

## History as Argument (Louvain-la-Neuve, 18–19 Mar 27)

Louvain-la-Neuve, UCLouvain, Mar 18–19, 2027

Deadline: Oct 10, 2026

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History as Argument (14th–18th centuries).

This conference aims to examine how men and women in the modern era interacted with Christian artefacts and places inherited from the past, such as late antiquity or the Middle Ages. The conference will consider these artefacts and places as active elements of religious cultures, rather than passive relics. Specifically, it seeks to explore how a genuine historical awareness of the elements of Christian ritual, such as architecture, circulation, furnishings, painting, sculpture, gold and silverwork and textiles, developed during the modern era in the broadest sense (from the 14th to the 18th century).

What kind of behaviors and narratives did objects and architectural features inherited from the past imply in society? How can we reconcile the historical depth of objects and places with the ideals of reform and returning to the early Christian era? How can we combine these objects' connection to a founding event, such as a donation, the consecration of a church or the coronation of a king, with their repeated reactivation throughout the liturgy? Finally, how should we approach the future of objects, images or architectural features that were recognized for their historical value, yet have become outdated or even obsolete, particularly in the context of the religious Reformations?

This conference will explore these issues through three main themes, examining both how objects have been passed down through the ages and how perspectives on inherited objects and places have changed throughout the 'long modern era'.

Main Thematic Areas

### 1. A Multilayered Memory

Long before critical scholarship and an epistemology dealing with old objects emerged, these objects could be imbued with a historical depth, feeding into narratives, beliefs and practices. Networks of meaning (whether well-founded or not) were woven around them, sometimes overlapping with other objects.

In many cases, their memory was formed less through scholarly discourse and more organically, through the continuous presence of objects within the ecclesiastical environment and the associated customs and practices.

This research area examines the multiple logics and modalities that govern the long-term preservations of objects, or indeed the creation of a 'proto-history' of these objects, in relation to issues of memory, legitimization, or symbolic construction based on antiquity

### 2: The Emergence of Critical Historical Knowledge

In the modern era, architectural structures and artefacts from the past were sometimes examined through the lens of critical hindsight. Some scholars specializing in archival science and paleography developed critical approaches based on archival sources, collecting and editing old liturgical texts to construct a history of the Church's rituals.

Through travel or fieldwork, others sketched out an 'ethno-anthropology of ritual' (Xavier Bisaro). Finally, antiquarian scholars drew on archaeology, or the study of artefacts from the past, to discuss their antiquity.

The aim of this research area is therefore to reveal these discourses and link them to how they were produced and disseminated. Editing liturgical texts, conducting field investigations, carrying out early archaeological work, and using drawing and engraving were all practices that contributed to the historicization of ritual practices and the production of scholarly discourse on the Christian past.

### 3: Reinterpreting, updating and reinvestment

Far from being static, the architectural objects and features inherited from the past were de facto integrated into new arrangements and embedded within renewed networks of objects and images in the ecclesiastical space in the modern era. This integration often involved transformations, whether material (alterations, relocations, restorations) or semantic (reinterpretations, changes in status or function). Some features and objects fell into disuse, while others were reactivated or underwent a functional and symbolic redefinition. These dynamics emerged in the context of the Religious Reforms, which, altered – or failed to alter – the place and meaning of objects inherited from the past by redefining liturgical practices and devotional sensibilities.

The aim of this research area is to examine the practical methods of conserving, restoring and adapting these old elements, paying attention to the choices, trade-offs and discourses that accompanied these interventions. Specifically, we seek to understand how these objects were redefined, recontextualised, or conversely marginalised, in changing environments. Additionally, we will explore how the persistence of certain objects and architectural features may have stimulated anachronism, or even a certain type of historicism, in the artistic creation from the 14th to the 18th century.

Discussions may focus on the following questions:

- Why and how have objects from the past been preserved? Is this preservation the result of a deliberate selection strategy? Did people seek to justify the preservation of such items, and if so, how?
- How were old artefacts and architectural features incorporated into church practices and ecosystems? Did their uses evolve?
- How did people of the modern era define the antiquity of an object? When and how did they seek to date old objects? What does the 'antiquity' of an object mean in the writings of modern scholars? Does it refer to the early Christian period, the focal point of all liturgical reform, or, simply to a history spanning several centuries?
- How was this critical historical awareness formed? What were its methods and sources? What tools did it use (the creation of discourse, the reproduction in images, an awareness of styles and prioritized conservation)?
- Was there a historical awareness of artistic styles? How did it manifest itself?
- How did people perceive the historical depth of objects and architectural features? Was age an asset, or a sign of dilapidation that needed to be addressed?
- How did people perceive the obsolescence of certain liturgical elements inherited from the past?

Was there any awareness of these objects as heritage?

Submission guidelines:

Presentations may be delivered in French or English. Proposals, comprising a title, an abstract and a brief biographical and bibliographical note, must be compiled into a single PDF file and sent by the 10th of October at the latest to the following addresses: [emmanuel.joly@uclouvain.be](mailto:emmanuel.joly@uclouvain.be) and [julie.glodt@uclouvain.be](mailto:julie.glodt@uclouvain.be)

Organisation and expenses:

This conference will take place at UCLouvain (Louvain-la-Neuve) from the 18th to the 19th of March.

Reference:

CFP: History as Argument (Louvain-la-Neuve, 18-19 Mar 27). In: ArtHist.net, Jun 30, 2026 (accessed Jun 30, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/52835>>.