

The Construction of Identity in Medieval/ Early Modern Times (Zurich, 17 Nov 12)

Zurich, Nov 17, 2012

Deadline: May 1, 2012

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The Construction of Identity in Medieval and Early Modern Times: Reflections on a Problem in Art History

University of Zurich, Kunsthistorisches Institut

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<http://www.khist.uzh.ch/neuzeit/res/conf/zurich12f.html>

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CALL FOR PAPERS

In recent years, studies on identity have noticeably increased, not only in formerly core disciplines such as sociology, gender studies or cultural sciences, but in art history as well. Concerning the application of the term "identity" to art historical studies, however, either the adoption of theoretical deductions from those disciplines is rarely connected stringently to the objects of art or the usage of "identity" occurs without consideration of its methodological and theoretical implications. This is especially the case for the art of the medieval and early modern times. Therefore, this international conference seeks to reflect fundamentally upon the usage of the term "identity" in art history, to possibly revise established opinions, and to problematize the possibilities for methodological orientation.

However, the term "identity" itself is elusive. In light of the transdisciplinary heterogeneity of the term and the great variety of identity theories, it might prove to be difficult to find a definition, which could do justice to all different approaches. Yet, one common denominator might be that "identity" presupposes that something can only be identical with something, i.e. that the identified is situated within a network, that it constitutes itself through relations. In doing so, it has to be differentiated between personal and collective identity, which stand in tension towards each other. This is demonstrated with regard to research on medieval and early modern times especially by the controversial term of the "individual", underlining the foundation on processes of social interaction that are marked by or are in opposition to class and rank. The social status, the confessional commitment as well as the sexual attribution in this connection are considered formative

parameters. Yet, none of these parameters was unalterable. Identity affiliations were convertible and under certain circumstances arbitrary.

How can we apply the disparate identity theories on art history? What kinds of problems appeared in previous research and will occupy us in the future? What are the possibilities and limits of the transposition of such a term like "identity" in art history? And, finally: which disciplines are particularly apt for transmitting the notion of identity to art historical studies? For example, art historians have committed themselves to engage in these issues for quite some time within the scope of gender studies through questions on the relation between body and representation and by breaking up traditional male-dominated canons of works, etc. Art historians with a postcolonial approach, on the other hand, attempt to deconstruct the identity-generating patriarchal and Eurocentric image policy. And, in the end, more traditional art historical research also contributes to questions of identity: such as in the case of studies on court culture and patronage, on political iconography and symbolism, etc. Ultimately, even one of the fundamental categories of art history, "style", is part of a larger identity discourse. "Style" refers itself mostly to the art production and art theory of a specific region or group, to the single personality of an artist or a workshop. The assumed characteristic relates to similarity in terms of formal criteria, which is ascribed as a common feature to the majority of manifestations of an epoch, a region, a person, etc. Style develops out of the not always conscious, but presumably coherent selection, evaluation and application of certain aesthetic properties. This manifestation of identity-constructing affiliation takes place via dissociation from something different. And, in the end, it is the very suppression of this affiliation that, in turn, enables a personal style and identity.

As to analyze this set of general questions about the art historical construction of identity, by reflecting once again fundamentally on the relation between identity research and art history, the conference will invite an interdisciplinary group of scholars, with focus on art history.

The deadline for submission of 30-minute presentation proposals is May 1, 2012. Abstracts should not exceed 500 words. Papers will be delivered preferably in English. Please send your abstract and CV to peter.scholz@uzh.ch

FRAMEWORK

The one-day conference is organized by the Zurich section of the SNF Sinergia project "Constructing Identity: Visual, Spatial, and Literary Cultures in Lombardy, 14th to 16th Centuries".

<http://www2.unil.ch/lombardy/>

SPONSOR

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