Love's Matter. Material Culture and Art of Affection (Neuchâtel, 12–13 Nov 26)

University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland), Nov 12–13, 2026
Deadline: Mar 20, 2026

Henriette Marsden

Love's Matter – The Material Culture and Art of Affection, c. 1700 –1900.
International Workshop for PhD Students and Early Career Researchers.
9th edition of the Entretiens de la Fondation Maison Borel.

From the early 18th century onwards, the material qualities of love were explored as a cultural technique and an artistic practice transformed by the onset of modernity. Young lovers courted their sweethearts by sending mass-produced valentine cards, friends filled each other's albums with carte de visite photographs and industrially made paper scraps, husbands romanced their wives through the gifting of colonial luxuries, and sisters used embroidery patterns circulated through the periodical press to stitch presents with and for one another. Evidently, love, as a practice of affection between family members, romantic partners and friends, became deeply embroiled in the material conditions of global trade, colonial expansion, nation-building, and the advance of industrialised commerce.

This workshop will explore how the affective properties of love shaped and were shaped by the material conditions of modernity from the early 18th to the end of the 19th century. It takes as a starting point the claim that modernity is characterised by a shift away from older understandings of transcendental love and toward a notion of love that is qualified by immanent, sensorial, and interpersonal experiences (Hanley, 4-5). Building on the conceptual framework of the "co- constitutive nature of things and emotions", as demonstrated in recent scholarship (Downes/Holloway/Randles, 9), we invite doctoral and postdoctoral researchers to examine not only the use of objects and artworks in the performance of love but also how their materiality (size, shape, material construction, other sensorial qualities) impacted the experience of love. By investigating how love's affective potential was navigated in the particular aesthetic constitution of objects, this workshop will explore love as a feeling of romantic desire, as a wish for amicable companionship, as a form of familial connection, as a religious experience, and as a charitable responsibility.

We invite papers by doctoral students and early career researchers that examine this diversity of love in the breadth of its aesthetic functioning as material culture, as art, and as cultural performance. The workshop also encourages comparative and cross-cultural perspectives, looking beyond Western Europe to consider how love was materially performed in the modern contexts of empire, global trade, and colonialism. The workshop is committed to fostering an open discussion between researchers at any stage of their project. We welcome submissions for papers covering both early-stage work and substantive original research on the art and material culture of

love, as well as theoretical and methodological discussions problematising the state of love studies within art and cultural history.

Topics might include, but are not confined to:
- personal gifts as expressions of hetero- and homo-romantic, familial, and amicable love
- material culture of heartbreak, loss, and/or separation
- commercialisation of love tokens; affection and consumer culture
- collaborative artistic production amongst friends
- material bonds between parents and children
- sexual self-identification and pictorial self-representation
- art as an affective instrument for nation-building and colonial expansion
- materiality of divine love in ecclesiastical, missionary, and charitable contexts

The workshop is organised in the context of the 9th edition of the Entretiens de la Fondation Maison Borel, held by the Institute of Art History and Museology at the University of Neuchâtel. These study days aim to foster the exchange of ideas and perspectives on methodological issues across the various disciplines of the Humanities and Social Sciences. As in previous editions, the workshop will take place in the historic 17th-century Maison Borel near Neuchâtel (Auvernier), a setting that offers an informal yet stimulating environment for scholarly exchange. The workshop may result in a publication. Accommodation, and, where possible, full coverage of travel costs will be provided by the organisers.
Please send a 300-word abstract in English for 20 minutes presentations as well as a 100-word CV to Henriette Marsden (hm772@cam.ac.uk) and Lara Pitteloud (lara.pitteloud@unine.ch) by the 20th of March 2026.

We are looking forward to reading your proposals!

Henriette Marsden (University of Cambridge) and Lara Pitteloud (University of Neuchâtel)

For the bibliography, view the full call here: https://grham.hypotheses.org/files/2026/01/Call-for-papers_Loves-Matter.pdf

Reference:

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