

Kinetics of the sacred (Michigan 29 Sept – 1 Oct 06)

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KINETICS OF THE SACRED

IN MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN AND EAST ASIAN ART, 800-1600:

PASSAGES OF SPACE, PLACE, TIME

An International Symposium hosted by
the Department of the History of Art, University of Michigan,
and the University of Michigan Museum of Art,
Ann Arbor

29 September – 1 October 2006

This conference reconsiders medieval art (broadly construed as including work from 800 to 1600), focusing on the spatial and temporal matrices in which objects and their viewers are grounded and through which these agents move. Although participants need not have any specialist knowledge in art from other regions, the conference will adopt an explicitly cross-cultural approach to highlight methodological biases in the scholarship of both European and East Asian medieval art and to suggest new avenues of study in these fields.

We have borrowed the term “kinetics” from the physical sciences and intend to use it as a lens through which we can re-examine medieval religious art. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “kinetics” as “the branch of dynamics which investigates relationships between the motions of bodies and the forces acting upon them.” Drawing on this basic definition, “kinetics” will be employed in this conference to mean the study of viewers and objects moving through the conceptual and physical spaces that are constituted and defined through their interactions. Questions that address this dynamic nexus between concepts of space, time, and subject-object relationships include the following:

Embodied presence: How does the viewer or the viewed move between the transcendent and mundane realms? In what ways can an apparently inanimate object be said to be activated, animated, alive? What are the motive forces of sacred art?

Passages of time and history: Through what kinds of temporal structures does the viewer or the viewed move? How do objects create and maintain a temporal structure around them? What senses of history are implied in specific works of art?

Mental and spatial topographies: What are the conceptual topographic structures in which the viewer and the viewed move? How do the physical characteristics of an object and its context affect its motion through this matrix, and how does the object in turn condition its environment? How are conceptual maps realized in the physical world?

Passages and thresholds: What happens betwixt and between social, religious, or other conceptual spaces? In which ways are viewers and the viewed affected by systems of containment and bounding? What happens when they cross those borders?

In addition to investigating questions such as these within the specific fields of the participants, our symposium is also meant to engage in wider methodological questions of cross-cultural research, examining its pitfalls, limitations, and possibilities. Stated simply, we will consider the question, "How can one make defensible and interesting cross-cultural comparisons and what is the value of this pursuit?" To that end, the symposium brings together representatives of two substantial and seemingly analogous bodies of scholarly and visual material – European and East Asian medieval art – to facilitate a series of focused dialogues on theoretical issues in art history that will draw primarily on the common store of examples provided by the participants. Not only will the colloquium serve as a testing ground for the validity of a trans-regional approach to medieval art, but we hope that it will also serve as a model for an intensive exchange of ideas between apparently disparate fields of study. Through this cross-cultural comparison, we hope to hold the mirror up to each of our fields, while considering the possibilities of drawing larger conclusions about visual cultures in general.

Our speakers are Paul Crossley, Courtauld Institute of Art, London; Thomas Cummins, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA; Jacqueline Jung, Yale University, New Haven; Ikumi Kaminishi, Tufts University, Boston; Yonekura Michio, Sophia University, Tokyo; Samuel Morse, Amherst College, Amherst, MA; and Zoë Opaġiġ, Birkbeck College, London.

For more information, please contact the organizers:

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