

The Social Life of Portraits (Wolfenbüttel, 22–23 Oct 26 / Lund, 15–16 Apr 27)

Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek / University of Lund, Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences, Oct 22, 2026–Apr 16, 2027

Deadline: Apr 15, 2026

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The Social Life of Portraits 1500–1900. Interdisciplinary workshops.

Without a doubt, the portrait is one of the most important types of images in Western culture. No other is more numerous, more widespread. Since antiquity portraits could be found in public and private spaces alike, in palaces, temples and churches, town halls, universities, libraries, on market places and cemeteries, in the meeting rooms of guilds and learned societies, in taverns and salons, on leaflets and wanted posters, in books and newspapers. Portraits circulated by post and in the luggage of travellers, merchants, pilgrims, artists and diplomats. Photography and digital media have continued this development. There is hardly a place in society without portraits.

In view of their ubiquity and usage, it is all the more surprising that portraits were long regarded and studied primarily as works of art. We would therefore like to focus on the various social functions of portraits in a historical perspective. Portraits helped shape social identity and status, they marked ownership, legitimised power and authorised official acts, they initiated and stabilised relationships, were used as gifts and social currency, represented those who were absent and commemorated the deceased. The diverse agencies of portraits went hand in hand with different forms and practices: miniatures and coin portraits, drawings and silhouettes, printed portraits in books, pamphlets and single sheets, paintings, death masks, statues and busts, not to mention the countless portraits on everyday objects like book covers and stove tiles, bottles and plates, facades and windows. Portraits have been given away, collected, presented, revered, mocked, desecrated and destroyed. Yet little research has so far addressed the interplay between different forms of portraiture. Portraits circulated in various forms and formats, thereby changing their social function.

Two workshops will bring together scholars from different disciplines to examine the role of portraits in processes of communication and negotiation from the 16th to the end of the 19th century. The time frame is determined by phases in the technology of image reproduction. It covers the beginnings of the use of woodcuts up to the replacement of lithography by offset printing. One of our goals is a better understanding of the interactions between different forms of portraiture and the associated changes in function. Also the specific performance of portraits in public and private events should be considered. Many portraits were mass media for communication in absentia and at a distance: by what means was their agency directed? How can their success – or failure – be determined in historical retrospect?

The workshops welcome proposals from scholars at all career stages and across disciplines; we

particularly encourage contributions from PhD candidates and early career researchers. Papers may present studies on topics including but not limited to the following:

- circulation and exchange of portraits in transcultural and global perspective
- portraits as instruments of inclusion and exclusion
- semantics and performance of portraits in social rituals
- production and representation
- reuse, shifting meanings, and reception across contexts

The first workshop 'production, circulation & economies' will take place in person in Wolfenbüttel from October 22–23 2026 and will be hosted by the Herzog August Bibliothek. It will focus on commodification, exchange, infrastructure, mobility, and markets of portraiture.

The second workshop: 'agency, reception & social meaning' will take place in person in Lund from April 15–16 2027 and will be hosted by the University of Lund, Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences. Among other themes, it will address identity, memory, representation, and interpretation.

Participants will normally present one paper in one of the workshops. If feasible, contributors may attend the second workshop as audience members to broaden the discussion. By convening the workshops in two different countries, the project seeks to foster international exchange. A central goal of the initiative is to create a sustainable research network and to explore opportunities for future collaboration and publication.

Please note that this call is subject to final approval by the funding bodies.

Abstracts of 200–250 words should be submitted to ylva.haidenthaller@kultur.lu.se or hole.roessler@hab.de along with a short biographical statement (2–3 sentences) by April 15 2026.

Organising team: Dr. Ylva Haidenthaller (Lund), Dr. Hole Rößler (Wolfenbüttel)

Reference:

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