

The Senses and the Elements

Deadline: Oct 15, 2025

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Edited Volume: The Senses and the Elements. Water, Fire, Air and Earth as Sensorial Triggers in Medieval Religious Contexts.

The four elements are inextricably tangled to human life, and therefore to social history. Recent scholarship on ecocritical theory has indeed increasingly turned to an exploration of the agency of natural elements (Bennet 2010). This methodological framework has been fruitfully applied to the study of the past, for example in the pioneering work of Harris (2014), and in more recent studies such as the two volumes of *The Elements in the Material World* (2024), dedicated respectively to Earth and Water. Nevertheless, research that considers all four elements together as an integrated whole remains scarce, particularly in relation to their role as active agents within religious contexts, where they shape and mediate human experience. To address this gap, the ERC SenSART project organized several sessions as part of the RSA Conference in Boston, held in March 2025. Building on the lively interest these discussions generated, we now aim to publish a volume entirely devoted to the intersection of the elements and the senses, with the goal of advancing this emerging field.

Within this approach, this book will examine the role played by the elements (water, fire, air, earth) in shaping medieval objects and sacred spaces, as well as in enhancing both the individual and collective experiences of the holy in the Mediterranean basin, broadly conceived to include Western Europe, the Middle East and the Byzantine Empire. We are interested in how these elements affected bodily sensations, influenced behaviors and mindsets, and were harnessed or incorporated into religious experiences as a whole. Water, for instance, played a key role in monastic environments, but was also integrated into processions -for instance, those in 15th-century Brittany following real and symbolic routes connected to the sea or to fountains-, thus shaping the faithful's encounter with the divine. Similarly, the movement of air through liturgical fans, or monumental censers, such as the one in the Cathedral of Santiago of Compostela in Galicia (Iberian Peninsula), profoundly affected the sensory experience of celebrating and attending mass. Fire too made its presence felt through the light of candles and in the warmth produced by handwarmers, while earth could be carried home by pilgrims as a tangible token of their journey to the Holy Land.

To investigate these dynamics, we encourage potential contributors to draw on a wide range of sources -textual, visual, material, and beyond- and to consider the multisensorial dimensions of the human experience triggered by the elements.

The volume will be published in Gold Open Access within the editorial series *The Senses and Material Culture in a Global Perspective* (Brepols, <https://www.brepols.net/series/SENSART>), and

will be edited by Teresa Martínez Martínez and Zuleika Murat. The initiative is connected to the ERC research project SenSArt – The Sensuous Appeal of the Holy. Sensory Agency of Sacred Art and Somatised Spiritual Experiences in Medieval Europe (12th-15th century), G.A. nr. 950248, PI Zuleika Murat (<https://sensartproject.eu/>).

Essay Length

8,000–10,000 words (including footnotes and bibliography).

Proposal Submission

Please submit by 15 October 2025:

- provisional chapter title;
- abstract (maximum 300 words);
- short CV.

Send proposals to zuleika.murat@unipd.it and teresa.martinez@unipd.it

Notification and Timeline

- Notification of acceptance: 3 November 2025.
- Full chapter due: 22 March 2026 (8,000–10,000 words).
- Peer review: double-blind; authors will receive reports and a revision schedule thereafter.

Guidelines Author instructions and style guidelines will be provided to accepted authors.

We particularly encourage submissions from scholars at all career stages and welcome interdisciplinary approaches that connect art history, history, religious studies, archaeology, philology, musicology, and related fields.

Reference:

CFP: The Senses and the Elements. In: ArtHist.net, Sep 22, 2025 (accessed Sep 24, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/50669>>.