

Matter, Senses, and Spiritual Experience in the Middle Ages (Padua, 6–8 May 26)

University of Padua, May 6–08, 2026

Deadline: Oct 31, 2025

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Materialising the Holy. Matter, Senses, and Spiritual Experience in the Middle Ages – 4th International Multidisciplinary Conference of the Series 'Experiencing the Sacred'.

Organisers: Zuleika Murat, Valentina Baradel, Vittorio Frighetto, Teresa Martínez Martínez.

In recent years, the growing interest in materiality has shifted art-historical inquiry from a primary focus on images to the physical and material characteristics of objects themselves. No longer viewed merely as carriers of representation, materials have emerged as crucial sites of meaning. Seminal studies by Caroline Walker Bynum (1995, 2007, 2011) and Jean-Claude Bonne (1999) have challenged the traditional hierarchy that privileged image over matter, demonstrating that the substance and presence of devotional objects were integral to their significance. Bynum, in particular, highlighted the transformative qualities of bleeding hosts, relics, and images—objects that drew viewers' attention as much to their materiality as to their iconography. In this perspective, the perception of sacred matter transcended symbolic or representational layers, creating an embodied and immediate nexus with the divine.

At the same time, as scholars have shown, philosophy and theology reshaped medieval understandings of perception. The recovery of Aristotle introduced new models of cognition in which sensory experience became the foundation of thought. As Michelle Karnes (2011) demonstrates, Scholastic Aristotelianism—mediated through Avicenna and Averroës - conceptualised perception as a phased process moving from sensation to abstraction. Thomas Aquinas systematised this framework, positing the existence of internal senses that mediated between bodily perception and spiritual apprehension (*nihil est in intellectu quod non sit prius in sensu*). This marked a decisive departure from Augustinian suspicion of the senses. Reframed through the Aristotelian virtue of temperance, sensory pleasures could instead be disciplined and elevated as instruments of knowledge and spiritual ascent (Newhauser 2007). These developments fostered what has been described as a "culture of sensation" (Bagnoli 2017), in which the body and its faculties became indispensable pathways to affective experience and, ultimately, to divine union.

Building on this dual reorientation toward matter and the senses, the ERC project SenSArt (2021–2026) has explored the interplay of art, material culture, and sensory experience in medieval Europe. Combining art history, sensory studies, material culture studies, and cognitive approaches, the project has analysed case studies across England, France, Italy, Spain, Germany, and the Low Countries, refining our understanding of how objects and the senses shaped spiritual practices across different communities, social groups and strata.

This concluding conference of SenSArt seeks to consolidate and expand this field of research by: Broadening the range of materials under consideration, including those often overlooked such as clay, paper, or organic matter.

Examining the full spectrum of the five senses, moving beyond the traditional emphasis on sight and touch, and drawing on anthropological models of 'intersensoriality' (Howes 2011).

Broadening the geographical scope of analysis from its conventional focus on Central and Western Europe or the Mediterranean to encompass Eurasia, Africa, and other regions, thereby fostering cross-cultural and transcultural perspectives.

Possible topics may include (but are not limited to):

- Philosophical and theological theories on matters and perception; what was considered matter
- Diverse devotional materials: host, chrisms, wax, oils, wood, ashes, clay, silk, parchment, and their ritual applications
- Relics as matter: blood, milk, and other sacred substances emanating from saints' remains or miraculous images
- Materials perceived as inherently divine: stone, wood, and marbles conceived as part of God's creation
- Affect and emotion: sweetness, fear, disgust, joy, and other affective states mediated through material encounters
- Methodological reflections: intersensoriality, anthropology of the senses, conservation science, digital reconstructions
- Perceptions of materials: cultural hierarchies, comparative evaluations, and shifting meanings across contexts
- Vision beyond "the image": sheen, translucency, brilliance, and darkness; optical theories and material effects
- Curative powers of matter: the bodily and spiritual healing properties attributed to substances
- Objecthood and/or thingness, affordance & agency: how the choice of materials influenced the perception and devotional use of objects
- Immaterial and/or intangible elements in dialogue with matter: light, sound, as well as odours or smoke, as sensory extensions of material presence.

We welcome proposals for 25-minute papers in English or Italian. While the primary focus is on objects, multidisciplinary approaches are strongly encouraged, including contributions that engage with broader theories and concepts.

By October 31st please submit to the conference organizers Zuleika Murat (zuleika.murat@unipd.it), Valentina Baradel (valentina.baradel@unipd.it), Vittorio Frighetto (vittorio.frighetto@phd.unipd.it) and Teresa Martínez Martínez (teresa.martinez@unipd.it):

- full name, current affiliation (if applicable), and email address
- paper title of maximum 15 words;
- abstracts of maximum 300 words;
- a biography of maximum 500 words;
- three to five key-words.

Notifications of acceptance will be given by November 15th.

Selected papers will be invited for publication in a collective volume in the Brepols series "The

Senses and Material Culture in a Global Perspective”.

This conference is organised by 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), Grant Agreement nr. 950248, PI Zuleika Murat, Università degli Studi di Padova (<https://sensartproject.eu/>)

Selected bibliography:

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Bagnoli, M., “The Materiality of Sensation in the Art of the Late Middle Ages”, in S.A. Harvey and M. Mullet (eds), *Knowing Bodies, Passionate Souls: Sense Perception in Byzantium* (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2017), 31-63.

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Starkey, K., and J. Eming (eds), *Things and Thingness in European Literature and Visual Art, 700-1600* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022).

Woolgar, C.M., “What Makes Things Holy? The Sense and Material Culture in the Later Middle

Ages”, in G. Jurkowlanec, I. Matyjaszkiewicz and Z. Sarnecka (eds), *The Agency of Things in Medieval and Early Modern Art. Materials, Power and Manipulation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 60-78.

Reference:

CFP: Matter, Senses, and Spiritual Experience in the Middle Ages (Padua, 6-8 May 26). In: ArtHist.net, Oct 11, 2025 (accessed Apr 7, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/50860>>.