Predoctoral Fellowships, IMPRS for Multimodal Digital Humanities, Zurich

University of Zurich
Application deadline: May 31, 2026

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International Max Planck Research School for Multimodal Digital Humanities (IMPRS-MDH).

Application Deadline: May 31, 2026,
Interviews: June 2026,
Start: from August 2026.

IMPRS-MDH predoctoral fellows work within a uniquely rich research environment and with access to special resources (https://www.mdh.uzh.ch/en/Resources.html): on the one hand, the BHMPI's fully digitized photographic collection (https://www.biblhertz.it/en/photographic-collection) of 1.3M assets, 3M pages of scanned art historical literature, and the Max Planck Research Group Machine Visual Culture (MVC: https://www.biblhertz.it/en/machine-visual-culture), led by Prof. Dr. Leonardo Impett; and on the other hand, the UZH's Linguistic Research Infrastructure (LiRI: https://www.liri.uzh.ch/en.html), CLARIN-CH (https://clarin-ch.ch) resources of text corpora and computational linguistic technology, and the Digital Society Initiative (DSI: https://www.dsi.uzh.ch/en.html). The program is directed by Prof. Dr. Tristan Weddigen (BHMPI/UZH) and Prof. Dr. Noah Bubenhofer (UZH), with scientific coordination by Dr. Darío Negueruela del Castillo (DVS).

The Research Program
The IMPRS-MDH is driven by a central question:
How can the nuanced and culturally diverse patterns of thought and argumentation of the humanities be modelled using AI, and how might we use these models to study both cultural history and the cultural position of AI systems themselves, across languages and cultures?

We seek doctoral candidates who bring genuine intellectual investment to one or more of the following research areas, which are not fixed tracks but overlapping problem spaces, we actively encourage proposals that cut across them:

1. Epistemic Modeling of Multimodal Reasoning
How can the interpretive methods of art historians, scholars of literature, and humanists at large be operationalized as multimodal AI models?

This area moves beyond using AI as a retrieval or classification tool toward making humanistic argumentation itself transparent, testable, and computationally legible. Projects might examine how specific methods and epistemic approaches and frameworks can be encoded as multimodal

pipelines, or how large, digitized collections such as the BHMPI's, or more specific ones like the Wölfflin edition (HWGW: https://hwgw.humanitiesconnect.pub/index.html) can serve as grounds for training and probing such models.

2. Spatiality, Temporality, and World Models
How can the diversity of humanistic knowledge be mobilized to develop AI systems that are genuinely adequate to the spatial and temporal complexity of cultural phenomena?

Multimodal AI research has largely addressed text-image relations while leaving spatial and temporal dimensions theoretically and computationally underdeveloped. This area investigates how perspectival systems, architectural typologies, urban morphologies, and the multilingual discourses through which they have been named and transmitted might inform the design and evaluation of spatially and temporally aware models for humanistic inquiry. It further asks how temporal processes such as gradual transformation, feedback, and drift might be modelled across modalities like text, image, and space, in ways that go beyond frame-by-frame pattern detection. Fellows may draw on spatial theory, corpus linguistics, or media archaeology, and might work with 3D reconstruction, video models, or multimodal corpora. Projects might develop cross-modal methods for representing historical process and spatial meaning or use architectural and urban corpora as evaluation grounds for culturally situated spatial AI.

3. Critical AI and the Culture of AI Systems
What cultural assumptions are encoded in the latent spaces of large multimodal models, and how can humanistic frameworks reveal, critique, and contextualize them?

This area brings the methods of art history/visual studies, linguistics, and the history of science to bear on AI systems as objects of inquiry themselves, and not only tools for analysis. Topics include: the visual, literary, and cultural genealogies of training datasets; circuit tracing and mechanistic interpretability as methods for humanistic AI critique; the cultural position of AI-generated images and text in contemporary culture; the history of computational thought in art history, linguistics, and the humanities; and the relationship between critical AI studies and Bildwissenschaft. Fellows are encouraged to develop work that is genuinely bidirectional, using AI to study culture while using culture to study AI.

4. Multimodal Corpus and Network History
How did fundamental cross-modal concepts like style, space, model, influence evolve and circulate through scholarly and cultural networks over time?

This area applies multimodal AI methods to large-scale historical corpora, investigating the formation and transmission of key concepts across image, text, and space. The BHMPI's Knowledge Graph, digitized library, and photographic collection offer exceptional material for such work, as do UZH corpora of 19th- and 20th-century mountaineering yearbooks and other journals. Fellows might examine multilingual and cross-cultural dimensions of art historical discourse or develop new corpus linguistic methods for integrating visual and textual data.
Further Areas and Cross-Cutting Problem Spaces

Beyond the four core areas above, the IMPRS-MDH welcomes proposals that open onto adjacent or hybrid problem fields with questions that do not map neatly onto a single research area but

draw productively from several fields. These include: generative curation and AI in museum practice, exploring how multimodal AI can assist curatorial reasoning across text, image, and spatial collection data, and how curatorial practice can in turn reveal cultural and multimodal limitations of foundation models, with particular attention to cultural bias in systems trained predominantly on Western visual and textual traditions; the text-image relation in large historical corpora, developing new methods for studying how visual and linguistic meaning co-constitute each other across time and across cultures; the historical and temporal dimensions of multimodal models, examining how processes of drift, accumulation, and transformation might be modelled beyond static pattern detection; and AI literacy and the epistemology of humanistic computing, asking how scholars, students, and publics come to understand, evaluate, and critically engage with AI systems as tools and as cultural objects. Candidates are encouraged to identify and articulate their own cross-cutting research questions within the program's broader intellectual horizon.

Candidates' Profiles
We seek candidates with strong academic preparation in one of the following fields: art history/visual studies, linguistics/history of literature, computer science, and related disciplines. Genuine curiosity about working across disciplinary boundaries is essential. Prior experience with computational methods, machine learning, AI critical studies, or digital humanities is required. We are particularly interested in candidates whose proposed projects address problems that are genuinely art historical, linguistic/literary, or humanistic in their orientation.

The MPG and the UZH have a strong commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and particularly welcome applications from underrepresented groups.

What We Offer
- Up to five fully funded predoctoral fellowships
- A salary range of 50-54k CHF p.a. at 80% employment, including social security contributions
- A yearly PhD contract that can be extended up to three years plus one (max. four years)
- A PhD awarded by the UZH with the special mention of the IMPRS-MDH
- A structured interdisciplinary curriculum including dedicated IMPRS-MDH seminars, workshops in Zurich and Rome, reading seminars, and summer schools
- Financial support for publications, conferences, and research activities
- An attractive range of campus amenities and activities in Zurich, including the DSI
- Access to the BHMPI's unique digitized collections and DH Lab expertise
- Access to LiRI's technological expertise and CLARIN-CH corpus resources
- Close supervision by leading researchers in digital art history, corpus linguistics, and critical AI studies
- Integration into an active international research network spanning Europe, East Asia, and North America
- Opportunities for research mobility and co-supervision with partner institutions
- Opportunities for teaching experience at UZH

Application
Applicants are asked to submit:
- Cover letter (max. two pages): describing the educational and research background, motivation, and fit with the IMPRS-MDH program

- Research proposal (max. ten pages, including references, excluding illustrations or diagrams): outline of the research question in relation to the program's research areas, state-of-the-art, theoretical framework, methodology, hypothetical outcomes
- Curriculum vitae, including a list of publications
- Up to three writing samples (optional)

All materials should be submitted in English via the following recruitment platform by May 31, 2026: https://recruitment.biblhertz.it/position/21299200. Shortlisted candidates will be invited to present their project in an online interview in June 2026.

About the IMPRS-MDH

The International Max Planck Research School for Multimodal Digital Humanities (IMPRS-MDH: https://www.mdh.uzh.ch/en.html) is a new doctoral school jointly established by the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History (BHMPI: https://www.biblhertz.it/en/home) in Rome and the Faculty of Art and Social Sciences (PhF: https://www.phil.uzh.ch/en.html) of the University of Zurich (UZH: https://www.uzh.ch/en.html), funded by the Max Planck Society (MPG: https://www.mpg.de/en/imprs) for six years. Building on pioneering research at the MPG-UZH Digital Visual Studies center (DVS: https://dvstudies.net/), the IMPRS-MDH opens a new field at the crossroads of art and architectural history, linguistics, and multimodal artificial intelligence. It is based at the University of Zurich.

Contact

For questions about the program and its research areas, please contact the Scientific Coordinator: Dr. Darío Negueruela del Castillo (DVS/IMPRS-MDH), dario.negueruelladelcastillo@uzh.ch

Reference:

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