

Representations of the Ocean as Social Space

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Abstracts of up to 250 words invited for following session for Association of Art Historians Annual Conference 2011:

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Before the eighteenth century the sea was regarded in the West as a fearsome, repulsive and chaotic deep (Corbin, 1988). Subsequently with the emergence of the notion of the sublime, then the invention of the seaside and the practice of leisure boating, it was recast as a zone of wonder and pleasure. However Western conceptions of the ocean continued to view it predominantly as 'empty space' although a space available for exploration and appropriation. Thus British Empire Marketing Board posters in the 1920s mapped imperial possessions and depicted ocean liners under the caption 'Highways of Empire' thereby appropriating - and socialising - sea passages radiating from centre to colonies. Ships themselves present microcosmic societies circumscribed and shaped by the ocean.

Imaginings of the sea vary depending on place, time, and culture. For example Australian Aboriginal 'Dreaming Paths' do not distinguish between land and water, continuing from shore into the sea. In post-independence Ireland artists painted contrasting visions of the Atlantic as a Celtic dreamscape with magic islands, or as the emigrant's route to America. The sea in many cultures has been gendered as female and viewed as a resource subject to masculine domestication and exploitation.

Contributions are invited that analyse the ocean as a social space, with reference to painting, illustration, maps, or other forms of visual representation. Papers may focus for example on the ocean surface or its deeps, on tropical or frozen seas; on representations of sea monsters, mermaids, seafaring, fishing, colonial or national exploitation and appropriation, slaving, cultures of travel, exploration, emigration or leisure.

Reference:

CFP: Representations of the Ocean as Social Space. In: ArtHist.net, Sep 9, 2010 (accessed Apr 19, 2026),

ArtHist.net

<<https://arthist.net/archive/32900>>.