

## Sigilli – An online exhibition by the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz

**An online exhibition by the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz displays seals from the Middle Ages and the early modern age, from two of the most important Italian collections of seals, thus presenting a significant but little known medium**

The seal, with its nine thousand year history, is one of the oldest image reproduction media and represents a highly complex cultural phenomenon by way of its multiple references to social and legal history, and the history of art.

The online exhibition by the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz concentrates on seals from the 12th-16th centuries, for the most part on bronze seal matrices and seal impressions in wax. The seal matrix, which leaves its impression in a soft material that then later hardens, can reproduce a potentially endless number of impressions. Seal impressions mark commercial goods and holy relics, and can seal letters or be fastened to documents by a lace. The authentication of written texts was one of the most important functions of seals in the Middle Ages and the early modern age.

The seal matrices, often round or ogival, are engraved with signs identifying the owner of the seal, which can be an individual or a corporation. Thus developed, the canon of visual motifs and forms, according to the authenticatory function of the seal, is not only marked by continuities, but also by innovations with important implications for other artistic genres.

Seals with secular and ecclesiastical authority often showed recurring figurative formulas, like the bronze seal of Tebaldo de' Prefetti di Vico, one of the first equestrian seals in Italy dating to the end of the 12th century; it shows the nobleman in profile, whilst the bishops and abbots are always shown in hieratic frontality, enthroned or standing. One of the most recurrent images is the papal lead bull, a seal impressed with a seal tong on both faces, which from 1099 onwards depicts the heads of the two main apostles Peter and Paul. The online exhibition illustrates, in exemplary fashion, how other owners of seals in Italy were inspired by this formula.

The uninterrupted relationship with antiquity is fundamental for the form and material of the seals: engraved gems and precious stones were used as seals in the Greek-Roman era and later reused from the Merovingian era onwards. In some seals from the Middle Ages antique iconographic themes are translated in a formal Christian language.

The exhibition aims to call attention to the seal as a means of reproduction and thus presents both matrices and impressions from the two most important collections of seals in Italy: the *Museo Nazionale del Bargello*, with its 2,761 seals, owns one of the largest and most important collections of seal matrices in Europe. The *Archivio di Stato di Firenze* houses the valuable corpus of "detached seals", nearly 900 impressions of seals which, during the construction of the *Archivio Diplomatico* executed by Grand Duke Pietro Leopoldo in 1778, were detached from their respective documents and are today conserved separately.



The exhibition is linked to the "Siegel-Bilder" research project financed by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation and realized by Dr. Ruth Wolff under the direction of Prof. Dr. Gerhard Wolf and Prof. Dr. Michael Stolleis at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, in collaboration with the Max-Planck-Institut für Europäische Rechtsgeschichte in Frankfurt. The project concentrates on the special formal language of the seals and the legal status of the seal images.

The online exhibition presents this medium, often difficult for the public to access, in a form that, thanks to the possibility offered by digital enlargement, does justice to the reduced format of the seals and thus allows an appropriate observation of the object of study. The intention is to make the meaning of the seal visually comprehensible as a figurative means and thus stimulate further research.

The photo campaign, realized by the Photo Library of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz at the *Museo Nazionale del Bargello* especially for the online exhibition, can also be viewed in the Digital Photo Library on [www.khi.fotothek.org](http://www.khi.fotothek.org). *L'Archivio di Stato di Firenze* has kindly made some photographic reproductions of its seal impressions available for online display.

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Head of the Photo Library: Costanza Caraffa

Project: Ruth Wolff

Coordination: Almut Goldhahn

Online from 19 October 2009 on <http://expo.khi.fi.it>

The next online exhibition will open on 22 February 2010 and will be dedicated to the grottoes of the early modern age.

**For further information:**

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## Photographic Material

Seal of the notary Bondie di Puccio with inset engraved gem (matrix, obverse), 14th century, bronze and carnelian, 18 mm (Florence, Bargello, inv. no. 565); © Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz (Max-Planck-Institut), with the authorization of the Ministero per i Beni e le attività culturali



Seal of Ugolino Grifoni (matrix and impression), 1541-76, bronze and sealing wax, 68x31 mm (ASFi, Grifoni, filza 33); © Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz (Max-Planck-Institut), with the authorization of the Ministero per i Beni e le attività culturali



Seal of the Parte Guelfa of Florence (matrix, reverse), mid-15th century, silver, height 36 mm (Florence, Bargello, inv. no. 474); © Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz (Max-Planck-Institut), with the authorization of the Ministero per i Beni e le attività culturali



Seal of Teobaldo De' Prefetti di Vico (matrix, obverse), late 12th/ early 13th century, gilded bronze, 58 mm (Florence, Bargello, inv. no. 1079); © Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz (Max-Planck-Institut), with the authorization of the Ministero per i Beni e le attività culturali



Seal of the College of Doctors of Perugia (matrix, obverse), 2nd half of the 14th century, gilded bronze, 78x52 mm (Florence, Bargello, inv. no. 2674); © Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz (Max-Planck-Institut), with the authorization of the Ministero per i Beni e le attività culturali



Seal of the College of Doctors of Perugia (matrix, reverse), 2nd half of the 14th century, gilded bronze, 78x52 mm (Florence, Bargello, inv. no. 2674); © Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz (Max-Planck-Institut), with the authorization of the Ministero per i Beni e le attività culturali



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