

Panel proposals

European Social Science History Conference (ESSHC)

Lyon, France, 21–24 April

Guilds and Artisanal Labor Working Group

The Guild and Artisan Labour Working Group, part of the European Labour History Network (ELHN) brings together scholars working on one of the classic subjects of economic and social history: craft guilds and artisan labour. The Working Group aims to revisit, expand, and deepen long-standing debates on the socio-economic dynamics linking these institutions to labour and society from a historical perspective, with particular attention to the period between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries, in Europe and beyond.

In view of the European Social Science History Conference (ESSHC), to be held in Lyon (France), 21–24 April 2027, the Working Group invites scholars at all stages of their academic career to submit paper proposals to be included in a panel organized by the group.

Scholars (esp. doctoral candidates) interested in contributing to this session are invited to submit a 250-word abstract **by 8 April** to Guild.Artisan.Labour@gmail.com

Proponents will be notified once the panel has been accepted by the ESSHC.

The Working Group welcomes contributions engaging with a broad range of themes related to guilds, artisan labour, and their socio-economic, institutional, and cultural dimensions across time and space. Possible themes for panels include, but are not limited to:

Session 1. Who Made Skill? Guilds, Artisans, and the Politics of Work

Who made skill—and who had the authority to define it? Far from being a neutral or self-evident attribute of work, skill emerges in recent social and labor studies as a historically contingent category, shaped by institutions, negotiated in practice, and embedded in relations of power. From this perspective, artisanal work cannot be understood apart from the social, economic and institutional environments in which it was learned and regulated. These settings did not merely provide the background for artisanal work: they actively structured access to training, controlled labour relations, defined hierarchies of competence, and shaped the social and economic value of skilled labour.

The panel welcomes contributions that examine how institutions shaped the transmission of know-how, the organisation of labour, the value of expertise, and the boundaries between dependence and autonomy, coercion and opportunity, household economy and market production. Contributions may focus on any period or geographical area, and comparative or cross-regional approaches are particularly welcome.

Session 2. Conflicts and Institutionalisation in the Artisan World

This session examines the interplay between conflict and institutionalisation in the artisan world, with a focus on disputes related to and arising from the guild system. Conflict, a recurring theme in labour history, takes multiple forms: within and between guilds; between guilds and external competitors; among apprentices, journeymen, and masters; and between guilds and ecclesiastical or governmental authorities. Its transversal nature means it both shapes and is shaped by the institutional contexts in which it unfolds, with guilds, municipal authorities, and state structures acting simultaneously as arenas of conflict, mediators, and agents that may transform or intensify disputes. Institutions structure, channel, and regulate conflicts through negotiation, arbitration, and formal frameworks, influencing both their expression and outcomes, while also redefining power relations among actors. Grounded in the hypothesis that institutionalisation channels conflict and limits extrajudicial expression, the session takes a broad approach across historical periods and geographical contexts, considering diverse forms of conflict and analysing how institutions influence their causes, development, and resolution. Contributors are invited to explore both conflicts and the institutional frameworks developed to manage them, as well as the strategies and tactics employed by the actors involved.

Session 3. Guilds across Europe and beyond: Diversities and Divergences

This proposed session explores the diversity, commonalities, and transformations of guilds and artisan labour across Europe and in a broader global perspective, moving beyond strictly regional or national frameworks to place different traditions of craft organisation into dialogue and highlight both convergences and divergences in their structures, practices, and social roles. Particular attention is given to the comparative potential of guild systems and to the ways in which they can be meaningfully analysed across different historical and geographical contexts. Recent scholarship has renewed attention to the relevance of guilds and guild-like formations, notably in the collection *Return of the Guilds*, which expands the analytical lens to include a wide range of “guild-like organisations” beyond the European case—forms of collective organisation among artisans and producers that, while not always formally recognised as guilds, fulfilled similar functions in regulating labour, structuring training, maintaining standards, and representing collective interests. Contributions may address themes such as the institutional structures of guilds and guild-like organisations; systems of apprenticeship and skill transmission; mechanisms of labour regulation and market control; relationships with political and religious authorities; patterns of inclusion and exclusion; and the social, economic, and cultural roles of artisans within their respective societies. Papers adopting comparative, transnational, or connected-history approaches are particularly welcome, especially those that bring European cases into conversation with

examples from other parts of the world. By fostering a comparative perspective, the session seeks to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of artisan labour and its institutional forms, questioning established narratives and identifying both shared dynamics and context-specific developments, and thereby reassessing the place of guilds and guild-like organisations within broader histories of labour, economy, and society.