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.

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Selected literature:

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