

SOCIAL LEGIBILITY IN THE EARLY MODERN CITY

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Section: Specialist session
Period: Early modern

Researchers often point to the ideological and practical importance of appearance and social legibility in the early modern period. Corporativism, sumptuary laws and limited wealth all contributed to a system where individuals could be 'read' by others. In recent years, Daniel Roche's account of a sartorial 'ancien régime' in Europe has been increasingly challenged. We can no longer view appearances as mere representations, nor dress before 1700 as immobile and always in accordance with social position. Finally, we might question the assumption of a process from an easily understandable social idiom to an increasing confusion as we reach the eighteenth century. The purpose of this session is to discuss social legibility in early modern cities in a global context. Papers are invited to explore the significance of performance, the material world, visual culture and place in creating social legibility, as well as the ideological foundations behind how social positions were to be expressed. Signs which might be of interest include clothing (broadly defined), food and drink, architecture and city planning, forms of social interaction, physical attributes and behaviour, as well as early modern theories of how to read these signs. Likewise, papers may discuss the impact of a globalising world and consumption patterns for how people were read and for the importance of legibility.

Questions papers may address include:

What methods were used to 'read' others' social status?

Were social signs always legible? In what circumstances did confusion arise?

How was social legibility policed?

Finally, can we assume that social signs functioned like a language that could be learnt, or does this view need to be complicated?