

Knowledge, Symbolics and Uses of Gold in Europe (1450-1550)

Deadline: Jan 31, 2025

Romain Thomas

Edited peer-reviewed Volume: Renaissance in Gold. Knowledge, Symbolics and Uses of a Versatile Material in Europe (1450-1550)

The Renaissance appears as a pivotal period in the history of gold in Europe. Conversely, the uses of gold have been seen as pivotal in the definition of the Renaissance. Indeed, art historians have made gold an emblematic material of medieval painting, abandoned precisely from the fifteenth century onwards. In 1942, Max J. Friedländer (*On Art and Connoisseurship*) described gold as a substance unsuited to the new paradigm of illusionism, and for this very reason abhorred by the most innovative painters. According to Friedländer, gold had moved from the pictorial surface to its margins – the frame. Thirty years later, Michael Baxandall (*Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*) approached the question from the perspective of social history, arguing that the Renaissance was a time when patrons' interest in the sheer opulence of the materials gradually shifted towards a more pressing concern for technical skills. Furthermore, Baxandall associated this crucial moment to broader issues in the history of the uses of gold in Europe. Linking these dynamics with a wider phenomenon, rooted in a complex interplay of social, economic and cultural changes, he referred to the decline of certain practices of social display (for example, clothes enriched with precious metals), and also pointed out that gold, which until then had been traded from Africa, circulated less abundantly in fifteenth-century Europe.

Recent research has shown that the historical landscape of the knowledge, symbolism and uses of gold in the Renaissance period deserves to be appreciated in a more nuanced way. For instance, some renewals appear in the uses of gold in painting and sculpture, or continuities with medieval practices. As demonstrated by a series of masterpieces executed by inventive artists ranging from Donatello, Verrocchio and Raphael to Rembrandt and Vermeer, gold was not completely abandoned in the artworks during the early modern era. Gold as a prestigious material still mattered, as illustrated by the well-known summit of the Field of the Cloth of gold (1520), where King Francis I of France and King Henry VIII of England symbolically competed through the display of wealth, or by the nascent myth of the El Dorado. It must also be remembered that, with the arrival of American gold in the mid-sixteenth century, and the new dominance of the Spanish peso as a currency of exchange in Europe (largely replacing the florin and ducat in international trade relations), this period also witnessed changes in the circulation of precious metals and the relationship between currencies.

In adopting a multidisciplinary perspective (e.g. history, art history, heritage science, literature, philosophy), this volume aims to understand the uses and meanings of gold as it pervades all areas of European societies, on a methodologically restricted time-frame (1450-1550). It intends to

move beyond traditional research, so as to map out the social and cultural dynamics of this precious and versatile material in Renaissance Europe.

We will welcome innovative proposals, that may address (but should not be limited to) some of the following topics:

- Practical and theoretical knowledge on gold: metallurgy, alchemical practices, humanist thought.
- Continuity and renewal of myths and sacred themes associated with gold and radiance (e.g. the myth of Danaë ; Pentecost etc.).
- New approaches on the economic history of gold (related to e.g. provenance, trade, monetary history).
- Gold craftsmen (e.g. goldsmiths, goldbeaters, gilders), their regulations and mutual relations.
- The artistic uses of gold (goldsmithing, sculpture, illumination, engraving, tapestry, painting, etc.) through, for instance, case studies on the versatility of this malleable material.
- The techniques used to apply this material as they can be reconstructed today by heritage science, as well as the techniques used to preserve the gilding of works of art from the Renaissance.
- The taste for gold in treasures, domestic interiors, sacred spaces, etc. What role did gold play in civic and ecclesiastical decorum? How was gold referred to in sumptuary legislation?

Applications:

Proposals of 350-500 words should be written in British English, accompanied with a short biography, and submitted before 31 January 2025 to Valentina Hristova, valentina.hristova@u-picardie.fr, and Romain Thomas, romain.thomas@inha.fr.

This volume is part of the AORUM project (aorum.hypotheses.org). It will be submitted for publication to Amsterdam University Press, Series Visual and Material Culture 1300-1700. Full versions of the chapters will be double blind peer-reviewed.

Provisional calendar:

- 31 January 2025. Deadline for the submission of proposals.
- February 2025. Selection of proposals.
- 31 August 2025. Deadline for the submission of full chapters (50.000 characters, including spaces and footnotes, in British English; 5-10 illustrations for which authors will need to pay to source high res digital art files and cover any permissions fees).
- Fall 2025. Final decision after double-blind peer-review.
- December 2025. Final versions of the chapters.
- Winter-Spring 2026. Publication.

Volume editors:

Valentina HRISTOVA (Université de Picardie), Romain THOMAS (Institut national d'histoire de l'art / Université Paris Nanterre).

Scientific committee :

Erma HERMENS (University of Cambridge), Valentina HRISTOVA (Université de Picardie), Romain THOMAS (Institut national d'histoire de l'art / Université Paris Nanterre), Alison WRIGHT (University College London), Rebecca ZORACH (Northwestern University).

Selected literature:

- Michael BAXANDALL, *Painting and Experience in 15th century Italy*, Oxford, 1972.
- Kathleen BICKFORD BERZOCK (ed.), *Caravans of gold, fragments in time. Art, culture, and exchange across medieval Saharan Africa*, exh. Catalogue, Princeton, 2019.
- Jean-Roch BOUILLER, Philippe JOCKEY, Myriame MOREL-DELEDALLE & Marcel TAVE (eds.), *Or*, exh. catalogue (Marseille, Mucem, 24 April-10 September 2018), Vanves, 2018.
- CUERMA [Centre universitaire d'études et de recherches médiévales d'Aix-en-Provence], *L'Or au Moyen Age : monnaie, métal, objet, symbole* / CUERMA [Centre universitaire d'études et de recherches médiévales d'Aix-en-Provence, Colloque, Aix-en-Provence, février 1982], Aix-en-Provence / Marseille, 1983.
- Anna DENGLER, Iris WENDERHOLM (eds.), "Themenschwerpunkt: Der Wert des Goldes – der Wert der Golde", *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*, 79, 2016.
- Rembrandt DUITS, *Gold brocade and Renaissance painting*, London, 2008.
- Agnes HUSSLEIN-ARCO, Thomas ZAUNSCHIRM (eds.), *Gold in der Kunst. Von der Antike bis zur Moderne*, exh. catalogue (Wien, Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, 15 March 2012-17 June 2012), Munich, 2012.
- Stefanos KROUSTALLIS et al., "Gilding in Spanish panel painting from the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries", *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies*, 2016.
- Stanton J. LINDEN (ed.), *Mystical metal of gold. Essays on alchemy and Renaissance culture*, New York, 2007.
- Douglas MACLENNAN et al., "Visualizing and measuring gold leaf in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian gold ground paintings," *Heritage Science*, 2019, 7, 25 [online].
- Robert MANIURA, "Valuing the work of Jaume Huguet : A Painter and his Materials", *Oxford Art Journal* 43.3 (2020), pp. 445-468.
- Nicolas MINVIELLE LAROUSSE, Marie-Christine BAILLY-MAITRE, Giovanna BIANCHI (eds.), *Les métaux précieux en Méditerranée médiévale. Exploitations, transformations, circulations: actes du colloque international d'Aix-en-Provence des 6, 7 et 8 octobre 2016*, Aix-en-Provence, 2019.
- Jeanne NUECHTERLEIN, "From Medieval to Modern : Gold and the Value of Representation in Early Netherlandish Painting", York, 2013 [online].
- Saskia QUENÉ, *Goldgrund und Perspektive. Fra Angelico im Glanz des Quattrocento*, Berlin, Munich, 2022.
- Lothar SCHMITT, "Farbe, Gold und Teig : druckgraphische Experimente im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert", in *Chiaroscuro als ästhetisches Prinzip*, ed. by Claudia Lehmann, Norberto Gramaccini, Johannes Rößler & Thomas Dittelbach, Berlin, 2018, pp. 241-262.
- Lois SHELTON, *Gold in Altarpieces of the Early Italian Renaissance. A Theological and Art Historical Analysis of its Meaning and of the Reason of its Disappearance*, Ann Arbor, 1987.
- Nancy K. TURNER, "Reflecting a heavenly light. Gold and other metals in medieval and Renaissance manuscript illumination", in *Manuscripts in the Making : Art and Science*, ed. by Stella Panayotova & Paola Ricciardi, II, London, 2018, pp. 81-96.
- Shannon L. VENABLE, *Gold. A cultural encyclopedia*, Santa Barbara, 2011.
- Alison WRIGHT, "The politics of the gilded body in early Florentine statuary", *Sculpture Journal* 29/2, 2020, pp. 131-158.
- Alison WRIGHT, "The transformation of gold", in *Simone Martini in Orvieto*, ed. by Nathaniel Silver, Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2022, pp. 38-59.
- Rebecca ZORACH & Michael W. PHILLIPS, *Gold. Nature and Culture*, London, 2016.

Reference:

CFP: Knowledge, Symbolics and Uses of Gold in Europe (1450-1550). In: ArtHist.net, Dec 4, 2024 (accessed May 23, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/43468>>.