

Aesthetics of Facts and the Medieval Image (Basel, 11–12 Jun 26)

eikones - Zentrum für die Theorie und Geschichte des Bildes, Universität Basel
(eikones Forum, Rheinsprung 11, 4051 Basel), Jun 11–12, 2026

Masha Goldin

Conference organized by Masha Goldin.

The age of artificial intelligence with its dissemination of synthetic visual media forces those who are exposed to them to question the truth value of the visible. Consequent discussions concerning images and their authenticity, authority and potential as frauds are being catalyzed among regulators, image theorists, artists and the general public. What often goes unnoticed in these deliberations is that similar discussions were flaring up at different points in the global past, certainly during the Western Middle Ages - then, for example, debates concerning the reality of the sacred presence claimed to be contained in certain material things, were common. At the same time, visual objects were often forged to attest to an individual's or a group's - not always legitimate - claims for privilege. The capacity of an image to be perceived as representing truth is subject to cultural norms; medieval and contemporary norms are significantly different. But much like in our times, in the Middle Ages those who understood that truths could have predictable visual forms employed this knowledge to fabricate images claiming to represent theological, scientific, legal or historical "facts."

The conference Aesthetics of Facts and the Medieval Image is designed as an exploration of both the conditions due to which certain images claimed their viewer's trust, and their manipulation. We seek to examine approaches to truth in images in the pre-photographic, pre-industrial Middle Ages, expressed in images, texts and practices. Nevertheless, speakers are encouraged to think with ideas, questions and terms prompted by the current discourse on AI-generated imagery, which allow us to rethink medieval evaluations of the "real" in the visual. The conference will address such questions as: What conditions conferred a factual status upon certain medieval images or their contents? What about the appearance of such images shaped their efficacy, and perception as sacred images, material historic or legal evidence, and other visual embodiments of proclaimed truth? What were the limits of the representable in the Middle Ages? And how was the production of images regulated, given their potential to deceive, confuse and persuade?

Program

Thursday, 11 June

9:30-9:45 Coffee

9:45-10:00 Introduction

Masha Goldin (University of Basel)

Session 1: Matters of Facts

10:00-11:00 Blood Stained Rags and Written Speech. A Franciscan Aesthetics of Fact and the Challenge of the Stigmata

Nino Zchomelidse (Johns Hopkins University)

11:00-11:15 Break

11:15-12:15 San Pellegrino in Bominaco: Generating Sainthood through Artificial Imagery

Assaf Pinkus (University of Vienna)

12:15-13:30 Lunch Break

13:30-14:30 Fabricating Truth, Producing Authority: The Footprints of Christ and the Institutionalization of Fact in Medieval Rome

Warja Tolstoj (University of Basel)

14:30-14:45 Coffee

Session 2: Generative Images

14:45-15:45 Tragelaphos, BuffBaff and Shrimp Jesus: The Iconology of Empty Words and Hybrid Creatures

Thomas Rainer (University of Basel)

15:45-16:45 "Optic Intoxication" and the Power of Images in Early Islam

Nadia Ali (University of Aix-Marseille)

Friday, 12 June

Session 1: Evidence/Fiction

9:30-10:30 Imaging Acts, Facts, and Pacts in the Middle Ages. Looking at Old Technologies from an Age of New Technologies: Same Problems

Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak (New York University)

10:30-11:30 Written in Hebrew? Text, Image, and Images of Text in Fifteenth-Century German Lands

Reed O'Mara (Case Western Reserve University / Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte)

11:30-11:45 Break

Session 2: Authenticating Images

11:45-12:45 Micro-architecture as Protection and Sanction: The Insecurities of Public Images in the Later Middle Ages

Niko Munz (Christ Church, University of Oxford)

12:00-13:30 Lunch Break

ArtHist.net

13:30-14:15 Superscriptions: Labeling Objects in the Middle Ages
Masha Goldin (University of Basel)

14:15-15:00 Concluding Discussion

15:00 Apéro

Reference:

CONF: Aesthetics of Facts and the Medieval Image (Basel, 11-12 Jun 26). In: ArtHist.net, May 28, 2026
(accessed Jun 10, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/52586>>.