Precious objects, and jewelry in particular, have generated repeated and echoed reactions over the centuries and across the globe, despite variations in context and location. Indeed, while the disapproval of an often ostentatious dissipation has been recurrent since Antiquity (Pliny the Elder), the benefits of a precious object has been claimed for aesthetic, symbolic, religious and economic reasons alike, whether it may be an agalma worthy of devotion; an offering to the gods or the dead; a symbol of status, power, alliance; a social or family heirloom, both a vehicle and a pledge of transmission or tradition; an inspiration for artistic creation and the development of techniques; as majors elements of exchange in the gift economy, and even a driving force behind the capitalist economy as emphasized by Bernard de Mandeville, Jean-Baptiste Say, Werner Sombart, and many others.

Thus, the precious object and jewelry especially, whether carried on oneself, socially exchanged or integrated into spaces, create distinction at all levels, material and symbolic: they “radiate”, according to the worlds of Georg Simmel, attracting attention, reconfiguring the space of appearances, and establishing cultural and social divides and a “partition of the sensible”. Because of their distinctive value, they influence social taste, originate fashion, encourage imitation and counterfeiting, and fake and kitsch reproductions.

Value and creation are keywords for this symposium. These notions summarize many questions, full of echoes and repercussions across the whole spectrum of the social sciences, from anthropology to economics, philosophy to sociology, and the history of the arts to techniques and work.
What properties determine the value of precious substances, such as gold or diamonds, widely shared in many societies and periods? Is gold precious because of its sensory and organoleptic qualities (malleability and resistance, durability, color, and brilliance that attract the eye like the sun’s rays) or because of its distinctive attributes (because it is rare, expensive, and difficult to extract), or all these reasons together? Who decides the place of other objects and materials, be they shells, textiles, or glass beads, as paradigms of aesthetic appreciation and specific economic power from prehistory to the contemporary creation of costume jewelry? What is the relationship between the value of precious objects and their price? What role do rarity, antiquity, and technical, craft, or industrial performance play in performing value? How does the circulation of precious objects allow us to compare different societies and reconstruct the hybridizations and reinventions of value as part of a social life of things in the sense of Arjun Appadurai?

As for creation, what are its aesthetic criteria? Between innovation and tradition, reinterpretation and return, exotic import, and local tropism, what are the socially accepted standards for claiming the success or obsolescence of equally “precious” objects? What does the “aura” of a precious object consist of? Is “aesthetic labor” a practical approach to understanding the interweaving of economic and emotional values?