**International Symposium**

***Ornamenta Sacra***

***Iconological and Anthropological Study of the Late Medieval and Early-Modern Liturgical Objects in a European Context (1400-1800)***

**Brussels, Royal Institute for Cultural Heritage**

**24-25-26 October 2019**

**State of the art**

Tucked away in church treasures or scattered in auction houses and second-hand markets, liturgical objects suffer from a disinterest or even a disdain from art historians. This bias is reinforced by their presumed decorative function and by their clerical dimension, which is perceived as ideologically out of fashion, even within the Catholic Church itself. Furthermore, a large majority of recent studies related to the connection between art and liturgy, mainly focusses on paintings and sculptures, leaving aside other cult objects. The few studies that do take these essential ritual instruments into consideration, are primarily devoted to the Middle Ages. The Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period have attracted far less attention, whereas the liturgy underwent profound transformations. Admittedly there are several studies limited to certain collections or types of objects, but we are still in need of a broader analysis instigated by recent methodological trends in historical anthropology and iconology, which have renewed our understanding of images and art objects.

**Objectives**

The general purpose of our symposium is to study this rich cultural heritage through interdisciplinary research as to contextualize the liturgical objects in their historical, spatial and cultural environment. This heritage is concerned with different kind of ceremonial objects – made of a wide variety of materials and techniques –that occupied a central place in the religious art of the past. We propose to explore issues related to the provenance, the nature (material, technical, stylistic, iconographic…) and the evolution of this production in order to gain a better understanding of its religious and artistic importance.

The historical anthropology of the visual, the sensible and the ritual will be the main methodological framework within which we encourage investigations in the material and symbolic nature as well as the spatial and ritual context of these objects, so as to provide a renewed analysis of their forms and functions.

This symposium invites papers dealing with one of the following main issues:

**Material and space**

In contrast to an approach to Art History that has long avoided the material dimension of images in favour of an often strictly stylistic or iconographic analysis, it is now understood that the properties and values of materials are part of the very meaning of works of art and the way in which they are received. It invites us to consider how materials generate certain forms and appearances, and how they bring about and maintain certain beliefs in the immanent power of objects, independent of their formal or representational value. This reflection is particularly relevant for liturgical objects made of a wide variety of materials (metals, wood, ivory, textiles…) whose symbolic meaning pertains to their efficacy.

It is also true with their spatiality. Inspired by several studies that have in recent years explored the relationship between art objects and the space they occupy, another aim of this symposium will be to understand the issues connected to the relationship between liturgical objects and their spatial environment. Indeed, we need to understand how liturgical objects formed body-parts of the space: their positions, their interaction between them, their status of inactivity (often veiled) towards activations are important signifiers that were consistently neglected in the liturgical studies. In short, as soon as we consider liturgical objects as dynamic spatial parameters, and not as static ‘passive’ containers, they will prove themselves as being part of a ‘liturgical choreography’.

**Art nexus and time**

The stress on their spatial environment also results in a new interest in ritual interactions. Liturgical objects were never isolated as works of art hanging in a museum; they were always located within a specific location and a network of artefacts gestures, words, sounds or smells. Recent research has plead to replace the work of art within a network of relationships. Alfred Gell speaks of an ‘art nexus’. Completing thus the traditional art historical approaches, research has attempted to understand the uses and practices that an art object can give rise to. From this, a body of thought on its functions and on its power to bring about actions or reactions has developed.

This approach could easily be applied to the study of liturgical objects which are endowed with a ritually instituted efficacy. To better apprehend this efficacy, a strictly stylistic and typological study — which has dominated research until now — cannot suffice any longer. After all, these objects ‘function’ only within a complex network or system of relations: relations with the people who ordered and manipulated them; with the ritualized time-space (dependent on the liturgical calendar and the structuration of sacred space); and finally, between the different objects themselves displayed and used in a certain order.

**Performativity and ritual**

The *Performative turn* in Humanities— in line with the renewed interest in rituals in their relations to objects, whether artistic or not — has opened up new avenues in the field of Art History. It had long been recognised that art could arouse an emotion, which in turn was able to provoke a motion (such as prayer, conversion, donation). In this respect, we may say that art is performative insofar as it engages the spectator in a performance; it is even possible to say that it is effective only when it is performed, in the sense of the *performing arts*. Since J.L. Austin’s ground-breaking work in the field of Linguistics, many scholars have considered the art object as an agent, that is to say, as an object endowed with an ability to act or to trigger reactions and not simply as a thing to be interpreted as a passive transporter of ideas. Their work has highlighted the way in which the belief in the agency of objects depends on a series of factors, ranging from their specific material and formal characteristics through to the ways in which they are displayed and the rituals surrounding them. Once more this can particularly be applied to liturgical objects which are the means and sometimes ends or focal point of the mass ritual.

**Synesthetic experience**

The issue of performativity also leads to a rich reflection on the aesthetic value of the objects under scrutiny, which contributes to an overall impression. We invite papers that will be taking advantage of recent studies on the history of senses and the sensible to shed new light on the synesthetic experience triggered by these objects. In fact, recent methodological impulses came from medieval historians who mapped out primary sources related to liturgy and the enveloping senses. A fundamental testing of these studies upon the material and contextual uses of the liturgical object as material carriers of synaesthesia is a highly innovative contribution to the space between Art History and Liturgical Studies.

**Art as ornament**

The symposium will also take advantage of the recent renewal of scholarship on ornament. Being no longer considered as a simple pattern, ornament is now approached as a complex phenomenon whose significance exceeds the strictly stylistic dimension. Its aesthetic dimension, far from being limited to the issue of taste and fashion, must be reintegrated within the realm of human intentions and actions. By serving with its aesthetic qualities the significations (symbolic, ritual…) of the object, the ornament acts on the spectator and makes him react in return. The way in which ornamentation affects meaning needs thus to be considered, and the way in which meaning is conveyed and often transformed by the force of the art objects, but also by the ornamental apparatus accompanying it and bringing it before the viewer also needs to be examined.

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