(Re)alignment: rethinking familial ties in the Visual Arts (London, 28 May 26)

National Gallery, London
Deadline: Jan 26, 2026

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We are calling for papers for an upcoming colloquium hosted at the The National Gallery taking place on Thursday 28th May 2026. Please share and reach out with any questions.

Expanding our understanding of family, community and what binds us together requires us to look beyond conventional definitions and documented histories. While official records like birth certificates offer us names, dates and biological ties, they often fail to capture the emotional, cultural and chosen connections that shape our identities and our sense of belonging. In a world where families are built not only by blood but by shared experience, mutual care and collective memory, we must turn to other forms of expression to grasp the full picture.

Visual art, through painting, sculpture, photography and other media, has long served as a powerful tool for representing and reimagining lineage and connection. These works can embody intimacy, inheritance, loss and continuity in ways that resist formal categorisation. A family portrait may reveal who is physically present, but also who is emotionally central. A sculpture might abstractly represent generations, resilience, or migration. A photograph can capture unspoken dynamics: the touch of a hand, the distance between bodies, a gesture of affection or estrangement.

Such representations invite us to ask: What does family look like when it isn't constrained by official records? How do artists convey relationships rooted in mentorship, solidarity, or shared struggle? What visual metaphors such as threads, branches, shadows, echoes might they use to trace the invisible ties that bind?

Art can fill in the silences left by documentation. It allows us to see what a birth certificate cannot: the emotional textures of a relationship; the complexities of chosen family; and the legacies passed through gesture, tradition and story rather than DNA. By engaging with these visual representations, we expand our understanding of lineage not as a fixed biological chain, but as a living, evolving network of connection and meaning.

With this in mind, we are welcoming proposals for 20-minute papers from researchers, museum professionals, independent scholars, artist-practitioners and postgraduate students. A potential outcome of the Colloquium will be the publication of selected papers in a special journal issue or edited volume. Papers may cover any period, geographic location or medium of art.

Proposals will relate to the following themes:
- Ancestry: How are family lines and the dynamics of succession visually rendered in the arts?

From large-scale family portraits to ornate illuminations of family trees, papers may focus on any one of the myriad ways in which ancestral ties have been made legible for public and private audiences. This may include shields, crests, trees and other symbols of family.
- Familial relationships: In what way are intimate family bonds portrayed in the visual arts? From siblings to parents, grandparents and children, artists have long been drawn to depicting their own family members as well as undertaking commissions from patrons.
Marriage: Portraits of betrothed or newly married couples may be a visual contract born of financial and social arrangements, romantic keepsake, or even a symbol of resistance. 'Mystic marriages' and mythical subjects further diversify the types of marriage we may see rendered in art.
- Inheritance and legacy: 'Passing it on' is a major part of family dynasties, particularly when it comes to hereditary titles and businesses. Visual art can be one means of not just establishing a line of inheritance but justifying and even fictionalising it.
Blended and extended families: With the concept of a 'nuclear' family being a modern invention, family groups have long included members from outside the immediate or even blood related spheres. Step-relations, in-laws, wards and charges have been integrated socially, legally and visually into familial groups.
- Chosen family: Whether spiritual, such as in confraternities, convents and other religious orders, or social, as is often found in the LGBTQ+ communities, depictions of chosen family might emphasise elements of support, belonging or diversity.

Submission Guidelines
Abstracts of no more than 300 words, along with a short biography (maximum 150 words), should be sent to maryanne.saunders@nationalgallery.org.uk by Monday 26 January 2026.

Please include your name, institutional affiliation (if applicable), preferred email, contact details and any accessibility requirements.

The conference organisers aim to let contributors know the outcome by mid-February.

For further information, please view the Colloquium website page:
https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/research/seminars-and-conferences/re-alignment-rethinking-familial-ties-in-the-visual-arts

Reference:
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