
‘IMAGE OF DEVOTION’, A CONCEPT TO BE DECONSTRUCTED?

HISTORIOGRAPHICAL APPROACHES TO DEVOTIONAL IMAGES IN EUROPE (14TH-18TH CENTURIES)

CALL FOR PAPERS

Study day of the research group ‘Essais de terminologie(s).
Images, littérature, spiritualité’ of the GEMCA
Louvain-la-Neuve, 27-28 November 2025

Bringing together researchers from a variety of disciplines, the ‘Essais de terminologie(s). Images, littérature, spiritualité’ group, which was set up at GEMCA in 2022, aims at collectively questioning our uses of terms relating to the uses of images and literature in the field of spirituality in the late medieval and early modern period: devotional images, pious images, devotional manuals, spiritual treatises, devotion, meditation, contemplation, piety, prayer, visionary experience, mysticism, apparitions, etc.

We started from the observation that our use of these terms varies, sometimes greatly, from one discipline to another and according to historiographical traditions. Depending on the period, the geographical region or the corpus under consideration, different terms are frequently used to describe similar practices and objects. In addition, it is not uncommon to observe a certain fluctuation in the vocabulary used to identify images, texts and their uses within a vast range of spiritual practices. We are therefore looking collectively at how we use these vocabularies in order to define our research objects more precisely and to propose more informed names for them. This exploration is based on the combined study of two main types of corpuses: secondary literature and primary sources.

In the context of this study day, for which we would like to welcome people from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, we wish to broaden our joint work and our network by focusing on the notion of the ‘image of devotion’ or devotional image (*image dévotionnelle*, *Andachsbild*) and the practices associated with it (devotion, piety, prayer, meditation, etc.). Using a variety of approaches and corpuses (both geographical and chronological), the aim of the study day is to collectively question the generic concept of the ‘devotional image’ from a historiographical, epistemological and terminological perspective.

This line of enquiry is prompted by one observation: whatever the disciplinary field or historiographical tradition, there is no consensus on the terminology used to describe and precisely define the uses of images in what is usually described as the ‘devotional’ field. This lack of consensus, which is a rich source of interpretation, reflects the absence, in primary

sources, of a stable vocabulary that has been established over the centuries to describe these interactions with images. The geographical diversity and plasticity of languages - and, more broadly, of language, which struggles to describe spiritual phenomena of the unspeakable order - has given rise to a plurality of terms, definitions and, above all, lexical usages. In addition to these historical observations, there is the necessary variety of intellectual, sometimes ideological or even political, and more broadly linguistic and geographical contexts within which researchers produce knowledge, select their corpus and establish terminologies.

The study day will consider the absence of a terminological consensus as a starting point rather than as an observation to be reinforced by case studies. It is based on two complementary dynamics: taking a critical look at historiography and examining the terminologies that are nurtured and even produced by current research. It therefore aims to examine our appropriation of notions on the basis of their historical uses, as well as their historiographical variations - from one person to another or over the course of one person's scientific output. This will involve examining the typological criteria used to define so-called devotional images and practices, from the reception of Panofsky's *Andachtsbild* to the history of the religious image discussed collectively under the direction of Philippe Martin, by looking at the 'issues and problems' of Olivier Christin's 'image of religion' and Sixten Ringbom's 'devotional images and imaginative devotions', or by considering, for example, the links between texts, practices and material and mental images in Marlene Hennessy's 'devotional present' or Daniel Arasse's 'devotional image', to name but a few famous precedents.

As a result, the discussions will focus as much on the history of images as on historiography. For example, in the field of devotional practices, is it more relevant to define the images themselves or the uses to which they are put? What term(s) should be used to designate the images involved in these practices? How does the idea of a devotion in front of the image differ from that of a cult of images? And from meditation? What role does orthopraxy (to a rule, a text with a spiritual aim, liturgical codes, implicit or explicit injunctions expressed by images) play in the nature and/or devotional use of an image? Secondly, and still by way of illustration, what is the history of this nature and/or these practices? In what way do historiographical uses of certain terminologies have heuristic value when applied to bodies of current research? Do these historiographical uses make it possible to build up a corpus today? Beyond this, how do certain historiographies and epistemologies, which a priori do not concern so-called devotional images, provide relevant notions capable of stimulating our discourse and our categories?

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

The study day will be held at UCLouvain (Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium) on 27 and 28 November 2025. It will consist of sessions at which papers (25-30 minutes) will be presented, followed by a talk by a member of our working group. Speakers will be invited to send a working paper or an extract from the sources studied a few days in advance, in order to stimulate discussion during the sessions. **Proposals for papers (in French or English), max. 1000 words long and accompanied by a brief biography, should be sent before 15 March to ingrid.falque@uclouvain.be.**