Creating the Sacred at Court (Bratislava, 21-23 Sep 26)

Bratislava, Slovak University of Technology, Sep 21–23, 2026
Deadline: May 15, 2026

Prof. Dr. Joanna Olchawa, LMU

Creating the Sacred at Court. Sensorial Practices and Experiences in Europe (1300–1800)

Organisation: COST Action 24164: Sensing Europe's Court Spaces at the Crossroads of Past, Present and Future (SENSES) and Slovak University of Technology

How does the sacred come into being?
History of art and architecture as well as religious studies have long demonstrated that the sacred is not merely an inherent property of spaces, objects, or images, but is constituted in part through (worldly) staging. Light regimes, overwhelming chromatic effects, dense olfactory atmospheres, architectural materials and spatial structures capable of producing resonances, all contribute to the sensorial construction of the holy. Yet sacred space is never purely environmental. Singing and speaking, moving and sometimes even dancing participants and audiences are integral to the performative creation of the sacred as well as to its perception.

But how can we approach such past sensorial enactments and experiences today? How can we model the historical sensory dimensions of ceremonies and devotional acts on the basis of surviving spaces, furnishings, or liturgical and courtly sources? And how might contemporary cognitive science alongside digital, virtual, and AI-based methods enable new forms of analysis, simulation, and interpretation? These questions lie at the centre of the Working Group "Sacred Spaces" within COST Action 24164: Sensing Europe's Court Spaces at the Crossroads of Past, Present and Future (SENSES). "Court Space(s)" should be understood here as the spatial and material environment of medieval and early modern courts in Europe (1300–1800), and is/are seen as playing a significant role in shaping social structures, behaviours, and ways of life. The Action explores the full gamut of sensory experiences linked with the court residence and its life throughout history until today to build a better understanding of this complex cultural phenomenon, to support its survival as European heritage, and to contribute actively to its role as shaper of a collective identity for the future.

Sacred space at court should be understood as a multiple ranging from the smallest scale to the largest. Architecturally speaking, it comprises the court chapel, or as the case may be, the church, even an entire monastery (e.g. the convent palaces of the Hispanic world, such as the Escorial and the Descalzas Reales in Madrid, Spain, but also the monastery at Brou, France, built by the widowed regent of the Habsburg Low Countries). As part of the private apartments, the oratories constitute another component, one which serves as connection. But sacred space at court

includes much more, the courtly organization behind the chapel's service frequently taking care of worldly matters such as the prince's valuables, for instance; the great hall adjacent to the smaller chapel actually serving as auditorium of the Mass for the lower ranks at court, and so on. On a larger scale, courts established religious networks extending across their lands, such as the Habsburg archdukes serving as regents establishing seven Marian shrines in strategic sites of the Low Countries around 1600.
Focusing on courtly contexts 1300–1800, the conference intends to explore the inter-sensorial performances and experiences within religious spaces of European court residences. It is explicitly conceived as forward-looking, aiming to open future avenues of research and foster shared methodological standards across disciplines.

We especially welcome contributions that
- explore inter-sensorial experience from an interdisciplinary perspective
- address the performative and embodied dimensions of sacred space at court in all its forms (such as court chapels, churches, monasteries, oratories)
- reflect epistemological questions of approaching past perception
- present proof-of-concept projects using digital, virtual, or AI-based methods

We particularly encourage participation from art and architecture historians, scholars in cognitive sciences and historical cognition studies, olfactory heritage studies, digital humanities researchers, heritage specialists and curators, as well as digital designers and simulation experts. Early career researchers are strongly encouraged to apply.

Please submit:
- an abstract (max 300 words)
- a short CV (max one page)
by May 15, 2026 to krista.dejonge@kuleuven.be and joanna.olchawa@lmu.de

Participants must register with COST (free of charge). Travel and accommodation costs of accepted speakers will be reimbursed according to COST rules. Early career researchers may also apply for Short-Term Scientific Missions.

For more information see:
- https://cost-senses.eu
- https://www.cost.eu/actions/CA24164/

Organisation:
Andrea Vargová (Slovak U. of Technology, Bratislava)
Monika Rychtáriková (KU Leuven / Slovak U. of Technology, Bratislava)
Magdaléna Kvasnicová (Slovak U. of Technology, Bratislava)
Vojtech Chmelík (Slovak U. of Technology, Bratislava)

Scientific Committee:
Krista De Jonge (KU Leuven), Chair
Monika Rychtáriková (KU Leuven)
Andrea Vargová (Slovak U. of Technology, Bratislava)
Joanna Olchawa (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)

Dubravka Botica (U. of Zagreb)
Jiří Kubeš (U. of Pardubice)
Philippe Vendrix (Tours, RicercarLab, Centre d’Études supérieures de la renaissance)
Pedro Luengo Gutiérrez (U. of Seville)
Mona Hess (Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg)
José Eloy Hortal Muñoz (U. Juan Carlos, Madrid)

Reference:
CFP: Creating the Sacred at Court (Bratislava, 21-23 Sep 26). In: ArtHist.net, Mar 1, 2026 (accessed Nov 13, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/51866>.