Thinking with Materials across Histories and Practices (Prague, 1-2 Oct 26)

Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague, Oct 1–02, 2026
Deadline: Mar 31, 2026

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The Centre for Doctoral Studies UMPRUM is pleased to announce an international doctoral conference focused on materials and materiality in the methodology of art history. We invite participants to join us on October 1–2, 2026 for a two-day conference at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague.

Referring to the material, linguistic, or pictorial turn has become a convenient way for art historians to register methodological change. However, such labels risk smoothing over more gradual transformations or historiographical precedents.

If we understand the objects of our inquiry as silent messengers (Dupré, 2011), it is their material that underpins their communicative force. In what is ostensibly an object-oriented discipline, one might expect material to be a fundamental point of inquiry. As Ernst Gombrich observed, even the most ordinary object, such as a teacup, opens questions rooted in its substance, physical behaviour, and mode of production (Gombrich, 1988). An object may invite multiple avenues of analysis, yet it is the material itself that first sets these questions in motion.

However, as the material turn itself demonstrates, the interest in material has gradually slipped into the background, overshadowed by approaches that tended to privilege formal or iconographic concerns. If the material turn may be understood as an invitation to re-examine the discipline's own history (Fricke and Lehmann, 2024), the forthcoming conference seeks to pursue it with more horizontal perspectives and microhistories in mind.

We aim to explore the following thematic areas:

Voices From Beyond the Canon

In the historiography of material-oriented art history, figures such as Michael Baxandall and Henri Focillon are frequently invoked, while less canonical voices whose work engaged with materials still await fuller inclusion into this discussion.
During the conference, we aim to recover perspectives from diverse linguistic and regional traditions, as well as voices that may have been overlooked or forgotten in existing historiographical frameworks.
Potential avenues of inquiry include, but are not limited to, the following questions:

How have local art-historical discourses responded to and expanded upon the work of canonical

art historians—such as Baxandall—when accounting for material and technical specificities?

To what extent have art historians historically challenged the long-standing privileging of form over matter (material) in their interpretations of artworks?

How has the primacy of disegno interno, or the inner idea, shaped the understanding of matter (material) as subordinate in artistic creation?

How have art historians reflected philosophical conceptions, such as hylozoism, that treat matter as an active agent in creation?

To what extent did modern vitalist notions of matter—as lively, self-organizing, or possessing formative capacities—shape the emergence of art history and its early approaches to objects?

Rethinking Hierarchies

The recent fascination with materiality has drawn renewed attention to objects made from diverse materials, long relegated to the category of craft, such as glass, ceramics, metalwork, or textiles. Objects historically excluded from canonical art-historical narratives, particularly those grounded in artisanal knowledge, are now becoming central to emerging efforts to rethink the canon.

Possible questions for contributors may include:
How have art historians specializing in objects relegated to the realm of craft navigated within a scholarly discourse and jargon originally shaped by the highest-ranked genres and media, such as painting or sculptures?

Practitioners bring processual and materially grounded forms of knowledge that can redirect theoretical questions, yet their expertise often remains marginal in methodological debates. How have practitioners of art and craft—past and present—thought about materials? What insights do they contribute to reenactments and reconstructions, particularly with regard to material intelligence?

The conference will be held in person, but online participation is also possible. The main language of the event will be English, and papers should not exceed 20 minutes. PhD students and early career researchers are particularly encouraged to apply.

To be considered, please submit a proposal of 200–300 words along with a short bio (up to 150 words) to email addresses listed below by March 31, 2026. Notifications of acceptance will be sent by the end of April 2026.

The conference will cover meals for all presenters during the conference. We hope to offer travel support; reimbursement will depend on pending funding arrangements. We will update participants when funding is confirmed.

Send abstracts and a short bio to: monika.drlikova@umprum.cz and david.blaha@umprum.cz

Organizing Comittee: David Bláha, Denisa Dolanská, Monika Drlíková, Tomáš Klička, Veronika Králíková Červená, Veronika Soukupová.

Reference:

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