

Ornamented Membranes

Abstract

In art history, increasing attention has recently been paid to artistic forms of marking, visualising, and reflecting on spatial transition zones and social boundaries within space, or the division of space (e.g., doors and portals, altar screens, curtains, geometric floor designs). The starting point of the joint project are decorated iron grilles, a previously unstudied yet functionally comparable group of objects, which were employed in the 12th century to separate the sanctuary from the lay area in churches.

The grilles frequently feature doors that can be opened and closed by members of the clergy, a privileged group responsible for regulating access to the sanctuary. However, when laypeople look through the latticework at the altar, the saints, or the biblical scenes on the apse wall, these grilles inevitably obstruct an otherwise unobstructed view. Conversely, when the viewer's gaze is directed towards the lattices and the ornaments attached to them, the elements situated in the background—altar and apse paintings alike—become blurred.

From this high-medieval group of objects, we aim to develop a broader medieval perspective on ornamental membranes as permeable or semi-permeable liminal spaces, and to open the discussion toward further ideas on non-iconic visual, architectural, or metaphorical spaces of passage, pause, or lingering. This raises questions about the ways in which optical progression and the layering of images and objects in time and space affect the viewer's experience. Likewise, very impermeable structures, such as marble altar screens, can exhibit distinct depth features and suggest a non-existent visual access.

In the theology of the Church Fathers, ornament was conceptualised in the spiritual context of divine ineffability. Therefore, we interpret ornamental structures as 'membranes', that is, as media for personal, social, and physical exclusion. At the same time, they also offer the experience of partial participation and can serve as stimulating devices for the individual's reflection on the human knowledge of God.

Organization

Dr. Irina Dudar/ Universität Bern

Ass. Prof. Dr. Daniel González Erices/ Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez, Santiago de Chile

Prof. Dr. Susanne Wittekind/ Universität zu Köln

Registration and contact

The conference will take place in a hybrid format. For on-site registration and the link for virtual participation, please contact: irina.dudar@unibe.ch



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Conference
January 19–21, 2026

Library Erich Auerbach Institute (3rd floor),
Weyertal 59 (back building), 50937 Cologne

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Program

Monday

19. January

- 18.00 Auerbach Lecture:** Daniel González Erices:
Physicality and Material Agency in Medieval Grids:
Affective Experiences of the Holy Sepulcher and Its
Relics in Light of Posthumanism

Tuesday

20. January

- 09.00** Irina Dudar / Daniel González / Susanne Wittekind:
Introduction

I Section: Thresholds in Space

- 09.30** Susanne Wittekind: Iron grilles in medieval church
interiors
- 10.15** Elisabetta Scirocco: The Materiality and Mediality
of Liturgical Screens in 12th-Century Southern Italy
- 11.00** *Coffee break*
- 11.30** Gabriella Cianciolo: Women Behind Bars: Grill
Design in Early Modern Sicilian Cloistered Convents

II Section: Membranes in the non-Latin World

- 12.15** Elizabeth Dospěl Williams: Concealing and Revealing
Enslavement in Late Antique Interiors
- 13.00** *Lunch break*
- 14.30** Abbey Stockstill: Dis-Orienting Space Through
Ornament and Architecture in the Maghrib
- 15.15** Elina Gertsman: Image Failures: Opacity and Openwork
- 16.00** *Coffee break*

Wednesday

21. January

III Section: Unfolding Membranes

- 16.30** David Ganz: Shielding from heat and flies.
The Flabellum of Tournus as membrane between the
natural and sacred spheres.
- 17.15** Pavla Ralcheva: Ornamental structures on foldable
panels in the Late Middle Ages
- 19.00** *Conference Dinner*

IV Section: Seeing Through and Seeing Past

- 09.00** Matthias Friedrich: The Space in Between:
The Agency of Openwork Objects in Early Medieval
Europe
- 09.45** Tobias Frese: Latticed letters. Reflections on the
calligraphy of Ottonian manuscripts
- 10.30** *Coffee break*
- 10.45** Vincent Debiais: Failure to Watch: Disappointment
and Frustration in the Making of Medieval Reliquaries
- 11.30** Conclusion
- 12.00** *Lunch Break*
- 14.00** Domschatzkammer/Museum Schnütgen (optional)