

The Sir Denis Mahon International Essay Prize

Application deadline: Oct 6, 2025

Dr. Anelita Tassinari

BACKGROUND.

The Sir Denis Mahon Essay Prize was established by Sir Denis' friends and colleagues in 2010 in honour and celebration of his 100th birthday. Sir Denis Mahon (London 8th November 1910 – 24th April 2011) was one of the most distinguished art historians and collectors of the XXth-Century, and a determined campaigner and philanthropist. He specialised in Italian XVIIth-Century Paintings and was an authority on Poussin, Caravaggio, Guercino and Annibale Carracci. Throughout his life and until his very last days, Sir Denis devoted a substantial amount of his time to help and encourage young students in the study of the art subjects he was particularly interested in. The Prize aims to continue Sir Denis's endeavours in this respect. Starting this year, by the express will of The Sir Denis Mahon Foundation, the Prize will be carried out by the Centro Studi Internazionale 'Il Guercino', an internal body of the Municipality of Cento (Italy), Guercino's birthplace, which proudly accepted to become its promoter and organizer. This initiative by the community of Cento is intended as a tribute and testimony to the special relationship between the city and the great English scholar who, in recognition of his remarkable efforts in promoting the knowledge of Guercino and the artists of his school, was awarded honorary citizenship in 1982.

SUBJECT MATTER

The Sir Denis Mahon Essay Prize comprises an award of 2,000 Euros (gross of withholdings and taxes if due) for an essay of distinction which reflects Sir Denis's studies, research and interest in the period of art from the Seicento (17th-Century), in particular the work of Guercino, the Carracci, Caravaggio and Nicolas Poussin, and his much wider range of art historical interests, including the 15th and 16th centuries and also certain key modern and contemporary artists. Sir Denis was in fact a contemporary and a friend of Graham Sutherland, Stanley Spencer, Henry Moore, Eduardo Paolozzi, Giorgio Morandi and he much admired their work. Among the contemporary artists, he liked the postwar avant-garde British artists, as well as David Hockney and Grayson Perry. Essays may focus on any of these artists and historical-artistic periods, including contemporary ones. The approach to the subject may be interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary: research papers may address the topic of the Prize from any perspective or interpretation, be it artistic, archival, historical, sociological, or economic.

ELIGIBILITY

The prize is open to undergraduate and postgraduate students who are 30 years of age or below when submitting their essay, who have completed their highest degree qualification or who are currently studying for a postgraduate qualification. Only unpublished essays are eligible for submission. Essays must never have been published in any form: print (personal books, anthologies, collections, newspapers) or electronic (websites, blogs, online newspapers, social networks, or

any other format). The essays must be entirely anonymous. There must be absolutely no trace of the author's name, institution, or any other identifying information. This includes, but is not limited to, omitting any supervisor names and any other named acknowledgements. The file name of the essay document must be the title only. Also, any identifying information in the files' metadata should be removed where possible. Any essays arriving with any identifying information in them will automatically be declared invalid.

PARTICIPATION REQUIREMENTS

In order to promote the prize and the work of the artists whom Sir Denis admired, it is a condition of submission that the winning author grants the Centro Studi Internazionale Il Guercino - Municipality of Cento the right to copy, distribute copies and generally to publish the winning essay in publications which the Centro Studi deems suitable. The essay will not be edited in any way without the consent of the author and credit will always be given to the author. Candidates agree to the cataloging of the essay and its preservation in the dedicated archive of the Centro Studi Internazionale 'Il Guercino', where it will be available to scholars in the field. By participating in the prize, entrants declare under their own responsibility that the work is unpublished and the exclusive product of their own endeavour, and they release the municipal administration from any liability for direct or indirect damages and consequences. Participation in the Prize also implies full and unconditional acceptance of these rules and the authorization to publish their name, surname, and the prize awarded in any publication. The Centro Studi Internazionale "Il Guercino" reserves the right, at its sole discretion, to modify, extend, suspend, or revoke this call for applications, in whole or in part, should it deem it appropriate or necessary for reasons of public interest or due to legal provisions, without any claim or right arising on the part of the participants.

AWARDING

It is a condition of the Prize that the winner will present his or her essay as a lecture to an invited audience. Previous locations have included The Courtauld Institute of Art, The Ashmolean Museum, The Fitzwilliam Museum, The National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, the Church of San Lorenzo in Cento, Italy, the birthplace of Guercino, The Museum of the Order of St John in Clerkenwell, the Prints & Drawings Room at The British Museum, The National Gallery, London, and The Charterhouse, London. In recent years, no reception has been held, and the Winners have instead recorded their winning essays which are shown on The Sir Denis Mahon Foundation website in their respective pages: <https://www.sirdenismahonfoundation.com/>

The award ceremony for this year's edition is scheduled for Saturday, November 8th, Sir Denis' birthday, at a location to be determined. The winner will be reimbursed for travel expenses to reach the award location, as well as for food and accommodation costs.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Manuscripts should be submitted in Italian or in English. Submissions should be no longer than 10.000 words in length. The Burlington Magazine's notes for contributors should be adhered to. Texts may be accompanied by high-quality images, with appropriate captions and references.

TIMEFRAME

Applications must be submitted by Monday, October 6th 2025, no later than 5:00 PM (local time).

To enter the prize the following must be submitted as separate documents attached to the same

email:

1. a complete electronic copy of the essay in PDF;
2. a completed and signed application form (Attachment 1) in PDF, downloadable from the Municipality of Cento's website: www.comune.cento.fe.it
3. a full educational Curriculum Vitae including date of birth, address and current and previous studies, occupations and work experience;
4. copy of a valid identification document (ID).

The total size of attachments must not exceed 10MB. You may need to down-res any images or compress PDFs in order to meet this limit. Please also refer to the Regulations listed above (especially with regards to anonymity) when preparing your submission. All documentation must be sent to the following PEC address: comune.cento@cert.comune.cento.fe.it. The email should include the following subject: 'Sir Denis Mahon Essay Prize – Application.'

Applications received after the specified deadline, or those missing one or more required documents, or otherwise incomplete, will not be accepted. Admission to this prize is subject to the full verification of the requirements declared by the candidates. Candidates who, upon review, even subsequently, are found to be lacking one or more of the required qualifications may be excluded from the prize or its ranking at any stage of the procedure, or declared to forfeit any rights related to their participation in the prize.

THE JUDGING PANEL

The judging panel will be composed of three or more members of the Centro Studi's Scientific Committee, specially appointed at the end of the application period. Over the years, the Judging Panel has included:

- David Barrie
- Gareth Bell-Jones
- Daniele Benati
- Alan Borg
- Christopher Brown
- Stephanie Buck
- Stephen Bury
- Stephen Deuchar CBE
- David Ekserdjian
- Sir Gabriele Finaldi
- Ketty Gottardo
- Fausto Gozzi
- Tom Henry
- Joanna Kilian
- Edward Payne
- Marcello Pecchioli (1954-2021)
- Duncan Robinson (1943-2022)
- Cristiana Romalli
- Sir Charles Saumarez-Smith

The prize may be awarded even if there is only one application, provided that the judging commit-

tee deems the essay suitable, achieving at least half of the maximum possible score, taking into account the number of jury members. The judging committee also has the authority to declare the competition invalid if no essay is deemed suitable, based on the eligibility criteria referred to. The committee's decision regarding the award is final and non appealable, and participants implicitly accept its judgment and results.

ASSESSMENT

Essays will be assessed on the following criteria:

1. ORIGINALITY: The essay should demonstrate a mature and original approach to issues and themes of current concern to the discipline in its broadest interpretation. (score 0-10)
2. RESEARCH AND METHOD: The essay should demonstrate evidence of broad and thorough research, combining primary and secondary sources as appropriate. It should show a clear awareness of appropriate methodological approaches. (score 0-10)
3. CONTENT AND FORM: The essay should be clearly structured and adhere to correct spelling and grammar conventions. All source material should be soundly evaluated and referenced, the argument or line of enquiry should be balanced and the conclusion well grounded. (score 0-10)

Each committee member will individually evaluate every submitted essay based on the criteria outlined above. The scores assigned to each criterion will be added up to obtain the total score. The essay with the highest total score, resulting from the mathematical sum of the scores assigned by the jury members, will be declared the winner. In case of a tie, a subsequent vote will be conducted among the essays that received equivalent scores, until a winner is determined.

For further information and/or clarifications, please contact:

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Reference:

STIP: The Sir Denis Mahon International Essay Prize. In: ArtHist.net, Jul 19, 2025 (accessed May 9, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/50422>>.