

Art and Religions

25th Spring School in Art History Lausanne-Neuchâtel, 2027

CALL FOR PROPOSALS

For over twenty years, the International Spring School in Art History has provided a unique space for training and dialogue for early-career researchers in art history from around the world. Supported by the International Research Training Network in Art History (RIFHA) – which brings together partner institutions in Germany, Canada, Spain, the United States, France, Italy, Japan, and Switzerland – it fosters the circulation of ideas and brings together different research traditions. Each edition addresses a transversal theme, common in all periods and cultural areas. This approach makes it possible to explore works of art from multiple perspectives and to bring into conversation methods drawn from art history, historiography, and related fields. Conceived as a genuine intellectual laboratory, the School encourages discussion, comparison, and experimentation. It offers each participant the opportunity to present their research within a collective, inter-institutional, and intergenerational framework, where individual approaches are enriched by collaborative work, exchanges among peers, and the productive clash of different perspectives.

The 25th edition will take place **from 21 to 25 June 2027**, in Switzerland, at the University of Lausanne and the University of Neuchâtel. Organised by Jan Blanc (University of Lausanne) and Valérie Kobi (University of Neuchâtel), with the collaboration of Tilleane Charavel (University of Lausanne) and Lara Pitteloud (University of Neuchâtel), it will bring together doctoral students, early-career researchers, and faculty members around a central theme of inquiry: “Art and Religions.”

This theme invites participants to explore the many ways in which artistic production interacts with, represents, transforms, critiques, or challenges religious phenomena. The aim is not to focus on any particular confessional or spiritual tradition, but rather to understand how images, objects, and spaces participate in the formation, dissemination, transformation, contestation, or rejection of beliefs. Proposals may therefore address forms of adherence, devotion, and appropriation as well as practices of critique, dissent, anticlericalism, desacralisation, or resistance to religious institutions and imaginaries. By examining these interactions, a number of fundamental questions come into focus: the role of art in constructing or challenging religious authority, its implication in ritual practices, the materiality of works of art, and the forms of power they embody, negotiate or contest.

The dialogue between art and religion, a constant throughout the centuries, does not refer to a single domain, but to a complex network of relations between belief and representation, cult and culture, materiality and transcendence. From ancient temples to contemporary installations, from medieval icons to certain present-day performances, works and objects of art appear as key vehicles through which societies give form to the divine, to faith, or to its absence, and through which they question, critique, or contest religious traditions and their representations. Far from revealing an intrinsic religious essence of art, this relationship brings to light a permanent tension between image and authority, visibility and prohibition, and memory and experience (Freedberg 1989; Belting 1998; Morgan 1998).

The 2027 International Spring School invites participants to examine this dialogue from a critical perspective, stepping back from the vague and contested category of 'spirituality'. Religion will be understood as a historical and social system, composed of practices, institutions, doctrines, and material mediations (Durkheim 1912; Mauss 1968). This approach makes it possible to reinstate religion's public, political, and anthropological dimensions, without presupposing its universal character, permanence, or the manifestations within the historical and cultural contexts examined.

The aim is to engage with a set of forms of mediation – images, objects, spaces, gestures, and narratives – through which societies have organised and legitimised, contested, or transformed their relationship to the visible and invisible world. Within this framework, art emerges as a shared language between faith and power, an agent of communication, persuasion, and teaching, but also of critique and contestation (Gell 1998; Pomian 2003).

This perspective calls for a resolutely interdisciplinary approach, grounded in the collaboration of art history, religious studies, visual anthropology, and the philosophy of images (Marin 1994; Mondzain 1996; Mitchell 2005). The organisers particularly encourage proposals that engage with the diversity of historical trajectories linking art and religion, within as well as beyond European and North American traditions, without positing a single model of development or secularisation. The aim is not to redefine a new category of 'sacred art', but to understand how, across time and cultures, art actively participates in the production, circulation, transformation, critique, or rejection of beliefs.

Thematic Axes

We propose to organise our collective reflection around six major axes, conceived to foster dialogue among specialists from different periods, disciplines, and cultures. These axes are built around deliberately cross-disciplinary and comparative approach: they invite participants to combine tools and methods from art history, anthropology, religious studies, visual studies, and philosophy, in order to move beyond the usual chronological, cultural, and geographical boundaries. From Antiquity to the contemporary period, from European traditions to non-

Western cultures, participants will be able to situate their contributions within one of these axes or explore the intersections between several of them.

The organisers particularly encourage proposals that examine the diversity of historical configurations linking art and religion across different cultural contexts, without presupposing a single model of development, secularisation, or religious engagement. The aim is to build a collective reflection on the ways in which the arts have, over the centuries, represented, accompanied, transformed, contested, or reinvented beliefs, religious practices, and the imaginaries associated with the divine, the sacred, or their outright contestation.

Through this open and comparative approach, the 2027 Spring School aims to offer a forum for research and discussion in which perspectives intersect and the relationship between artistic production, religious experience, forms of belief, and practices of contestation is reconsidered in all its complexity.

1. Divine Images, Idols, and Aniconism

The relationship between art and religion is enacted first of all around a fundamental question: how can the divine be represented, and should it be represented at all? Every religious tradition has formulated its own rules of the visible, defining what may be shown of the sacred and the manner in which it may be displayed. These choices express not only artistic options, but also theological conceptions, spiritual hierarchies, and forms of authority. Some cultures have exalted the image and its power (iconophilia, or even iconodulia), while others have restricted it (aniconism) or banned it altogether (iconoclasm). These regimes of the visible reflect the way in which each community organises its relationship to the divine, to transcendence, and to authority (Mondzain 1996; Belting 1998; Koerner 2004).

But religious images do not merely represent the divine: they act. Their force resides in a logic of agency and presence, in a capacity to move, protect, heal, or persuade, as David Freedberg (1989) and Caroline Walker Bynum (2011) have demonstrated. Far from being simple representations, icons, sculptures, relics, buildings, and ritual objects function as active mediations between the visible and the invisible realms. They embody a bond between body, matter, and belief, and may be perceived as instruments of spiritual action. Some of these works were thus invested in a particular aura, becoming miraculous or protective images, objects of veneration and power. Others, by contrast, were denounced as instruments of illusion, superstition, or domination, provoking reactions of rejection, destruction, or reinterpretation. Others still, judged suspect or idolatrous, were censored, destroyed, or reinvented.

The comparative study of doctrines of the image, from Christian iconophilia to Jewish and Muslim aniconism, makes it possible to understand these tensions between veneration and suspicion, presence and prohibition (Brown 1981; Geary 1990; Mathews 1993; Gruber 2019). The legends of *acheiropoietic* images ('not made by human hands'), the debates over their

spiritual efficacy, and the Byzantine, Protestant, or contemporary iconoclastic crises all demonstrate the extent to which the question of the religious image exceeds that of style. Religious art is not merely a collection of forms. It constitutes a use of matter, a way of rendering the sacred visible, of transmitting, transforming, questioning, and sometimes contesting it.

2. Art, Ritual, and Efficacy

Religious art is not reducible to what is seen. It engages the whole body in a sensory experience of the sacred. The scent of incense, the light of candles, the sound of bells, the texture of fabrics, and the rhythm of processions compose a sensory universe in which every perception becomes a form of participation in faith. These elements are not mere ornaments. They construct an atmosphere conducive to devotion, foster prayer, and reinforce communion among the faithful. As Richard Davis (1997), Jeffrey Hamburger (1998), and David Morgan (2015) have shown, this multisensoriality grounds a genuine anthropology of religion. Matter, colour, light, and music each serve as mediators between the human and the divine, transforming belief into lived experience.

In all cultures, art occupies an essential place in the staging of ritual. Through form, sound, light, and movement, it intensifies the presence of the divine and reinforces the cohesion of the believing community. From ancient temples to Christian liturgies, from Hindu or Buddhist ceremonies to contemporary performances that re-enact sacred gestures, works of art participate actively in the dynamics of ritual. This efficacy is not merely symbolic, but also concrete. Relics, processional statues, dressed images, offerings, and ex-votos act by arousing emotion, prayer, healing, or protection. In this, they illustrate art's capacity to become an operator of spiritual power.

The study of these practices, at the intersection of anthropology, art history, and sensory studies, shows how religious art acts upon the body and faith itself; how it makes one feel, see, and believe; but also how certain artistic practices, religious or otherwise, question, subvert, contest, or deconstruct these mechanisms of adherence and symbolic efficacy (Davis 1997; Morgan 1998; Hamburger 1998; Bynum 2011).

3. Sacred Spaces and Visual Programmes

Religious architecture has likewise always been one of the most powerful means of rendering the presence of the divine visible. From ancient temples to Gothic cathedrals, from mosques, pagodas, and synagogues, all civilisations have sought to create spaces capable of accommodating prayer, contemplation, and community. These spaces are not limited to a practical function. They materialise the sacred, orient perception, and structure ritual. Through light, sound, matter, and movement, they shape a sensory and spiritual experience that connects the faithful to transcendence (Cormack 2000; Kieckhefer 2004; Pentcheva 2017).

The works that adorn or inhabit these spaces, frescoes, mosaics, stained glass, sculptures, and liturgical objects, contribute fully to this staging of the sacred. They guide the gaze, accompany the gestures of worship, and establish an atmosphere conducive to contemplation. To understand these forms of mediation is to analyse how artists and patrons conceived coherent visual programmes, adapted to the topography of the space and to the requirements of the liturgy. Whether in medieval chapels, baroque sanctuaries, Buddhist stupas, or modern synagogues, each architectural form expresses a particular way of connecting image, body, and transcendence.

Moreover, sacred spaces are never fixed: they are transformed, reinvented, and transmitted from one culture to another. Religious history is made of conversions, sharings, and reappropriations. Ancient temples have become churches, churches have been transformed into mosques, and some sanctuaries have been used by multiple confessions. These mutations have fostered visual dialogues and formal hybridisations, revealing exchanges as much as tensions between traditions. They have also given rise to conflicts of appropriation, acts of destruction, effacement, and competing reinterpretations of spaces and their uses.

To study these spaces in motion is therefore to reflect on the social, political, and religious uses of the sacred as a field of negotiation and power relations, in which forms express collective memory, shared identities, and the encounter between cultures (Panofsky 1946; Cutler 1994).

4. Patrons, Authorities, and the Pedagogies of Belief

In all societies, religious art is situated at the crossroads of power, authority, and belief. Spiritual institutions and political authorities alike have constantly used images, architecture, music, and the staging of worship to assert their legitimacy, defend their orthodoxy, and shape collective faith. In this context, ornament also presents itself as an instrument of spiritual governance, one that teaches, persuades, moves, and unifies. This axis thus addresses religious art as a social and institutional phenomenon, revealing the close links between creation, hierarchy, and dogma (Koerner 2004; Hall 2011).

The first task is to identify the agents of this production, whether members of the clergy, lay patrons, religious orders, sovereigns, or theocratic states. All of them commissioned works, buildings, and liturgical objects with a specific purpose: to propagate a doctrine, reaffirm an authority, or consolidate a communal identity. Devotional painting, narrative altarpieces, the great decorative programmes of Gothic cathedrals or seventeenth-century chapels, and the images disseminated in the modern era to counter the Reformation, all belong to a genuine visual pedagogy of belief (Duby 2002; Wirth 2011).

Yet this alliance between art and power has never been unambiguous. The image, as an instrument of persuasion, has also provoked suspicion or rejection. Certain rigorist movements, such as Protestant, Jansenist, and Puritan movements, refused recourse to the

visual arts, or at least to certain forms of visual representation, in the name of a pure faith, preferring the simplicity of the word to the seduction of form. The destruction of images, censorship, and decorative austerity then become, paradoxically, other ways of signifying religious fervour. Other forms of contestation have also sought to denounce religious authority itself, mobilising the image as an instrument of critique, satire, dissent, or challenges to institutions and doctrines.

Thus understood, the history of religious images appears as a veritable laboratory of power, a space of confrontation between faith and authority in which the legitimacy of the visible, the function of art, and the modalities of spiritual persuasion are constantly being redefined, but also as a privileged terrain of opposition, negotiation, and contestation where religious authorities and the regimes of truth they claim to embody are themselves called into question.

5. Transfers, Missions, and Syncretisms

The religious history of art is, moreover, inseparable from the history of cultural exchange. Forms, images, and objects never remain confined to a single tradition. They travel, transform, and reinvent themselves through contact with other beliefs. A Catholic church repurposed as a Protestant temple, a Byzantine icon taken up by a Flemish painter, or a Buddhist motif adapted within an Islamic or Christian context: these are just some of the many ways in which works circulate and are metamorphosed. These movements trace a genuinely connected history of sacred practices, objects, and imaginaries, made up of transfers, hybridisations, and, at times, resistances (Flood 2009; Fromont 2014).

Religious art constitutes a privileged observatory of these exchanges. The forms of syncretism, appropriation, and reinvention it offers are innumerable. The encounters between ancient paganism and early Christian art, as well as the artistic circulations between Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas, testify to a constant dialogue between cultures. These interactions are not accidental, but are most often inscribed in specific contexts, missions of conversion, diplomatic embassies, commercial relations, colonial enterprises, and so on, in which artists, travellers, and missionaries play a key role in the dissemination of models. They may also be entwined with processes of domination, erasure, acculturation, or resistance, which invite reflection on the power relations at work in these exchanges.

Transfers concern not only forms, but also objects themselves, displaced from their original context in cases of spoliation, scholarly collection, or museum acquisition. These displacements redefine the value, function, and meaning of the religious within the modern framework of knowledge and institutions (Grabar 1987; Thomas 1991; Davis 1997). To study these mobilities is to observe the visual and symbolic effects of the encounter between traditions through the fusion of motifs, the transformation of meanings, cultural hybridisations, as well as identity-based resistances or spiritual reinterpretations.

The aim is also to reflect on the ways in which art history, long centred on the Christian West, has established hierarchies among or marginalized other religious traditions. Recent approaches – including global art history, postcolonial studies, and visual anthropology – offer new tools for thinking through these exchanges in all their complexity. They make it possible to understand how, through these crossings, societies have continually reformulated their ways of representing, transmitting, transforming, contesting, and inhabiting religious life (Flood 2009; Fromont 2014).

6. Secularisation, Patrimonialization, and New Sacralities

Since the modern period, the relationships between art and religion have undergone profound transformations. Religious reforms, secularisations, critiques of confessional institutions, the heritagisation of cult objects, and the contemporary reinvestment of religious motifs have all contributed to redefining the links between artistic creation, belief, and power. Rather than presupposing the decline, persistence, or return of the religious, this axis invites the study of the diversity of historical situations in which works, institutions, and audiences have reconfigured their relationships to religious traditions and their legacies.

Proposals may therefore engage with processes of secularisation, desacralisation, heritagisation, or the reappropriation of the religious. Cult objects have become works of art, sanctuaries have become listed monuments, and relics have become museum pieces. This transformation raises questions about the boundaries between religious uses, heritage values, and aesthetic appreciation: what remains of a medieval relic when it is displayed behind glass? What form of presence subsists when an altar becomes a heritage work? Museum practices, restoration, and tourist promotion profoundly transform the function and reception of these objects, while attributing to them new statuses and new meanings (Didi-Huberman 2002; Pomian 2003; Elkins 2004).

This axis also welcomes research devoted to artistic forms of critique, satire, blasphemy, anticlericalism, or opposition to religious institutions, as well as to the debates these productions have provoked in the public sphere. It invites participants to examine the conflictual uses of religious images, symbols, and narratives, whether they take the form of political contestations, doctrinal challenges, or denunciations of spiritual powers.

At the same time, many modern and contemporary artists have continued to mobilise references, symbols, or practices drawn from diverse religious traditions. From the Symbolists and the theosophical ideas associated with Wassily Kandinsky to contemporary immersive installations, including certain forms of performance or conceptual art, works reinterpret or displace motifs associated with faith, ritual, revelation, or collective memory. The aim is not to presuppose the existence of a new artistic sacrality, but to interrogate the uses, meanings, and effects of these references in varied historical, cultural, and geographical contexts (Conte 2008; Morgan 2015).

Finally, contemporary visual culture, from street art to digital environments, from fashion to popular culture, testifies to the continuous circulation of images, symbols, and narratives drawn from religious traditions. These may be preserved, diverted, critiqued, reinvested, or transformed. Between heritagisation, secularisation, contestation, and reappropriation, the art of the nineteenth through the twenty-first centuries thus invites reflection on the multiple futures of the religious in contemporary societies, without presupposing either its disappearance, its permanence, or its future forms.

Submission Guidelines

Public

The call for papers is primarily aimed at PhD candidates in art history — or related disciplines — as well as early-stage postdoctoral researchers. Applicants must be enrolled at one of the RIFHA partner universities or at a recognised institution. Submissions from institutions that are members of the RIFHA network will be given priority.

Format of Presentations

Each accepted paper will be delivered as a fifteen-minute oral presentation, followed by a discussion with participants and members of the scientific committee.

Proposals may address all geographical areas and historical periods without restriction, provided they relate to the general theme “Art and Religions” and fall within one or more of the axes outlined above. The final programme of the Spring School will be established by the scientific committee based on the selected proposals. Attendance is required throughout the entire week in order to participate in all sessions, workshops, and collective discussions.

The call for papers will be published on the RIFHA website (www.proartibus.org) and on major academic portals dedicated to art history, with priority given to applications from institutions affiliated with the network.

Languages

French, German, English, Italian, Spanish.

Paper Proposal

Applicants are invited to submit an abstract of their paper (title and text) of **no more than 2,000 characters including spaces**. The abstract should present the research question, the corpus or case studies, and the link with the general theme of the 2027 Spring School.

The proposal document, to be submitted in PDF format, must also include:

- the applicant’s full name;
- email address;
- institutional affiliation (university, research centre, or laboratory);
- level of study (year of PhD or expected date of defence);
- place of residence.

Application

PhD candidates wishing to participate in the Spring School must send, **by 13 September 2026**, in addition to the abstract mentioned above, a short CV (maximum one page) including information on language skills. All documents must be combined into a single PDF file, named as follows:

Surname_Firstname_EdP2027.pdf

Applications should be sent by email to:

edp2027suisse@gmail.com

Email subject line: *Application EdP 2027 – [Applicant's name] – Country of home institution*
(e.g. *Application EdP 2027 — Maria Rossi — Italy*)

Researchers and postdoctoral scholars interested in chairing one of the sessions are also invited to submit their CV **by 13 September 2026**, highlighting the relevance of their research to the theme of EdP 2027 in a cover letter.

Selection

Proposals will be reviewed by the international scientific committee of the 2027 Spring School. A country-based selection process will be carried out: each national institution affiliated with the RIFHA network will rank applications within its own remit. For example, a specific jury will be convened for applications from France, with the support of the INHA. The results of the selection — list of accepted papers and waiting lists — will be communicated to all applicants by email on the date indicated in the schedule below.

Fees and Logistics

Accommodation costs will be covered by the organisers. For travel expenses, applicants must seek funding from their own institutions. The organising committee will define the programme of the Spring School in coordination with members of the RIFHA network. Attendance for the entire duration of the Spring School and participation in all sessions are mandatory.

The results of the selection will be announced **by 31 October 2026**. Within two weeks of acceptance, participants must submit a translation of their abstracts into another of the official RIFHA languages listed above.

PowerPoint presentations must also be submitted **by 15 June 2027**, accompanied by the presentation text or its English translation (to facilitate comprehension), via a link that will be provided later. For more information about RIFHA and the Spring School, please visit <https://www.proartibus.org>.

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