Art and Architecture in the Alps, 1000–1900 CE (Florence, 15-16 Mar 27)

Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut (Florence, Italy), Mar 15–16, 2027
Deadline: Nov 27, 2026

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Place, Passage, Ecology: Art and Architecture in the Alps (1000–1900 CE).

The Alps, stretching from present-day France to Slovenia, have frequently been considered a geographic, climatic, and cultural barrier separating northern Europe from the Italian Peninsula and the Mediterranean. Yet, while their imposing peaks and challenging terrain constrained movement, Alpine valleys and passes offered crucial routes for trade, pilgrimage, military campaigns, and the transit of artists, objects, materials, and ideas. Looking beyond the mountains as either obstacle or thoroughfare, “Place, Passage, Ecology” foregrounds the Alpine regions’ histories from within, considering these landscapes as places of settlement, artistic production, and the formation of local identities, where environmental conditions shaped lives and relationships with the natural world. The chronological scope spans from 1000 to 1900 CE, a period that encompasses the Little Ice Age and its far-reaching political and cultural consequences. The conference investigates how forms of mobility transformed art and architecture, from the seasonal migrations of Alpine herders and craftspeople to imperial expeditions, pilgrimage, and trade. While many of these patterns persist to the present, the long nineteenth century witnessed fundamental changes. As glaciers began to retreat, railway tunnels and other transportation infrastructure altered movement through the mountains, accompanying the rise of recreational mountaineering and Alpine tourism that laid the groundwork for twentieth-century mass tourism and its environmental consequences.

This conference is organized around three interconnected themes: the Alps as Place, the Alps as Passage, and Alpine Ecologies. “The Alps as Place” considers the distinctiveness of Alpine communities, religious institutions, and artistic production. Topics may explore the role of towns, monasteries, hospices, and churches in organizing Alpine spaces; painters, sculptors, and stonemasons serving tradespeople, mining communities, vintners, or princely courts; and the Alpine landscape itself, a product of human intervention, together with the paintings, prints, and other media that shaped not only an external gaze on the region and the imagery associated with it, but also the formation of identities within it. “The Alps as Passage” examines how mountain ranges can connect and divide geographical regions, inviting comparison with recent scholarship that treats rivers and seas as cultural spheres in their own right. Even as communities a few kilometers apart could remain isolated from one another, vital North-South and East-West crossings facilitated the circulation of people, commodities––such as precious textiles, metals, stone, and wood––as well as artistic practices and ideas across the mountains for centuries. The mobility of

materials, including those extracted from the mountains themselves, connects to the third theme, “Alpine Ecologies.” Extending beyond extraction and resource exploitation, this segment considers the fragile interdependence of human and non-human worlds in the Alps. Topics may include the presence and transformation of the glaciers; the ways locally available stone, mineral, timber, and animal-derived materials informed artistic practices and forms; and the climatic conditions that gave rise to particular architectural typologies and conditioned daily life. These concerns remain urgent today, as the disappearance of Alpine glaciers and environmental instability caused by climate change further endanger local communities and tourists alike.

We welcome papers on images, buildings, sites, and objects that examine the Alps as a region of artistic production shaped by its landscapes, resources, and patterns of human intervention. Methodological and theoretical interventions that reconsider the relationships between geographical conditions and artistic practices are equally encouraged. Contributions may also address broader political, social, and ecological concerns, including territorial expansion, gender, tourism, and historical changes to landscapes and topographies.

Submission Guidelines

We invite proposals for 20-minute papers.

Please submit an abstract of no more than 300 words and a short biographical note (maximum 150 words) to alpsconference2027@gmail.com by 27 November 2026.

The notifications of acceptance will be sent by 15 December 2026.

The conference will take place on 15–16 March 2027 at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut, Florence, Italy.

This conference is a collaboration of Columbia University, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut, Florence, Italy.

Organizers: Sarah Cohen (Columbia University and KHI), Cynthia Fang (UCLA), Emma Leidy (Columbia University), and Laura Valterio (KHI).

With support from: Columbia University, Department of Art History and Archaeology; UCLA, Hannah and Edward Carter Endowment for European Art, the Clark Research Center; Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut, Florence, Italy.

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Reference:
CFP: Art and Architecture in the Alps, 1000–1900 CE (Florence, 15-16 Mar 27). In: ArtHist.net, Nov 4, 2026 (accessed Nov 4, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/54826>.