Votive Patronage (Florence/online, 10-11 Dec 26)

Netherlands Interuniversity Institute for Art History (NIKI), Viale Torricelli 5, Florence / Online, Dec 10–11, 2026

Eelco Nagelsmit

Art and Architecture Ex-Voto in Early Modernity.

This symposium reexamines the patronage of art and architecture within early modern votive culture (c. 1400–1800), clarifying how such works expressed and fulfilled vows. It proceeds from the premise that votive donations offer a distinctive lens onto early modern subjectivity, blurring boundaries between personal and communal devotion, piety and contract, art and ritual. The votive category was never static, spanning individual ex-voto paintings and figurines, interior ensembles like altar retables, micro-architectural silverwork, textile art, urban monuments such as plague columns, pilgrimage shrines and votive churches, and ephemera like liturgies, plays, and votive masses. In these works, artistic form carried performative power binding human and divine actors. Drawing on recent scholarship in art history, the anthropology of art and religion, and visual and material culture studies, the symposium explores how commissioning, crafting, and displaying votive art and architecture shaped perceptions of divine agency and human intention, focusing especially on the circumstances of vows and their fulfillment across varied religious, social, and political contexts.

The complexity of votive patronage raises questions for historians. What sources illuminate the sequence of events, the content of vows, and the nature of commissions? How do formal or iconographic qualities relate to the vow or underlying predicament? Votives materialize a wish or thanksgiving, redeeming a vow made in peril or fulfilling a desire or atonement. Yet it is often unclear whether they were propitiatory offerings or debts repaid to the divine. This ambivalent, suspended temporal structure, in which a “votive contract” or “votive scenario” unfolds, lies at the heart of these unresolved questions. The Maussian model of reciprocal gift-exchange has also been questioned as a suitable frame for the vertical relationship between votaries and the divine. Whether through ascetic practice, pilgrimage, or donating objects sized to match the vow (e.g. the dimensions of a healed body part), votaries effectively “offered themselves”: a logic at once magical and economic, raising questions about patronage, design, execution, display, and reception.

Programme:

Thursday, 10 December

10:30
Coffee/Tea

11:00

Michael W. Kwakkelstein (NIKI/Utrecht University)
Director's Welcome

11:10
Eelco Nagelsmit (VU Amsterdam/Bibliotheca Hertziana-MPI)
Introduction to the Conference

Session I
Form, Meaning, Function, and Agency
Chair: Stella Sonia Chiodo (University of Florence)

11:30
Robert Maniura (Birkbeck, University of London)
"Revisiting Votive Performativity: Actions, Objects and Art"

12:15
Philip Muijtjens (Université Catholique de Louvain/Vrije Universiteit Brussel)
"Plautilla Nelli's Altarpiece for Santa Lucia, Pistoia: A Large Votive Project"

13:00
Lunch

Session II
Vows, Narration, and Memory
Chair: Andrew Horn (Loyola University of Chicago's John Felice Rome Center)

14:15
Louise Marshall (University of Sydney)
"Securing Salvation: Renaissance Plague Votives"

15:00
Mitchell B. Merback (Johns Hopkins University)
"'Ich, lüdwig klingkhamer ...' On the Destination and Function of an Early Tyrolean War Votive" (on-line presentation)

15:45
Coffee/Tea

Session III
Economy, Calamity, and Collective Experience
Chair: Scott Nethersole (Radboud University Nijmegen)

16:00
Andrew Hopkins (University of L'Aquila)
"Ex-votos and votive churches in Early Modern Venice"

16:45
Anne Lepoittevin (Université de Paris-Sorbonne IV)
"Dalla peste alla gloria: Santa Maria in Campitelli e la captazione chigiana del voto di Roma"

17:30
Closing remarks of the day

Friday, 11 December

9:30
Excursion to San Miniato al Monte (led by Philip Muijtjens)

11:00
Coffee/Tea

Session IV
Identity and Conversion
Chair: Josephine Neil (University of Oxford)

11:15
Carol M. Richardson (University of Edinburgh)
"'A memorandum of any that were ever cured of Folly': ex votos in Reformation England"

12:00
Ulrich Heinen (University of Wuppertal)
"The Pro-Voto Pledge of the Neuburg Court Church (1618) as an Argument for Reconversion: Rubens's Large Last Judgment between the Chalice Miracle of Henry II and a Visible Vow of Wolfgang Wilhelm"

12:45
Lunch

Session V
Dynastic Concerns
Chair: Isabelle Hoover (University of Cambridge)

14:00
Susan Klaiber (Winterthur, Switzerland)
"Votive Churches of the Savoy Dynasty: Themes and Variations"

14:45
Friedrich Polleross (University of Vienna)
"Public Monuments in Vienna as Ex-Voto and Clandestine Representations of the Emperors Leopold I, Joseph I and Charles VI"

15:30
Coffee/Tea

15:45
Diana Rafaela Pereira (University of Porto)
"Clothing Our Lady: Votive Practice and the Agency of Marian Images in Early Modern Portugal"

16:30

Closing remarks and discussion

17:00
Reception

Please register for online or in-person attendance by 7 December 2026 here:
https://www.niki-florence.org/in-person-online-conference-on-december-10-11-2026-votive-patronage-art-and-architecture-ex-voto-in-early-modernity/

Reference:
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