

Continent Allegories in the Baroque Age: A Research Database

Marion Romberg

By Marion Romberg, of the Austrian Research Project "Erdeillegorien im Barockzeitalter" in the University of Vienna's Department of History

During the late Renaissance—around 1570—humanists developed a new 'shorthand' way of representing the world at a single glance: personifications of the four continents Europe, Asia, Africa and America. While the continent allegory as an iconic type had already been invented in antiquity, humanists and their artists adapted the concept by creating the four-continent scheme and standardized the attributes characterizing the continents. During the next 230 years until ca. 1800, this iconic scheme became a huge success story. All known media were employed to bring the four continent allegories into the public and into people's homes. Within this prolonged history of personifications of the continents, the peak was reached in the Late Baroque, and especially the 18th century. As a pictorial language they were interwoven with texts, dogmas, narratives and stereotypes. Thus the project team find himself asking: What did continent allegories actually mean to people living in the Baroque age?

Notably—though not exclusively—this question is the topic of a research project on continent allegories carried out between 2012 and 2016. The project team approached the subject in a new and systematic fashion. First, a clearly defined geographic area consisting of the greater part of Southern Holy Roman Empire from Freiburg in the Breisgau to the eastern frontier of Lower Austria including Vienna was chosen; the northern limit of the study area is constituted by the Main River, the southern one by South Tyrol. Secondly, the project studied continent allegories in immovable media like fresco, stucco and sculptures within abbeys, palaces, parks and gardens, townhouses and—most importantly—in churches. The systematic survey conducted by the project team identified 407 instances of continent allegories in the south of the Holy Roman Empire. To facilitate the systematic and detailed analysis of all identified instances of continent allegories, a database was developed and is now open access: continentallegories.univie.ac.at. This database allows the use of the collection of sources for various research interests: iconography and iconology, reception of aesthetics, cultural history, social history, history of identity, history of science, etc.

Further results of this research project can be found in the in English published anthology *The Language of Continent Allegories in Baroque Central Europe* (Stuttgart, 2016) and in the doctoral thesis by Marion Romberg "Die Welt im Dienst des Glaubens. Erdeillegorien in Dorfkirchen auf dem Gebiet des Fürstbistums Augsburg im 18. Jahrhundert" (Stuttgart, 2017).

Project Team, 2012–16

Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Schmale, University of Vienna, www.wolfgangsschmale.eu

Dr. Marion Romberg, University of Vienna, www.marionromberg.eu

ArtHist.net

Dr. Josef Köstlbauer, University of Bremen, josef.koestlbauer@univie.ac.at

Reference:

WWW: Continent Allegories in the Baroque Age: A Research Database. In: ArtHist.net, Feb 5, 2017
(accessed Apr 7, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/14571>>.