

'God is in the Details' – The Art of Detail in the Middle Ages
Medieval Postgraduate Colloquium
Friday 29th April 2022, 10am – 6pm

Abstracts and Biographies

SESSION 1 - Marginal, Fragmentary, Isolated: Giving Minutiae Centre Stage

Aidan Valente (University of Cambridge) – *Marginalia in Stone: The Evolution of Allegory and Classicism on the Fonte Gaia*

Abstract: The Victoria & Albert and Metropolitan Museum drawing fragments documenting an early planned stage for Jacopo della Quercia's Fonte Gaia (1409-1419) include four parapet statues either removed or changed in design from the fountain's executed appearance. Although usually identified as Acca Larenzia, foster-mother of Romulus and Remus, close examination of details on the left-hand female statue reveals that della Quercia followed a Sienese tradition of depicting Eve with her sons Cain and Abel. Paired with Rea Silvia opposite, the statues relate to the relief sculptures of Mary and the Virtues below and shed light on the allegorical interpretation of the "marginal" ape and dog not included in della Quercia's final design. Due to changing Sienese claims to Roman heritage, della Quercia also removed the iconographic details from both female statues, creating two "Anti-Subject" works in his increasingly Classicizing style that purposefully lack a single allegorical meaning. Understanding their significance explains why the statues were marginalized and omitted when Tito Sarocchi carved his 19th century replica for the Fonte Gaia.

Short biography: Aidan Valente is an MPhil student in the History of Art and Architecture at the University of Cambridge. He received his BA from Washington & Lee University, where he was a Mellon Undergraduate Fellow in Digital Humanities and an inaugural student contributor to the visionary DH project Florence As It Was. His academic work focuses on the art and architecture of Trecento Italian cities as well as questions of influence and patronage related to the Avignon Papacy. He is particularly drawn to issues of multisensory aesthetics, the interplay between theology, semiotics, and medieval iconography, and the experiential aspect of the medieval (un)built environment.

Lydia Fisher (University of Exeter) – *A Window into Faith: The Value of Studying Stained Glass Fragments*

Abstract: Stained glass windows were once a dominant focal feature within the visual environment of the late medieval parish church. Whilst the adoption of religious reform gradually altered the infrastructure and décor of parish worship, pieces of stained glass were more likely to survive than any other pre-Reformation feature due to the economic consequences of iconoclastic destruction. A large and rich variety of fragments still survive in parish churches today providing valuable insights into the intersection of art and religious practice in the locality. However, this material has traditionally been overlooked due to the interpretive challenges of analysing isolated remains and details in a reduced form. As a result, the meaning of these humble remnants is devalued and a greater weight of research is focussed upon uniquely preserved and complete programmes found at churches such as Fairford, or 'great sites' such as Wells cathedral.

Therefore, this paper constitutes a call for studying humble and seemingly insignificant remains of stained glass. It will consider examples of extant pieces of glass situated in churches across the South West of England, such as Bampton and Lanteglos-by-Fowey. It will be argued that far from impairing our ability to view the whole, a scrutiny of detail in this form holds the potential to shed light upon and enhance our understanding of a variety of wider themes, such as devotional experience, social dynamics and religious change.

Short biography: Lydia Fisher is a final year doctoral candidate in the History and Art History departments at the University of Exeter, working under the supervision of Professors James Clark and Fabrizio Nevola. Her current research project focusses on surviving late medieval stained-glass schemes and fragments across the South West of England, seeking to understand their role in the religious practice and social dynamics of the parish church. She is the Postgraduate Representative of Exeter's Centre for Medieval Studies and contributes to courses on historical methods, religion, society and material culture across both History and Art History.

Jessica Gasson (The Courtauld Institute of Art) – *Woven Complexities: Untangling the Uses of Silk, Gold and Wool in the V&A Passion Tapestry*

Abstract: This paper examines the optical approaches to conveying material surfaces in an early fifteenth century tapestry. The V&A Passion tapestry measures 105.5x304cm, it is minutely woven with gold and silver thread, many shades of silk, and multiple gauges of wool. Its material richness is anomalous among the surviving tapestries from the early fifteenth century, most of which are larger, woven solely with wool and a narrower spectrum of colours. The V&A Passion tapestry makes extraordinary use of the reflective properties of its expanded range of materials to communicate other textural surfaces through small, often subtle, but brilliant detailing within the weaving: flesh is woven with wool but fingernails are woven in silk, pearls combine the lustre of white silk with the shine of silver. These technical choices evince a highly developed practice and a specialised industry that employed a sophisticated catalogue of optical devices. This case study will consider the production and function an overlooked class of early tapestry weaving that differed from conventional tapestries in their techniques, material, scale and use.

Short Biography: Jessica is a second-year PhD candidate. Her thesis, supervised by Professor Susie Nash, is titled 'Woven Complexity: understanding the textiles represented at the Burgundian Court, c.1420-c.1470' addressing the production and function of fifteenth-century textiles, with a particular focus on tapestries. Jessica completed a Fine Art MA at Edinburgh University. She is interested in textile production broadly and is co-organiser of The Courtauld Textile Research Group.

SESSION 2 - Desire for Detail: Motives and Meanings

Danielle Omesi Moisa (Tel Aviv University) – *Romanesque Horror Vacui: Ornamental Density in Architectural Sculpture as an Expression of Fear of the Absence of Creation and Creator*

Abstract: The term *horror vacui* (*kenophobia*) in modern art history designates "a tendency or predilection for filling up the available space of a composition [...] by means of additional or incidental elements" (Riegl, 1992) in artworks; a tendency regarded as "decorative", folkloristic, and even barbaric. Despite post-colonial criticism, the concept is still used to describe the sculptural clutter that characterizes twelfth-century ecclesiastical art.

In the proposed research, I shall re-examine the concept of *horror vacui* in relation to the packed surfaces of monumental architectural ornamentation of the Romanesque period in southern France and suggest that a true anxiety became visualized as abhorrence of empty space – perspectival as well as visual.

In 12th-century theological treatises, church buildings and structures were perceived as macrocosms while unarticulated matter and structure as void. Following the abhorrence of void from Aristotle to 12th-century hexameral literature, I will demonstrate that the visual density in iconic church portals might have represented the cosmic and divine presence, and undecorated elements the absence of creation and thus also of the Creator – engendering an existential fear of Chaos without God. As a case in point, I will refer to the ornamental scheme of the south portal of Saint-Pierre at Moissac.

If the stones lacked dense ornamentation, then, in the thinking of the time, the structure would reflect an empty universe, and perhaps also the absence of God, potentially undermining God's omnipotence and omnipresence in the Cosmos. Thus, ornamental density is conceptually anchored in theological metaphysics and empirically meant to serve Christian spiritual life as an active agent perpetuating the act of creation, imbuing ecclesiastical art with the presence of God.

Short biography: Danielle Omesi Moisa completed her BA degree with honors in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at The Open University of Israel. She is currently a doctoral candidate in the direct PhD track for outstanding students in the Art History Department at Tel Aviv University, working also as a teaching assistant in the 'Multidisciplinary Program in the Arts'.

Moisa was awarded a Varda and Boaz Dotan Scholarship for her MA studies in medieval art. She is currently writing up her pre-proposal for a doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Prof. Assaf Pinkus. Her work investigates Romanesque ornamental density through the perspective of twelfth-century theological metaphysics, suggesting a phenomenological reading of it as anagogical ontology; or, more simply put, as a perpetuation of the act of Creation and by extension the presence of the Creator in the ecclesiastic space.

Jordan Booker (University of York) – *It's All in the Details: Tracing Temporality in Early Netherlandish Painted Settings*

Abstract: In *Ode to a Grecian Urn*, John Keats views the urn's artistically-rendered world as one frozen in time:

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new[.]¹

True: painted scenes are well-placed to highlight the everlasting. It is more difficult to portray, in a static medium, the passage of time. However, taking the trivial as focal point, this paper suggests that, within some Early Netherlandish settings, are the small traces of temporality. A crack in stonework. A cobweb in a dark corner. A crease in fabric. All seemingly inconsequential details, and almost imperceptible, but nonetheless intentionally added by the artist. Given the prior lack of high-definition images, these settings' tinier details have been practically unacknowledged in scholarship. However, with the digitization of artworks (e.g. KIK-IRPA, Closer to Van Eyck), obscured details can finally be placed "under the microscope".

Each the result of a prior action or event unseen, such details can be read as indexical symbols of temporality, implying the passage of time and highlighting the transience of earthly matter. This paper explores the artist's motivations for such tiny additions and their impact on the overall scene, arguing that, when seen, these details hold the potential to disrupt "idealistic" interiors – challenging the way we interpret these fictive settings altogether.

1. John Keats, *Ode to a Grecian Urn*, 21-24. <<https://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/content/ode-grecian-urn>>

Short biography: Jordan Booker (née Cook) holds a First-Class BA(Hons) in English Literature from the University of Kent and an MA in Medieval Studies from the University of York. Her research project, "Settings and Subjects in Early Netherlandish Painting" is part of a Collaborative Doctoral Partnership between the University of York and The National Gallery. Focusing on the Workshop of Dieric Bouts, the project interrogates variances in painted settings, their possible meanings and their impact on viewers' interpretative experiences of religious subjects. Alongside her doctoral research, Jordan is currently a Curatorial Trainee at The Bowes Museum, County Durham.

Rachel Alban (*The Courtauld*) – *Framing in Detail: Small-scale Illumination Design as Cognitive Framing in late Timurid and early Safavid Literary Manuscripts*

Abstract: During the Timurid period, the painters who illustrated Persian literary manuscripts increasingly moved away from the epic presentation of narrative episodes, in which heroic figures dominate the pictorial field with bold planar designs. Instead, poetic manuscripts came to deploy a rhetoric of detail, from the reduced scale of figures to the complication of the pictorial field, as well as the inclusion of patterning and playful details. This trend was crucial to the illustrative function of the paintings, allowing painters to evoke the complex layers of mystical and literal interpretations both inherent in and brought to bear on the classical works of Persian poetry. However, the role of illumination both in the development and framing of this pictorial mode has been thus far overlooked. Although the decorative role of illumination has often been celebrated as elevating and enriching the luxury codex, this paper argues that it functioned in a more meaningful way. By attending to its architectural structure and its close relationship with prefatory paratexts, this paper presents illumination as a framing device analogous to the densely decorated architectural facades of buildings such as Shah-e Zinda and Masjid-e Jameh in Isfahan. Through a consideration of frame theory and close analysis of small-scale illumination design in manuscripts from late Timurid Herat and early Safavid Tabriz, illumination will be considered as a means of conditioning the viewer towards a posture of wonderment and close-looking, attuned to the subtle details which were interpretatively crucial to the illustrations.

Short biography: Rachel's PhD, supervised by Professor Sussan Babaie, explores a miniaturised mode of painting that flourished in Persian literary manuscripts from the fifteenth to the early sixteenth centuries. Her research interests focus on text-image relationships in illustrated manuscripts and the interpretative, material and experiential dimensions of size and scale. Her interdisciplinary approach is informed by a BA from the University of Oxford in English Language and Literature, followed by an MA by Research from York University on the cultural significance of size and scale in relation to the Tudor portrait miniature.

SESSION 3 - Rhetorical Flourishes: The Persuasive Power of Details

Sommer Hallquist (University of Cambridge) – *Authority is in the Details: Illuminating Apocrypha in the Late Middle Ages*

Abstract: This paper explores the use of detail in manuscript painting to express the validity of apocryphal narratives. A case study focused upon the late-medieval manuscript K.21, housed in the Library of St. John's College, Cambridge, will be presented. The creators of this densely-illuminated work employed details such as figural gesture to present specific reasoning for belief in the resurrection and assumption of the Virgin Mary. Created for use by a monk at St. Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury, manuscript K.21 features an extended textual-pictorial cycle presenting 101 events in the life of Christ and the Virgin. Near the end of the narrative, a unique miniature depicts the preparation of the Virgin's body for burial. This striking image not only represents the most disrobed representation of the Virgin in medieval art, but highlights her exposed breasts and abdomen with the gestures of surrounding figures. This miniature is located just two folios before a rare depiction of the Virgin's bodily resurrection and was designed as a way of reminding the reader of the dogmatically-grounded nature of the events presented, as argued within the authoritative writings of Pseudo-Augustine. The creators of the manuscript purposefully employed minute artistic details that highlight specific portions of the Virgin's body in order to display the patron's stance on this debated topic in medieval Marian theology; the final fate of the Virgin and her body. This reveals much concerning the identity and sophistication of the manuscript's patron, whose role in the construction of this narrative sequence is considered.

Short biography: Sommer Hallquist is a doctoral candidate in the History of Art at the University of Cambridge. She currently works under the supervision of Dr. Laura Slater and her research explores the role of images in late-medieval monastic devotion. Her thesis is focused on issues branching from the late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth-century English manuscript K.21, housed in the Library of St. John's College, Cambridge. Sommer is specifically interested in medieval concepts of historical veracity in apocryphal narratives and researches the way this was presented in book illumination.

Chloe Kellow (The Courtauld) – *From Contemplation to Self-Fashioning: Detail as Narrative Device in Plaques from the Lives of Christ and Saint James, The Altar of Saint James in Pistoia (1316-1371)* [NB Slightly Amended Title]

Abstract: The culture of relics depends upon an acceptance that the size of an object is not proportionate to its religious significance. As a typology, relics give weight to the notion that God is indeed in the details.

The Altar of Saint James (1287-1456), created to honour a relic of Saint James the Great, is an overwhelming sight to behold; a towering silver ensemble, comprised of 77 high-relief figures, 64 enamelled plaques, 33 historiated panels and numerous gems. It prompts an overarching question: how do we navigate objects of such scale without anatomising their elements, or abstracting the intricacy of their details? Further still, how and where do we begin with looking closely – and might this visual overload itself be a device?

Amidst the burgeoning sermon and text traditions of the late medieval period, evermore detailed versions of Biblical and hagiographical stories inspired the imaginations of audiences to dwell, contemplate and empathise. This culture of embellishing ancient stories with minute detail can be seen reflected in narrative cycles across the visual arts; from frescoes to pulpits and illuminations to metalwork plaques like those commissioned for the Altar of Saint James.

This paper focuses on the three silver panels which surround the altar block, illustrating stories from the Old and New testaments, and the hagiography of Saint James. By homing in on selected details, this paper will connect the micro and macro histories of the plaques to the chapel and the Altar to Pistoia, to explore how detail is a storytelling device, adapted by goldsmiths and patrons to engage viewers with particular themes, both civic and devotional.

Short biography: Chloe is a third-year PhD student at The Courtauld Institute of Art, funded by CHASE and supervised by Professor Joanna Cannon and Dr Jessica Barker. Her thesis focuses on the silver Altar of Saint James in Pistoia, to examine the long, iterative history of its numerous commissions, reconfiguration and material reuse. Chloe completed her BA at the University of Oxford and her MA at The Courtauld. She is Assistant Curator of the new V&A East Museum and has previously worked in curatorial roles across the V&A's Metalwork, Sculpture and Gilbert collections.

Michela Young (University of Cambridge) – *Saint John Gualbert and the Cross: Details of a Conversion Story in Creating the Cult of a Saint*

Abstract: Saint John Gualbert, founder of the Vallombrosan congregation, joined the religious life following a miraculous encounter with the bowing head of Christ in the church of San Miniato, Florence, on Good Friday c.1003, later committing himself to a staunch fight against simony. Thanks to a vast hagiographic tradition, details of Gualbert's conversion at the cross can be compared to that of Saint Francis, whose own cult began to flourish in Italy during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, a period which heralded the mendicant orders as champions of artistic innovation and saw the wide diffusion of imagery of Francis.

I argue that a codified iconography for Gualbert only began to emerge around 1300, centuries after his death in 1073 and canonisation in 1193. I suggest that this was prompted by discernible similarities in the narrative details of the two saints' respective miraculous encounters with the Crucified Christ, and the intentional embellishment of additional details to post-fourteenth century accounts of Gualbert's cross miracle, in order to perpetuate his role as instigator of the fight against simony and defender of the Church. I will thus consider how the detail of the cross became intrinsic to Gualbert's cult image and to the identity of the Vallombrosan congregation, as well as the means by which the visual cult of a saint is constructed.

Short biography: Michela Young is a PhD candidate at the University of Cambridge, having previously received her BA from the Courtauld in 2018. Her research focuses on the urban churches of the Vallombrosan congregation in Florence, offering a microhistory of the Florentine neighbourhood surrounding the churches of Santa Trinita and San Pancrazio, exploring the social and artistic relationships that characterised the area and their impact upon the fabric of the churches. Michela's broader research interests include the iconography of Saint John Gualbert, as well as the relationships between artworks, their spatial settings, and devotional practices within the church interior.

SESSION 4 - Transcendental and Transformational: 'God is in the Details'

Dagmar Thielen (Catholic University of Leuven) – *Multum in Parvo: The Intermedial Gothic Detail within the Symbolic Networks of the Ghent Altarpiece (1432)*

Abstract: Medieval symbols are more than referential images or linguistic metaphors. They are visual or verbal incarnations of a higher power. In the Gothic artwork, the symbol functions in the same way as a leaf within the structure of a tree. On its own, the symbol forms a microcosm of meaning and embodies a higher reality. In the artwork, it interacts with other symbols and thus gains an additional dimension of meaning with each interaction. Each symbolic network thereby functions within the organic whole of the artwork, supporting the creation of a sublime Gesamtbild in which each detail adds to the organic whole, whilst being a multifaceted cosmos of meaning on its own. The Gothic artwork thus functions into infinity on both measurable ends.

This presentation will focus on the Ghent Altarpiece (1432), where verbal and visual symbols are combined in an intermedial network of preachable and seeable Leitmotiven. Each symbolic detail on the altarpiece forms a gateway to a higher reality and adds to the organic whole that, as a reflection of Christian Liturgy, brings the believer into direct contact with the abstracted core of the transcendent. The famously detailed Eyckian mimesis adds a secondary layer to this multifaceted unity by creating a pseudorealistic reality where both the closest and nearest objects are painted with a greater detail than the human eye could perceive. With this, the multifaceted Gothic Detail has become both a visual reflection of the Divine gaze, and a transcendent reflection of Divine meaning.

Short biography: Dagmar Thielen (°1995) is a PhD student at the Catholic University of Leuven. In her doctoral research she analyzes the Nachleben of Late Gothic pictorial and ideological motifs in Modern Western European art history. In addition to her research Dagmar works as junior curator and is preparing a monograph on the pictorial Leitmotif in contemporary art, to be published in 2024 (WBooks Zwolle). During her studies, Dagmar held an internship at the Brussels Centre for the Study of Flemish Primitives (KIK-IRPA) and published two monographs on the Nachleben of the polyptych in contemporary art (WBooks, Zwolle; Kerber Verlag, Berlin)

Adela Foo (Yale University) – *Reflections of an Intermediary World: Considering the Mirror as a Threshold into Another World*

Abstract: In this presentation, I will focus on a 15th-century painting from the Metropolitan Museum of Art which depicts Iskandar judging a painting competition between a group of Greek and Chinese artists. This painting belongs to a Khamsa of the poet Nizami Ganjavi who describes that during the competition, the Greeks painted one wall and the Chinese polished another wall on the opposite side. In the end, when a curtain that was used to separate the artists was drawn, the Greek painting was reflected on the Chinese mirror. Both paintings are indistinguishable and Iskandar is left dejected at this wonder.

In addition to presenting the mirror as a tool of image-production, I suggest that the mirror can also be understood as a locus of manifestation for The World of Suspended Images. This was a philosophical concept conceived by Nizami's contemporary, al-Suhrawardi, who defines it as a sector of reality that resides between the immaterial and material worlds. Thus, confronted with a view of The World of Suspended Images on the Chinese mirror I the material world as embodied by the Greek painting, Iskandar must choose between the realities. Using al-Suhrawardi's theory as my framework, I will highlight specific details of the painting which demonstrate that the work is situated

between the world of the observer and the external domain that lies beyond the painting. Thus, to view a Persian painting is to embark on a visual journey to an alternative realm.

Short biography: Adela Foo studies Early Modern Islamic art at Yale University with a focus on the cross-cultural relations between Ming China and Timurid Persia. Her current research interests lie in a group of Timurid-era silk paintings that are scattered across the cities of Kuwait, Istanbul, New York and Boston. She received her BA from Bard College and her MA from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).

Juliette Brack (Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne) – *God is in Textile Patterns: Meditation on the Virgin's Cloth of Honour in Italian Devotional Panels*

Abstract: God's Incarnation is a central theme of Christianity, but it is also its greatest mystery. God became flesh, the very flesh that has been compared to a veil (Heb. 10: 19, 20). In the late Middle Ages, with the development of a more visual and material religion, artists used this textile metaphor to depict the Word made flesh and make it accessible to the senses. This is evidenced by the sumptuous cloth stretched behind the Virgin and Child in Italian devotional panels from the XVth century. Beyond honouring them, its magnificence reveals an ornamental aesthetic that invites oneself to take a closer look. It is common to observe that artists depict sinuous or wavy lines that sometimes form a series of spots. Such details could allude to the materiality of the fabric; however, their appearance is surprisingly abstract and stylised, far from the textiles' reality. Focusing on a significant example painted by the Venetian Giovanni Bellini, this paper aims to question the perception and meaning of these details in the context of the devotional experience offered by paintings meant to be seen up close. It will demonstrate that the fabric's materiality is what makes possible the manifestation of the unseen divinity. The abstraction of the material effects would suggest that the perception of these details is based on a different sense than the perception of reality. In the realm of the visible, the viewer is invited to contemplate the details in order to meditate on the invisible: the experience of the details would lead the devout beyond the forms of the material and ordinary world to live a spiritual experience.

Short biography: Juliette Brack is a PhD student in Art History at the Pantheon Sorbonne University in Paris. Her thesis, supervised by Professor Philippe Morel, focuses on the depiction of fabrics in religious paintings of the Italian Renaissance. She is interested in both the materiality and performative value of these motifs, which jointly participate in the revelation of the sacred in and through the image. Furthermore, she notably organised the event titled "Ritual and Images: Textiles and the Revelation of the Sacred" in May 2021 in Paris, at the National Institute of Art History, and is actually working toward the publishing of its proceedings.