The theme of the seminar, materiality, is concerned with the tangible stuff of medieval lives, with those materials - animal parts, vegetable fibers, metal, stones, clay, wood, that were used and processed into finished objects - comestibles, clothing, homes and monuments, artifacts and ornaments, images and the media of written and visual communication. As they emerged from raw materials, things affected social relations and cultural perception, enabling action and provoking reaction. We will consider, for example, the effects of pageantry, with its elaborate display of culinary, heraldic, and sartorial splendor, in asserting and maintaining chivalric claims to dominance. We will examine recent archeological findings to understand the ways accessories to clothing enabled peasants to resist and re-fashion the identities imposed upon them by medieval elites.

Objects, thus, shaped history, yet historians tend to write history based upon texts. Avoiding such an exclusive dependency requires methodological reflection. Stimulated by the work of social scientists such as Jane Bennett, Alfred Gell, Tim Ingold, Carl Knappett, Bruno Latour, and Bjørn Olsen, lively debates are currently taking place about the theory, goals, and relevance of material culture studies, and we will develop our own perspectives on the issues at stake.

Assessing the participation, meaning, and agency of things in pre-modern lives forces one to question boundaries so as to gain a newer historical perspective on such relationships as those between humans and animals (and nature), humans and technology, body and soul, images and memory, the animate and the inanimate. Our exploration of the connections between human and non-human environments will consider the appropriation of animal skins in the production of writing; the extension of human personhood via the use of animal power, tools, weapons, images, and memory aids; human involvement with a living landscape of holy trees, sacred groves and springs, and powerful stars; attitudes toward idols and automata; the perception of art as vibrant matter.

Though modern theory inspires present-day archeologists, anthropologists, historians, and art historians to seek agency in a network of social and material relationships, medieval
intellectuals were dubious about belief in the power of matter. In fact, for many, the materiality of the human body was suspicious, as was knowledge that depended upon the mediation of the senses. Such ‘carnal’ knowledge was ascribed to minorities (Jews) and alleged dissenters (magi, witches). Materiality in the Middle Ages was a philosophical topic fraught with ambivalence, imbued with a potential for violence.

Every week, students will be expected to write a one-page report, delineating the purposes and theses of the assigned readings. They will give a précis of each group of books and articles, seek to identify the issues raised by authors, define the nature of their sources, assess their methodology and approaches, evaluate the clarity and organization of the particular study, and consider the validity of the theses presented. Diverse interpretations have come to shape our understanding of the medieval past, which makes necessary a critical approach to the reading of all secondary materials.

Students will circulate their reports in WORD via NYU Classes (Forums) to all seminar members by TBA on the TBA preceding class meetings.

Class discussion will build upon these reports, with students responding both to the readings themselves and to their colleagues’ takes on the arguments advanced.

In addition to readings on and discussion of materiality each student will be required to prepare and present a twenty-minute paper (with PowerPoint, footnotes, and bibliography). The paper will be delivered orally in class on TBA, and posted that very same day (1PM) on NYU Classes (Assignments).

Your paper should be devoted to a medieval object, or a small ensemble of medieval objects. In your analysis, make sure to explain the reasons for your selection; what the object is and what in it is permanent and irreducible to meaning; the properties from which its operational capacities derived; the nature and modalities of its operations; the associations, effects, and reactions the object enabled within the society that produced it, as well as in the succeeding or surrounding cultures within which it remained relevant; or the oblivion in which it fell, if it did.

When writing notes, and citing books, articles, and websites, students should conform to The Chicago Manual of Style, 15th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), Bobst Atrium Z253.U69 2003 Non-circulating. You may also consult the section “Citing Sources,” available on NYU Classes under the tab “Library Resources”

Academic integrity is an important aspect of students’ membership in an academic community, and penalties for its violation are severe. The following website contains clear statements about plagiarism and other forms of cheating, and their repercussions:

http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity

Grading System

Three quarters of the final grade (75%) will be based on weekly attendance, which is mandatory, oral participation in class, and the timely submission and merit of the weekly written reports.

The paper and its oral presentation will make the quarter of the final grade (25%).
All readings are available in the following fashion: **Books** have been put on **Reserve at the Bobst Library**, where they can be read in the Reserve Room; **books, book chapters, and articles** available **on line** have been put on **Electronic Reserve** and can be accessed via **NYU Classes, Library Resources, Course Reserves**; **scanned** articles and book chapters can be accessed via **NYU Classes, Resources**.

The following books are also available for **purchase from the University Bookstore**:


1. **Introduction: Medieval Studies and the Material Turn** - January


   **Optional Readings**


2. **Medieval Materiality: A Postmedieval (Re-)Production** - February

Christopher Wood, *Forgery, Replica, Fiction: Temporalities of German Renaissance Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 2008) - (Book Reserves)

**I. FOUNDATIONS OF MEDIEVAL MATERIALITIES**

3. **Matter and Materials** - February


4. **Nature** - February


5. **Body, Flesh, Bodily Senses** - February


**OPTIONAL READINGS**

*Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture*, ed. K. Walter (NY, Palgrave McMillan, 2013)

6. **Divine Incarnation** - March


**OPTIONAL READINGS**
Sarah Beckwith, *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (Florence, KY, Routledge, 1996)

### II. THE MEDIEVAL EXPERIENCE OF MATERIALITY

7. **Living with Things: Objectification and Identity** - March

Frederik Buylaert, Wim De Clercq and Jan Dumolyn, “Sumptuary legislation, material culture and the semiotics of ‘vivre noblement’ in the county of Flanders (14th–16th centuries),” *Social History*, 36/4 (2011), pp. 393-417 (e-journal, Electronic Reserves)


*Heraldry, Pageantry and Social Display in Medieval England*, P. Cross and M. Keen, eds. (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK ; Rochester, NY : Boydell Press, 2002) - (Book Reserves)

**Pick a Chapter**


**OPTIONAL READINGS**

*Heraldry, Pageantry and Social Display in Medieval England*, P. Cross and M. Keen, eds. (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK ; Rochester, NY : Boydell Press, 2002)

8. **Making and Meaning** - March


9. **Skinny Writ. Drawing, Making, Writing, or Drawing Making Writing?** - April


Laura Kendrick, “Writing as Relic. The Mythologizing of Alphabetic Writing as Bodily Trace,” in *Animating the Letter: The Figurative Embodiment of Writing from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1999), p. 11-35 (NYU Classes, Resources)


10. **Mediality** – April

Class will not meet on that day, and will be replaced by attendance at the Marc Conference on Mediality, NYU, April 3-4

11. **Empty : The Inscription of Blankness** - April

III. **MATERIALITY. THE MEDIEVAL AMBIVALENCE**

12. **Agency and Animation** - April

theory of the art nexus" (p. 12-27); Chapter 7, "The distributed person" (p. 96-121) – (Book Reserves)


13. Living Matter and the Matter of Intolerance - April


14. Conference - May

• Students will give formal readings of their papers.

• Medieval Material Culture: A Redundant Concept? – General discussion

• The written paper is due in its final form on May 7th, and must be posted on NYU Assignments.