature of ornamentation and surface decoration.

In this session we would like to reimagine the wearable in similarly holistic terms. Bringing together varied forms and different media will help scholars better understand how the surfaces of medieval bodies not only presented social values and norms, but also operated within a designated spatial enviroment. In rethinking the wearable in the Middle Ages, this session has four

major aims:

1. The session seeks papers that look past field- and medium-specific divisions to explore the relationship of textiles and jewelry in medieval dress practices in western medieval, Byzantine, and Islamic traditions.

2. The session welcomes presentations that consider cosmetic elements often omitted from discussions of dress. These might include makeup, tattooing, amulets, prosthetics, and any other modifications to personal appearance.

3. The session seeks papers that situate dressed bodies in their spatial contexts, particularly topics addressing medieval notions of personal space and the relationship of bodies to their surroundings.

4. The session also seeks papers on issues of medium-specificity and materiality, as concerns that arise directly from questions regarding the wearable. Papers dealing with the centrality or marginality of image-making within the practice of the wearable, as well as the reception of the wearable as part of a sensory experience are also welcomed.

DEADLINE FOR PAPER PROPOSALS: 15 September 2015

Paper proposals should consist of the following:
1. Abstract of proposed paper (300 words maximum)
2. Completed Participant Information Form available at: http://wmich.edu/medieval/congress/submissions/index.html#Paper
3. CV with home and office mailing addresses, e-mail address, and phone number

ALL PROPOSALS AND INQUIRIES SHOULD BE DIRECTED TO:
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Reference:

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