

Gold and Silver Altarpieces in Venice and Beyond (Milan, 23-24 Jan 25)

Bocconi University, Milan, Jan 23-24, 2025

Giosuè Fabiano

Golden Glow: Gold and Silver Altarpieces in Venice and Beyond.

Between the 12th and the 17th centuries, the churches of Venice gleamed with the brilliance of gold and silver altarpieces and frontals. Radiating from dim interiors, they provided a unique and awe-inspiring backdrop for the celebration of liturgy. Large-scale and materially sumptuous, these altarpieces—possibly inspired by the Pala d’Oro in the Basilica of San Marco—were ingenious and dramatic viewing machines. They could be opened and closed horizontally to reveal different layers of imagery. When closed, they were further screened behind purpose-made panel paintings (or pale feriali).

These multimedia ensembles exerted significant appeal among contemporaries. In Venice, they continued to play a vital role as intermediaries between architecture and ritual in later centuries, when they functioned as the fulcrum of radical architectural renovations. In addition, less costly specimens made of painted or gilded wood were also commissioned for the adornment of churches across the lagoon. Finally, outside of Venice, precious silver and gold-plated pale have also survived along the northern and eastern Adriatic coast, further demonstrating the popularity of these peculiar altar adornments throughout Venice’s colonial territories. As visual palimpsests that could be opened and closed during liturgy, gold and silver pale hold unique potential to transform our understanding of Venetian sacred spaces, and to illuminate the performative nature of medieval and renaissance religious and artistic experiences.

This bilingual workshop examines these opulent artifacts and their pale feriali within their architectural, liturgical, and acoustic settings and in conversation with comparable visual materials from other Mediterranean regions. In doing so, it seeks to demonstrate the relevance of these rich artifacts for our understanding of broader art-historical issues, including: the artistic geographies and visual identities of Venice’s colonial empire; the material agency of painted and metallic surfaces; the interactions between artistic and technological knowledge in medieval times; sacred spaces across the eastern and western Christian Mediterranean; and the transformations of architectural environments in Venice across the medieval–early modern divide.

Further information and booking (essential):
<https://green.unibocconi.eu/golden-glow-gold-and-silver-altarpieces-venice-and-beyond>

//PROGRAM//

//DAY ONE – 23 January 2025//

Edificio 'Velodromo', Piazza Sraffa 13, Milano, Aula N08

14:00 - 14:05

Welcome and Opening Remarks

- Session 1: THE METALWORK ALTARPIECES OF MEDIEVAL VENETIA -

14:05 - 14:45

Stefania Gerevini (Università L. Bocconi), 'A Gold Standard? The High Altar of San Marco and the landscape of Venice's pale d'oro'

Giosuè Fabiano (Università L. Bocconi), 'Chasing Gold: Venice's lost pale d'oro'

14:45 - 15:10

Danijel Ciković (University of Rijeka), '...e quando si apre la pala si accendono ventotto candele. Le pale d'argento in Istria e lungo la costa dalmata: fonti, contesti e (ri)uso'

15:10 - 15:30 : Q&A Session

15:30 - 16:00: Coffee Break

- Session 2: GOLD AND GILT -

Chair: Serena Romano (Université De Lausanne)

16:00 - 16:25

Alison Wright (UCL), 'Three Gold Pale, a Missing Madonna and the Body of Christ'

16:25 - 16:50

Gabriele Matino (Save Venice), 'La pala mobile di Malamocco: novità e proposte'

16:50 - 17:10: Q&A Session

- Session 3: REVELATIONS: FOLDABLE FORMATS IN THE LAGOON -

Chair: Serena Romano (Université De Lausanne)

17:10 - 17:35

Cristina Guarnieri (Università degli Studi di Padova), 'Le pale ribaltabili in area veneziana e adriatica: varietà tipologiche e funzionali'

17:35 - 18:00

Andrea De Marchi (Università degli Studi di Firenze), 'La pala opistografa di San Giorgio a Pirano: un caso di metodo'

18:00 - 18:20: Q&A Session

End of Day 1

//DAY 2 – 24 January 2025//

Edificio 'Velodromo', Piazza Sraffa 13, Milano, Aula N08

- Session 4: BEYOND THE ALTAR -

Chair: Martina Cognati (Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera)

09:00 - 09:25

Michele Bacci (Université de Fribourg), 'Altarpieces, Iconostases, and their Elusive Interconnectedness'

09:25 - 09:50

Bella Radenovic (The Courtauld Institute of Art), 'Beyond the Liturgical Stage: Material Agency and Sacral Sensibility of Metalwork Georgian Icons'

9:50 – 10:10: Q&A Session

10:10 – 10:40: Coffee Break

- Session 5: SENSING SPACE -

Chair: Antonio Mazzotta (Università degli Studi di Milano)

10:40 - 11:05

Jamie Reuland (Princeton University), 'Of Organs and Altars'

11:05 – 11:45

Andrew Hopkins (Università degli Studi dell'Aquila), 'Changing Tastes at San Salvador and San Pietro di Castello'

Stefano Colombo (Università degli Studi dell'Aquila), 'Architectural Spaces for Silver Altars: Case Studies of San Salvador and San Pietro di Castello'

11:45 – 12:10: Q&A Session and final remarks

End of day 2

Reference:

CONF: Gold and Silver Altarpieces in Venice and Beyond (Milan, 23-24 Jan 25). In: ArtHist.net, Jan 9, 2025 (accessed Jan 6, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/43641>>.