The Icon as Cultural Model: Past, Present and Future (Utrecht, 25-26 Jan 18)

Utrecht, Jan 25–26, 2018
Deadline: Jul 1, 2017

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Journalists, artists and scholars, among others, tend to refer to iconic events or images from the past in order to better understand present-day developments. For example, in the wake of the American elections media repeatedly referred to the iconic 'years of crisis' of the thirties of the last century. Also, they recalled George Orwell's iconic depiction of a dystopian society from his novel 1984 to contextualize the use of 'alternative facts'. In this respect, the icon functions as a model that generates cultural meaning by connecting past and present. But the icon not only shapes our (collective) image of the present, nor does it merely re-evaluate our image of the past. It also opens up potential scenarios for the future – be it brilliant or gloomy.

The making of specific icons is a much-studied topic in cultural studies, literary studies, art history and even in the history of science. However, theoretical and/or synthesizing studies on how the icon functions as a cultural model from which we can learn how to act or perform are scarce. The conference 'The Icon as Cultural Model' wants to fill this gap.
First, it will do so by addressing different manifestations of the icon. Traditionally understood as a static visual image, the concept of the icon is also used to refer to:

- a specific period (e.g. the thirties or sixties, the Enlightenment or the Golden Age);
- a specific place (e.g. Waterloo or Woodstock, cities like Amsterdam, Rome or New York, or imaginary places such as Orwell's 'Oceania');
- a specific person (e.g. Christ, Michelangelo, Mae West);
- a specific phrase (such as Descartes' 'I think therefore I am' or Clausewitz' 'War is the continuation of politics by other means').

Static as the icon may be, its evaluation by different groups (artists, scholars, politicians) can change through time. Recently, scholars have shown an increased interest in phenomena linked to the theme of the icon: such as fan culture and celebrities, artists' self-representation, cultural marketing, and processes of canonisation. This poses the question why at present the search, and explication of, cultural models occurs to be highly relevant. By posing this question the conference's second aim is to encourage reflection on how the icon has functioned and still functions as cultural model (and how it can be studied as such).

In addressing the icon as cultural model the conference explicitly wishes to bring together scholars from various disciplines such as art history, literary studies, history and philosophy. In this way the conference wishes to offer room for joint interdisciplinary reflection on the question how

the study of cultural models may contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of culture in general.

Paper submissions

We welcome abstracts for papers (20 minutes max. excluding discussion). Contributions can address, but are by no means limited to the following aspects:
- How do periodical concepts like the ‘Golden Age’, ‘Enlightenment’ or ‘Renaissance’ function as icons? How does the evaluation of these concepts by artists and/or scholars change through time? And how can we study this shifting evaluation?
- How do both general spatial notions such as the ‘city’ (as opposed to the ‘country’ or to ‘nature’) and specific places function as models for writers, philosophers and artists?
- How do specific historical events become iconic? Who attributes power to these events? And how, why, and by whom are their cultural meanings rewritten?
- How do artifacts such as novels, poems, paintings, sculptures, and films construct iconic images of the past and/or future? How can we study iconic representations within these artifacts?
- How, and for whom, do certain phrases from philosophers, politicians or artists function as icons? What are the contexts that make phrases iconic?
- How do specific historical persons function as icons in art, philosophy and scholarship? And how can we study these cases in the broader context of the study of cultural models?

Abstracts of papers consist of approx. 250 words and should include the name of the speaker, affiliation, full contact address (including email), the title, and the summary of the paper.

Deadline for abstracts is 1st of July, 2017.
A notification of acceptance will be sent no later than August 15th, 2017.

Abstracts can be sent to Marieke Winkler (Open University) via iconsconference@ou.nl.

Papers will be selected for publishing in the conference proceedings.

Reference:
CFP: The Icon as Cultural Model: Past, Present and Future (Utrecht, 25-26 Jan 18). In: ArtHist.net, Apr 4, 2017 (accessed Nov 19, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/15139>.