

Communication Cooperation Confrontation

Queens Noblewomen Burgher Women in the Middle Ages

16-17 October 2025,
Academic Conference Center, Prague



Abstract deadline: 20 April 2025

Medieval women were not isolated figures in society. As part of a complex system of relations – personal, ideological, or material –, they lived and worked within various networks. The terms “communication, cooperation and confrontation” can serve as analytical categories for comprehending how women exerted influence and power, gained support for the realization of their goals, and navigated around their social, economic and other obstacles. With this conference, we seek to apply these lenses to the investigation of the manifold relations between medieval women and material culture in the broadest sense. The conference focuses on three main areas depending on the nature of these relations:

1. Women and their public image

As widely demonstrated in scholarship, women frequently shaped their own public image and used different media to achieve that goal. We are interested in the communication strategies women were choosing to promote their agenda and to overcome diverging interests, and within this scope, we wish to give particular attention to artwork commissions by women: architecture, altarpieces, books, seals and other types of objects. How were these inscribed or imprinted, for example, with tension in such cases as problematic succession or contested authority, either religious or secular, or with the politics of fama when women had to face various accusations?

2. Women and their entourages

To a large extent, women in the Middle Ages exercised agency through a specific engagement with material culture. Within those negotiations in which they could actively take part, women often participated in the exchange of gifts such as jewels, books and artworks, combining cultural and political influence. We wish to investigate with particular attention the instances in which women

sought through donations to secure or strengthen cooperation in various social circles with which they were involved: families, households, noble courts, religious houses etc. We also hope for a comparative discussion of such acts in different situations and contexts: Can some be characterized as products of long-term strategy while others, perhaps, as tactical or even ad hoc, reactive measures?

3. Women and their artists

While the scarcity of sources typically precludes an examination of the entire process behind works commissioned by women, its details are often worth inquiring into. We invite discussions of the various modes of interaction and cooperation between the commissioners, the artists (e.g. painters, sculptors, architects, goldsmiths, writers, poets, musicians) and, where relevant, also the go-betweens. On what grounds were decisions and choices made? What factors influenced the choice of a particular artist or workshop? How important were the material and social constraints or the personal networks involved? When faced with obstacles in their pursuits, how did women react, what course of action did they take, and what other agents did they, perhaps, seek to collaborate with?

Within these three areas, we invite contributions from various fields of research: art history, history, literary studies, musicology archeology and others.

The language of the conference proceedings will be English and each paper should be a maximum of twenty-minutes long and include a slide presentation.

We are able to cover accommodation expenses in Prague for the conference speakers.

If you wish to take part, please let us know by 20 April 2025, sending the title of your paper with an abstract (one standard page long at most) and specifying your affiliation.

Please write jointly to all three of the conference organizers:

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This international conference will be the third meeting in a row on the topic "Queens, Noblewomen, and Burgher Women in the Middle Ages" organized by the Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Czech Literature of the Czech Academy of Sciences with the support of the Strategy AV 21 Programme – Anatomy of European Society: History, Tradition, Culture, Identity. The aim of the conference continues to be the development of an international platform for research on the topic of women patrons, their social standing and way they presented themselves in medieval Europe. In connection with the conference, a volume on the topic will be published by the Institute of Art History, Prague.

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