Smelly Renaissance (Basel, 6 Nov 26)

Pharmaziemuseum, Grosser Hörsaal, Totengässlein 3, 4051 Basel, 06.11.2026

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58. Basler Renaissancekolloquium HS 2026.
Smelly Renaissance .

Veranstalter: Departement Geschichte und Kunsthistorisches Seminar, Universität Basel .

The Renaissance street was a notoriously stinky place. Yet despite the richly odorous culture of the early modern period, the historical significance of smell has evaded careful scholarly scrutiny—no doubt due to Enlightenment-era biases that placed smell below the so-called “higher senses” and thus kept olfaction outside scientific enquiry, philosophy, and academic codification. And this despite the fact that the world of early modernity was more intensely fragranced than ever before and the social, medical, and symbolic roles of scents and aromatics only grew in importance from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Global shipping routes allowed for the routine arrival of spices and aromatics; changes in fashion more routinely incorporated smell as a critical component of both clothing design and textile maintenance; proto-industrial production met rising consumer demand; and changes in social structures and wealth distribution meant that the potential to deliberately alter scented experience was accessible to a wider segment of the population than ever before.

The inherently ephemeral nature of smell, the comparatively sparse nature of period archival documentation around many scented ingredients, and the relatively underdeveloped period discourse on olfactory (as opposed to musical, literary, artistic, and even gustatory) experience means that the study of smell in the early modern period necessarily poses methodological challenges. At the same time, such investigation has the potential to productively intersect with many issues that have in recent years become central to humanistic scholarship: the sensory and material turns, a globalization of traditional disciplinary divides and a renewed focus on colonialisms, the environmental humanities, theorizations of archival absence, and moves toward historical recreation and “making as knowing.” The 58th Basel Renaissance Colloquium thus advocates for scent’s potential centrality in uniting sometimes disparate discourses and generating interdisciplinary dialogue across the humanities and even sciences.

The event is thus particularly interested in exploring how considerations of smell intersect with more traditional evaluations of historical shifts, material and visual culture, and literary production. In this, it also seeks to push beyond mere reconstruction of period smellscapes, a distinct trend in the subfield, to deal with the theoretical, methodological, and historiographic considerations of recentering smell in Renaissance studies.

The Smelly Renaissance is intended as an interdisciplinary forum for scholars working across sen-

sory history, material culture studies, literary production, global and colonial histories, and experimental or reconstruction-based approaches to the past. The colloquium will allow for individual presentations of about 30 minutes in length, followed by questions and a final roundtable discussion.

PROGRAM
6. November 2026, 14.15–18.30 Uhr
Pharmaziemuseum, Grosser Hörsaal, Totengässlein 3, 4051 Basel

14.15–14.30 Welcome & Introduction

14.30–15.00 Sarah-Maria Schober (Lucerne), Mixing Scent – Making Race? Early Modern Perfumery and the Arts of Distance

15.00–15.20 Discussion

15.20–15.40 Coffee break

15.40–16.10 Aaron M. Hyman (Basel), Smelling Clean in the Renaissance

16.10–16.30 Discussion

16.30–16.50 Coffee break

16.50–17.20 Caro Verbeek (Amsterdam), On Musico-Olfactory Museology: How to Stage Smell in Relation to Sound, or a Case of ‹Smound› at Kunstmuseum Den Haag

17.20–17.40 Discussion

17.40–17.45 Comfort break

17.45–18.30 Final roundtable

Online-Zuschaltung: Die Vorträge und Diskussionen können auch per livestream verfolgt werden; eine aktive Teilnahme ist in diesem Format nicht möglich.

Anmeldung: Melden Sie sich für Ihre Teilnahme (sowohl physisch wie im livestream) unter folgender Webadresse an: https://dg.philhist.unibas.ch/de/forschung/forschungskolloquien/basler-renaissancekolloquium/

Kontakt: renaissance@unibas.ch

Outline & Abstracts: www.renaissancen.ch

Quellennachweis:
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