

**ARTH 422: Materiality and the Senses  
in Medieval and Early Modern European Art**



Undergraduate Seminar Fall 2023 / Wednesdays, 11:35am–2:25pm, Ferrier 422  
Prof. Chriscinda Henry ([chriscinda.henry@mcgill.ca](mailto:chriscinda.henry@mcgill.ca))  
Office Hours: drop-in Wednesday 2:30–3:30pm, Arts W-240 or by appointment  
Thursday 11:30–1:30pm

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This seminar seeks to collapse methodologies used for study of so-called fine or high arts (painting, sculpture, architecture, printmaking), the so-called decorative or luxury arts (furniture, textiles, ceramics, metalware, glassware), and performative work (banquets, triumphs) through a visual culture and object-based approach that enlists the speculative reconstruction of sensory experience. We will read important recent work on the cultural history of the senses and the somatic experience of art, while also engaging with the theoretical literature on the “power of images” and the agency of things, including the important concept of “vibrant matter.” Overall, we will address the role of sensation and experience in thought and practice in relation to the materiality and use value of objects from around 1200 to 1600, primarily in western Europe, although paper topics on transcultural objects and objects from non-European contexts are welcome. We will also pose questions about historical experience. For example, how did artists make touch, sound, and scent palpable to the minds and bodies of their audiences and to what ends? A key course component will be a group visit to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

## **COURSE REQUIREMENTS:**

### **Participation/in-class work: (50% of grade)**

Because this is a seminar you each share responsibility for the quality of discussion we have in class. If you have difficulty formulating discussion questions and responses based on close, critical readings of texts and the formal and/or technical analysis of artworks, or if you find speaking out in class challenging for whatever reason, please come to office hours at the start of the term so we can work together on effective strategies of participation.

Specific requirements are:

- 1) to attend every class meeting, do all the readings in advance of the session for which they are assigned, and participate actively and constructively in all discussions (10%).
- 2) to lead discussion for a class session with 1–2 partners (10%) between Weeks 4–10. You and your partner/s will meet with Prof. Henry during office hours 1-2 weeks before you lead discussion. For that meeting you should skim the assigned readings and begin planning which artists, artworks, themes, and ideas you want to focus on in class. This assignment involves preparing a PowerPoint slide presentation.
- 3) To make an informal 5/7-minute presentation on an object, set of objects, or installation practice connected to the senses, sensory experience, and/or materiality at the Museum of Fine Arts in the “Early to Modern International Art” section of the Hornstein Pavilion (primarily third and fourth floors; unfortunately, Decorative Arts is currently deinstalled) (10%) in class on **Nov. 8**.
- 4) to make a 12/15-minute PowerPoint slide presentation on your research paper topic at the end of the term, in class on **Nov. 15, 22, or 29** (20%).

**Note:** short writing exercises (to be submitted to Prof. Henry in class or through the MyCourses platform) may be added to encourage close, critical reading and stimulate class discussion depending on the class dynamic – more on these if needed. If they prove necessary, they will contribute toward the 10% participation grade.

### **Written work: (50% of grade)**

The final assignment for the seminar is a research paper of around 15 pages (Word document, Times New Roman font, 12 pt., double-spaced, 1 in. margins, with footnotes and bibliography formatted according to the Chicago Manual of Style) on a topic of your choice relevant to the course and its chronology (c. 1200–1700). Topics should connect to course themes and concepts. The paper should include properly captioned illustrations with clearly legible illustrations, a complete bibliography of works cited and consulted, and is due to Prof. Henry via email by midnight on **Sunday Dec. 10** (50% of grade).

A 1-page topic statement with an object list and initial bibliography of 5-7 sources (journal articles, book chapters in collected volumes, monographs, *catalogues raisonnés*, essays, and catalogue entries in exhibition and museum catalogues) is due via email before midnight on **Sunday Oct. 8** (required but ungraded). You should schedule an office hour appointment to discuss your idea for the research paper during weeks 2–5.

You may also want to arrange a second appointment to discuss your in-class research presentation and final paper during Weeks 8-10. A final topic statement, object list, and bibliography are due via email before midnight on **Sunday Nov. 12** (required but ungraded).

### **COURSE READINGS:**

Assigned readings are listed by class session. Readings listed as “eBook” are available for download through the McGill library catalogue (you must be logged in to check them out). Articles (indicated by “JStor” on the syllabus) are also available for download through the McGill Library catalogue (search by author last name and title keywords or by journal title). Readings listed as “MyCourses” will be uploaded to the MyCourses website near the start of term (or as the library processes them) and organized by date under the Content tab. ***Please check that you can access required readings at least 4-5 days before the class session for which they are assigned and let Prof. Henry know ASAP if you have problems. Report broken catalogue links and other issues directly to library staff via the website.***

All readings are to be done *in advance* of the class date for which they are assigned and will provide the essential material for our discussions. You are thus strongly advised to take detailed notes and formulate 2-3 written discussion questions/topics, and to mark specific page numbers and paragraphs that will facilitate your active participation in class discussion. Note that for some eBooks you will not be able to download a PDF to bring with you to class so you will need to prepare accordingly, for example by printing the assigned material. ***Rather than using eBooks, students leading discussion for a given week may find it preferable to check out print books from the library. Books with assigned readings should be available from course reserves.***

There will be approximately 80-100 pages of reading per week. Be sure to budget enough time to read thoroughly and carefully and to look up unknown people, places, terms, concepts, and images online. Types of questions to consider: What arguments does the author make? What sources/evidence do they use (visual, textual, other)? What are the questions they want to answer and what approaches do they use to answer them? Are there any limitations in their approach? How do the readings relate to each other and what terms, ideas, and themes connect or differentiate them? Some of the readings may require specialized knowledge. You may need to read some things twice and look up unfamiliar vocabulary, concepts, or foreign words and names. This is all part of developing your critical reading skills. You will find it helpful to bring readings to class in print or PDF form on your tablet or laptop along with written notes, questions, and comments prepared for discussion, with key passages marked for quick and easy access by page number in your notes.

### **MOBILE PHONE POLICY:**

Mobile phones are strictly prohibited during class time and should be silenced and stored where they cannot be seen or heard. There will be a 10/15-minute break halfway through seminar. If for some reason you must check your phone or make a call during class time, first excuse yourself from the classroom.

**ABSENCES:**

Students are allowed one absence with no need to provide justification or readings responses. The participation grade is waived for that class session unless it is the student's week to lead discussion or give their research presentation. For any additional absences, students are required to submit a 2-page synopsis and synthetic evaluation of the assigned readings complete with 3-4 discussion questions within 2 weeks of the class date or as arranged with Prof. Henry.

**UNIVERSITY POLICIES:**

“In accord with McGill University’s [Charter of Student Rights](#), students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives.” (Approved by Senate on 21 January 2009)

« Conformément à [la Charte des droits de l'étudiant](#) de l'Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté, sauf dans le cas des cours dont l'un des objets est la maîtrise d'une langue. »

“McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the [Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures](#).” (Approved by Senate on 29 January 2003) (See McGill’s [guide to academic honesty](#) for more information.)

« L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le [guide pour l'honnêteté académique de McGill](#)).»

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## Schedule of Course Meetings and Readings

### Week 1/Aug. 30: Introduction and course overview

### Week 2/Sept. 6: Materiality, Agency, and Reception

#### Readings:

David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago, 1989), Ch. 1, “The Power of Images: Response and Repression,” pp. 1-27.

#### [MyCourses]

Hans Belting, “Introduction” and “Statues, Vessels, and Signs,” in *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image in the Era before Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago, 1997), pp. 1–17 and 297–311. [MyCourses]

Constance Classen, “A Touchable God,” in *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (2012), pp. 27–46. [eBook]

Alfred Gell, “The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology,” in *Anthropology and Aesthetics*, eds. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 40-63. [eBook]

### Week 3/Sept. 13: The Powers of Materials

#### Reading:

Marina Belozerskya, “The Powers of Gold and Precious Stones,” in *Luxury Arts of the Renaissance* (J. Paul Getty Museum), pp. 47-87. [PDF: free download from the Getty Museum website]

<https://www.getty.edu/publications/virtuallibrary/9780892367856.html>

Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150-1750*, Ch. 2, “The Properties of Things,” pp. 67-108. [eBook]

Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, Books 32–37, On Metals, Colors, Stones, and Precious Stones:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137%3Ab ook%3D35%3Achapter%3D1>

### \*Week 4/Sept. 20: Affective Media in Christianity

#### Readings:

Beth Williamson, “Sensory Experience in Medieval Devotion: Sound and Vision, Invisibility and Silence,” *Speculum* 88/1 (2013): 1-43. [JStor]

Andrea Pearson, “Authority and Community in Women’s Books of Hours,” in *Envisioning Gender in Burgundian Devotional Art, 1350-1530: Experience, Authority, Resistance* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 29-60. [MyCourses]

Craig Harbison, “Visions and Meditations in Early Flemish Paintings,” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 15/2 (1985): 87-118. [JStor]

### \*Week 5/Sept. 27: Banquets as Multisensory Experience

Christina Normore, “Sensual Wonder at the Medieval Table,” in *A Feast for the Senses: Art and Experience in Medieval Europe*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Martina Bagnoli, pp. 75-83. Baltimore: Walters Art Museum, 2016. [MyCourses]

Niall Atkinson, “The Social Life of the Senses: Architecture, Food, and Manners in the

Renaissance,” in *A Cultural History of the Senses*, vol. 3, ed. Herman Roodenburg (Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 19-41. [MyCourses]

François Quiviger, “Banquets,” in *The Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art* (Reaktion, 2010), pp. 153-65.

Elias, Norbert. “On Behaviour at the Table,” in *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Revised Edition, ed. Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom and Stephen Mennell (Malden: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 72-109. [MyCourses]

#### **\*Week 6/Oct. 4: Ritual Arts of Marriage and Family**

##### **Reading:**

Marina Belozerskya, “The Seduction of All the Senses,” in *Luxury Arts of the Renaissance*, pp. 227-61 [PDF, see Sept. 13 on how to download]

Deborah Krohn, “Rites of Passage: Art Objects to Celebrate Betrothal, Marriage, and the Family,” in *Art and Love in Renaissance Italy*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Andrea Bayer (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2008), pp. 60-67. [MyCourses]

Adrian Randolph, “Performing the Bridal Body in Fifteenth-Century Florence,” *Art History* 21/2 (1998): 182-200. [JStor]

Jacqueline Musacchio, “Imaginative Conceptions in Renaissance Italy,” in *Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, ed. Sara F. Matthews Grieco and Geraldine Johnson (Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 42-60. [MyCourses]

**Initial topic statement and bibliography due via email to Prof. Henry before midnight on Sunday Oct. 8**

#### **WEEK 7/Oct. 11: Fall Break**

#### **\*Week 8/Oct. 18: Architecture and Urban Experience**

##### **Readings:**

Mary Quinlan McGrath, “Early Modern Ecosystems: The City, the Building, the Person,” in *Influences: Art, Optics, and Astrology in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago, 2013), pp. - -. [MyCourses]

Fabrizio Nevola, “Introduction” and Ch. 2 “Everyday Life on the Streets: Sociability and the Public Realm,” in *Street Life in Renaissance Italy* (Yale, 2020), pp. 7–21 and 67–98. [MyCourses]

Niall Atkinson, “The Republic of Sound: Listening to Florence at the Threshold of the Renaissance,” *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance*, Vol. 16, No. 1/2 (Fall 2013): 57-84. [JStor]

#### **\*Week 9/Oct. 25: Sculpture and Touch**

##### **Readings:**

François Quiviger, “Touch,” in *The Sensory World of Italian Renaissance Art* (London: Reaktion, 2010), pp. 105-24. [eBook]

Geraldine A. Johnson, “Embodying Devotion: Multisensory Encounters with Donatello’s Crucifix in Santa Croce,” *Renaissance Quarterly*, 73 (2020): 1179-1234. [JStor]

Adrian Randolph, "Hands: Gesture in Renaissance Portraiture," in *Touching Objects: Intimate Experience of Italian Fifteenth-Century Art* (Yale, 2014), pp. 17-67.

[MyCourses]

**\*Week 10/Oct. Nov. 1: Music, Gender, and Visuality**

*Readings:*

Flora Dennis, "Unlocking the Gates of Chastity: Music and the Erotic in the Domestic Sphere in Fifteenth and Sixteenth-Century Italy," in *Erotic Cultures of Renaissance Italy: Visual Culture in Early Modernity*, ed. Sara Matthews-Grieco (Ashgate, 2010), pp. 223-246. [eBook]

Bonnie Gordon, "Madrigalian Desire: The Convergence of Love and Sex in Madrigals," in *Monteverdi's Unruly Women: The Power of Song in Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 86-130. [MyCourses]

Katherine McIver, "Pastoral Pleasures, Sensual Sounds," in *Music, Sensation, and Sensuality*, ed. Linda Phyllis Austern (Routledge, 2002), pp. 285-98. [eBook]

**Week 11/Nov. 8: Materiality and the Senses in the Museum**

Visit to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts: short object/experience/installation studies

**Topic statement, object list, and final bibliography for research paper due by email before midnight on Nov. 12**

**Week 12/Nov. 15: 5-6 student research presentations**

**Week 13/Nov. 22: 5-6 student research presentations**

**Week 14/Nov. 29: 5-6 student research presentations**

**Final papers due Sunday Dec. 10 by midnight via email to Prof. Henry**