

Reinventing the Middle Ages to Build the Nation (4-5 Feb 27)

Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History, Rome, Feb 4–05, 2027

Deadline: Jun 30, 2026

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Reinventing the Middle Ages to Build the Nation. Visual Arts and Identity Strategies in Pre- and Post-Unification Italy (1830–1910) - International Conference.

For nineteenth-century Italy, the Middle Ages were far more than a historical period. In its various interpretations, the medieval era became a symbolic terrain on which the ideals of the Risorgimento were forged and, after 1861, where the foundations of a nascent national tradition were sought. Across many European nations, the Middle Ages underwent a process of identity-driven rediscovery and reevaluation. In Italy, however, this process took on a distinctive character, shaped by the country's geopolitical fragmentation and the diversity of its regional artistic traditions.

The conference aims to investigate the ways in which the various artistic medievalisms of the Italian peninsula were discovered, reinvented, and mobilized in the service of national identity construction, tracing the double life of artefacts: on the one hand, as instruments of Risorgimento and post-unification rhetoric; on the other, as works destined for the emerging discipline of Art History. The central objective is to foster dialogue between the heterogeneous neo-medieval artistic production of the nineteenth century and the original medieval artworks, illuminating the moment when both contributed to shaping the image of the new nation.

While neo-medieval architecture has already received systematic scholarly attention, painting, sculpture, goldsmithing, decorative arts, photography, and musical theatre have yet to be analysed comparatively in relation to questions of national identity: it is precisely this gap that the conference seeks to address. The chronological scope spans from the early Romantic reconfigurations of the Italian Middle Ages in the 1830s to the early twentieth century, closing at the threshold of the institutionalisation of art history as an academic discipline – when this heritage, having lost its explicit political charge, became an object of scholarly inquiry and preservation.

Guiding Questions:

- How was the idea of an Italian medieval art constructed – framed in national and even nationalist terms – in the absence of a pre-existing state?
- What is the relationship between the Middle Ages as conceived by scholars, artists, and Risorgimento rhetoric?
- When, how, and why did regional medieval traditions – Sicilian, Neapolitan, Apulian, Lombard,

Tuscan, among others – become symbolic capital of an emerging national identity?

- How, when, and why did Art History emerge as a discipline, disentangling medieval objects from their ideological function?

- The conference also invites critical reflection on current terminology: what is the relevance of terms such as 'medievalism', 'medieval revival', and 'neo-medieval' in the context of the Italian visual arts?

Main Thematic Areas:

1. The life and critical reception of medieval objects: the selection, analysis, and appropriation of medieval art in the nineteenth century in the process of constructing a national imaginaire.

2. Exhibitions and institutions: the sites and instruments – exhibition events, institutions, catalogues, specialist journals, and learned societies – through which the Middle Ages became collective heritage and was transformed from a political tool into an object of scientific inquiry.

3. Neo-medieval production – inventing the Middle Ages: the arts of the nineteenth century – from history painting to musical theatre – that drew on the Middle Ages as a formal, iconographic, and narrative repertoire in the service of national identity formation.

Submissions:

We welcome proposals for 20-minute papers in Italian, English or German on specific case studies that engage with methodological questions and open research challenges. The conference provides ample space for discussion and is open to scholars at all career stages.

Interested applicants are invited to submit an abstract (max. 500 words) and a short academic CV (max. 300 words), in a single PDF file via the following link <https://recruitment.biblertz.it> by 30 June 2026. The outcome of the selection process will be communicated by 30 September 2026. The organizers will contribute to travel and accommodation expenses within the limits of available funding.

Organizers: Tanja Michalsky, Damiana Di Bonito, Alberto Pirro

Reference:

CFP: Reinventing the Middle Ages to Build the Nation (4-5 Feb 27). In: ArtHist.net, May 16, 2026 (accessed May 16, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/52461>>.