

Matter, Senses & Spiritual Experience in Middle Ages (Padua/online, 6–8 May 26)

Padua (Italy) / online, May 6–08, 2026

Registration deadline: May 6, 2026

Teresa Martínez Martínez

Materialising the Holy. Matter, Senses, and Spiritual Experience in the Middle Ages (12th–15th century).

From 6 to 8 May 2026, the fourth international multidisciplinary conference in the “Experiencing the Sacred” series will take place within the framework of the ERC project SensArt, under the title Materialising the Holy: Matter, Senses, and Spiritual Experience in the Middle Ages (12th–15th Century), at the University of Padua.

Recent scholarship has increasingly foregrounded materiality, shifting art-historical inquiry from a primary focus on images to the physical substance of objects, now understood as active sites of meaning and devotion. In parallel, the Middle Ages witnessed a profound transformation in theories of perception: drawing on Aristotle, thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas argued that all knowledge originates in the senses, so that intellectual understanding is grounded in sensory experience rather than opposed to it. Consequently, in contrast to earlier traditions influenced by Augustine of Hippo, medieval scholars came to regard the senses as indispensable instruments of cognition and as legitimate pathways to engagement with the divine. Building on this dual reorientation toward matter and the senses, the ERC project SenSArt (2021–2026) has explored the interplay of art, material culture, and sensory experience in medieval Europe.

At this final conference of the project, international scholars from a range of disciplines – including historians, art historians, architectural historians – will examine the role of materiality within the sacred context of the Middle Ages.

Programme:

6 May - Palazzo Bo, Archivio Antico

9.00 Welcome and introduction

9.15 Session I - Sensory Epistemologies and the Theology of Sacred Matter, chaired by Zuleika Murat

- Micol Long (Università degli Studi di Milano Statale), Tracing Materials and Their Perception in Medieval Religious Texts (Western Europe, 12th-13th century)

- Marta Battisti (UCLouvain), Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas, and the Crucifix: The Sensory and Cognitive Power of Material Artifacts

- Davide Tramarin (Università di Padova), Hildegard of Bingen Matters: Sensory Epistemologies of

Substance and Their Resonance in Twelfth-Century Rhenish Sacred Art

Discussion

11.00 Coffee Break

11.15 Session II - Nature as Sacred Medium, chaired by Luca Nodari

- Ross Debernardi (KU Leuven), Material Paradoxes: Sacred Images Produced by Nature between Sensation and Cognition

- Vittorio Frighetto (Università di Padova), Material Virtue and Sacred Power of the Serpentine Stone

- Maia Wellington Gahtan (Kent State University), Lead Objects in the Middle Ages

Discussion

13.00 Lunch Break

14.30 Session III - Translucent Materials and Light, chaired by Davide Tramarin

- Mihnea Alexandru Mihail (Universitatea Națională de Arte București), Light as Divine Matter: A Medieval Ciborium in a Rural Church of the Hungarian Kingdom

- Esther Pitoun (Universität Wien), Carving Light: Materiality, Surface, and Devotional Perception in Late Medieval Tuscan Annunciation Sculptures

- Zuleika Murat (Università di Padova), Reflecting and Refracting Divine Light: Gilded Glass Reliquaries in Central and Northern Italy

- Jesús Rodríguez Viejo (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen), Light and Presence: Rock Crystal Objects in Norman Sicily

Discussion

16.45 Coffee Break

17.00 Keynote

Bissera V. Pentcheva (Stanford University), The Pursuit of Heights: Romanesque Architecture, Aquitanian Notation, and the Office of Sainte-Foy at Conques

Discussion

7 May - Accademia Galileiana, Sala del Guariento

9.15 Session IV - Sacred Materials and the Body, chaired by Micol Long

- Valentina Baradel (Università di Padova), 'The Material is the Message'. The Sensory Agency and Meanings of Linen in Medieval Religious Culture

- Flavia Galli Tatsch (Universidade Federal de São Paulo), Feeling the Sacred: Textiles, Metal, and Devotional Experience in Marian Pilgrim Badges

- Sarah Guerin (University of Pennsylvania), Interoception and Medieval Art, or The Art of the Bow

Discussion

11.00 Coffee Break

11.15 Session V - Material Word: Interacting with Sacred Texts, chaired by Vittorio Frighetto

- Karen E. McCluskey (University of Notre Dame Australia), Grieving and Healing: The Sydney Hours as an Extended Tool of Cognition
- Sebastiano Crestani (Università di Padova), Look but don't Touch: The Materiality of the Torah Scroll in Medieval European Judaism
- Alison Ray (Royal Irish Academy Library), Perceiving the Page: Devotional Visions Across Double Openings in the Book of St Albans

Discussion

13.00 Lunch Break

14.30 Session VI - Liquid Matter: Mediating and Embodying the Sacred, chaired by Teresa Martínez Martínez

- Rocío Sánchez Ameijeiras (Universidad de Santiago de Compostela), The 'Well of Moses', a Well of Tears: Emotions and Sensory Devotional Experience at Champmol
- Aisling Reid (Queen's University Belfast), Sweet Matter: The Taste of the Virgin's Milk and the Sensory Theology of Devotion
- Elena Paulino Montero (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, UNED), Materializing the Holy Blood: Sensory Experiences, Vicarious Touch, and Female Devotion in Late Medieval Castile

Discussion

16.15 Coffee Break

16.30 Session VII - Crafting the Sacred Surface: Media, Materiality, and Devotional Practices, chaired by Alfonso Zoleo

- Emma Bruckner (Courtauld Institute of Art), Recreating Creation: Material Transformation and Artistic Identity in Jean Colombe's Books of Hours
- Marta Boscolo Marchi (Museo di Arte Orientale Venezia), The Many Faces of Kannon: Devotion, Material Culture, and Propaganda in Japan from the Middle Ages to the Edo Period (1603-1868)
- Chiara Croci (HES-SO University of Applied Sciences and Arts Western Switzerland/HE-Arc Conservation Restoration), Managing the 'Lost of Sense'. Conservation Practices and Sensorial Values of Medieval Objects

Discussion

8 May - Basilica del Santo, Sala Dello Studio Teologico

9.00 Session VIII - Wax and Fragrances: Making the Sacred Sensible, chaired by Valentina Baradel

- Alessandro Vecchia (Università di Padova), The Scent of the Soul: Materializing the Invisible Through Aromatic Matter and Practices in Medieval Europe
- Dragoș Gh. Năstăsoiu (Asociația Art Conservation Support, Bucharest), Fragrant Treasures from the East: The Intersensorial Materiality of the Magi's Gifts in Late-medieval Devotion Margherita Orsero (Università degli Studi di Genova and Fondazione Edoardo Garrone), Touching and Smelling Salvation: Wax Agnus Dei in Medieval Rome
- Ragnhild M. Bø (Universitetet i Oslo), Transformative Permanence. Wax as Multisensory Matter in Late Medieval Devotion

Discussion

11.15 Coffee Break

11.30 Session IX - Transcending Structural Boundaries: Architecture as Sacred Matter, chaired by Francesca Toffolo

- Lisa Marzahn (Princeton University), Darkness Beyond Light. Between Visions and Experiences of the Sacred at the Pantokrator Monastery

- Oana Maria Nae (National University of Arts, Iași), Illuminating the Ineffable: Dionysian Theologies of Light and the Spatial Experience of the Sacred in Byzantine and Gothic Architecture

- Teresa Martínez Martínez (Università degli Studi di Padova), Water as Moving Matter and its Sensorial Role in Iberian Medieval Spaces

Discussion

13.15 Conclusions

The conference will be held at Padua (Italy), and sessions will take place in the following locations:

6 May - Palazzo Bo, Archivio Antico

7 May - Accademia Galileiana, Sala del Guariento

8 May - Basilica del Santo, Sala dello Studio Teologico

Online participation is possible by registering at the following link: forms.gle/xJvmq4fwE7dDPb-Nv5

Organising Committee:

Zuleika Murat, Università di Padova

Valentina Baradel, Università di Padova

Vittorio Frighetto, Università di Padova

Teresa Martínez Martínez, Università di Padova

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Reference:

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