

History as Argument (14th–18th Centuries)

Call for papers (Conference March 18th-19th 2027 – Louvain-la-Neuve [BE])



The chapel of Our Lady of Halle (detail). Engraving by Lucas II Vorsterman

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future of objects, images or architectural features that were recognized for their historical value, yet have become outdated or even obsolete, particularly in the context of the religious Reformations?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

Area 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.

Area 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.

Area 3 : Reinterpreting, updating and reinvesting

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 2026 at the latest to the following addresses: emmanuel.joly@uclouvain.be and julie.glodt@uclouvain.be

This conference will take place at UCLouvain (Louvain-la-Neuve) from the 18th to the 19th of March 2027.

Selected Literature

- AGOSTI Barbara, *Collezionismo e archeologia cristiana nel Seicento. Federico Borromeo e il Medioevo artistico tra Roma e Milano*, Milan, Jaca Book, 1996.
- ARIBAUD Christine (éd.), *Destins d'étoffes : usages, ravaudages et réemplois des textiles sacrés, (XIV^e-XX^e siècles)*, [actes des Journées d'étude de l'AFET, Toulouse, janvier 1999], Toulouse, CNRS-Université de Toulouse-Le Mirail, 2006.
- L'Atlas Marianus de Wilhelm Gumpenberg : édition et traduction*, Neuchâtel, Alphil, 2015.
- BISARO Xavier, *L'abbé Lebeuf, prêtre de l'histoire*, Turnhout, Brepols, 2011.
- BISARO Xavier, *Le passé présent, une enquête liturgique dans la France du début du XVIII^e siècle*, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 2012 (Histoire religieuse de la France).
- Cordez Philippe, *Trésor, mémoire, merveilles. Les objets des églises au Moyen Âge*, Paris, EHESS, 2016.
- Fashion for God. Religious Textiles from Hidden Churches in the Dutch Republic 1580-1800*, Zwolle/Utrecht, Museum Catharijneconvent, 2023.
- GRODECKI Louis, *Le Moyen Âge retrouvé, de Saint Louis à Viollet-le-Duc*, Paris, Flammarion, 1990 (Idées et Recherches).
- Horn, Hauke, *Erinnerungen, geschrieben in Stein : Spuren der Vergangenheit in der mittelalterlichen Kirchenbaukultur*, Berlin, Deutsche Kunstverlag, 2017.
- KROESEN Justin, *The Lutheran Middle Ages. The Survival of Medieval Art in Protestant Churches in Germany*, Turnhout, Brepols-Harvey Miller Publishers, 2026.
- LOURS Mathieu, *L'autre temps des cathédrales : du concile de Trente à la Révolution française*, Paris, Picard, 2010.
- OTTENHEYM Konrad, *Romanesque Renaissance. Carolingian, Byzantine and Romanesque Buildings (800-1200) as a Source for New Antica Architecture in Early Modern Europe (1400-1700)*, Leiden, Brill, 2021.
- RITZ-GUIBERT Anne, *La collection Gaignières : Méthodes et finalités*, Paris, Société française d'archéologie, 2008.
- ROUSTEAU-CHAMBON Hélène, *Le gothique des Temps modernes. Architecture religieuse en milieu urbain*, Paris, Picard, 2003.
- Une description inédite de la cathédrale de Tournai au siècle des Lumières : les écrits du chanoine Denis-D. Waucquier, 1742-1752*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Ciaco-i6doc, 2017 (Tournai-Art et Histoire. Instruments de travail, 29).

Organisation

Organising committee

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Emmanuel Joly (UCLouvain – IRPA)
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