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Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Department of
Philosophy and
Cultural Heritage

PhD Programme in
the History of Arts



**12–14 October
2026**

CALL FOR PAPERS

8th International PhD Conference
in History of Arts

Organizing Committee:

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Matter of Time: Transformation, Persistence and Discontinuity in the Life of Artworks

Works of art do not pass through history unchanged. Indeed, the artworks that have come down to us are often the result of successive material and contextual passages: deterioration, restoration, remaking, reinstallation, and reuse. Art objects, installations, and performative devices are frequently reassembled, adjusted, restored, relocated, or reactivated in ways that alter not only their material conditions but also their functions, values, and historical intelligibility.

Over the last decades, increasing attention to the material dimension of artworks has shifted the focus toward the multiple processes through which they are preserved, modified, recontextualized and passed on, as exemplified by recent projects, such as the research group “Decay, Loss, and Conservation in Art History,” led by Francesca Borgo at the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History, which addresses these issues. In fact, materiality has long been central to art-historical reflection – from Dario Gamboni and David Bomford to more recent work in technical art history, conservation history, and material culture studies – yet it continues to generate new questions, methods, and lines of interpretation. In this regard, the 36th Congress of the Comité International d’Histoire de l’Art (2024), dedicated to materiality, demonstrated the ongoing relevance of this field for contemporary research.

From this perspective, the conference aims to examine how material and contextual processes affecting works of art and objects – such as partial or significant alterations, conservation, and exhibition practices – participate in shaping their historical identity by introducing elements of discontinuity, redefinition, or rupture. More broadly, it asks how such operations condition their capacity to persist through the years.

The conference welcomes contributions addressing these topics over a long historical period, from the Middle Ages to the present day, across diverse cultural and geographic contexts, and from a wide range of disciplinary perspectives. The following thematic areas are intended as starting points for reflection.

Alterations, unstable materialities, and ephemeral forms

This section explores the material transformations of artworks, with particular attention to deterioration, destruction – whether due to the degradation of the materials or intentional-

ly enacted as part of the artistic process – and other forms of alteration. It also welcomes contributions on temporary forms and devices, as well as on practices in which transformation or destruction constitutes an integral element of the artwork itself: from the processional, ritual, or theatrical apparatuses of the medieval and early modern periods to contemporary performances.

Movements and changing contexts

Artworks frequently move across different cultural, social, and institutional contexts. This section examines the material transformations resulting from such shifts, considering the interventions that accompany them, including additions, adaptations, and reorganizations. Special attention may be given to cases involving transfers across different geographic and cultural spheres, where shifts in context generate new material configurations and interpretative frameworks. How do these processes contribute to the preservation of artworks, or instead to their redefinition? Relevant topics include ritual refunctionalizations, as well as display and exhibition choices linked to the incorporation of artworks into different collecting, communal, or museum settings.

Practices of repurposing: reactivation and conservation

This section addresses the role of conservation and restoration, as well as processes such as replication, reconstruction, and the reactivation of theatrical or performative devices. Such cases invite reflection on the relationship between the preservation of the artwork’s initial condition and the transformative processes through which it persists, even as it undergoes transformations in the forms of its transmission and reception, including within historical memory. Contributions may also address how restoration practices themselves have evolved, and are still evolving, in response to changing technical knowledge, aesthetic criteria, and cultural values.

Roundtable: epistemological perspectives

Building on the discussions developed across the sessions, the conference will conclude with a roundtable designed to foster dialogue on how different methodological approaches – within art history and related disciplines – engage with artworks whose material condition and contextual meanings remain in flux.

Participation Guidelines

The conference is open to all PhD candidates and early-career researchers who have obtained their doctoral degree within three years of the conference date. Those interested in participating are invited to submit a proposal for a 20-minute presentation, in either English or Italian, to the following address:
arts.phdconference@unive.it

Submission deadline
24 May 2026

Notification of acceptance
8 June 2026

Conference languages
English and Italian

Proposals must include the following:

- name and surname
- contact details (e-mail address and telephone number)
- academic affiliation
- provisional title
- abstract (maximum 400 words)
- curriculum vitae (maximum 150 words)

Applicants are asked to combine all materials into a single PDF file, named according to the following format:
Surname_Name_Title
(for example: *Dimmick_Lawrence_Architectural Elements of Space Identity*).

The conference will take place in a hybrid format. While in-person participation is preferred, the organizing committee will also consider requests to present remotely. There is no registration fee; however, participants will be expected to cover their own travel and accommodation expenses.

The conference proceedings are planned for publication. Submission of a written version of the paper for publication is optional and is not a condition for participation. For those interested in having their paper included in the volume, a draft version must be submitted before the conference. Further information will be communicated to selected participants.