Evoking the Incommensurable - Painting the Sublime (Jena, 26-28 Jul 23)

Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Jul 26–28, 2023
Deadline: Dec 15, 2022

Sonja Scherbaum

Evoking the Incommensurable – Painting the Sublime

Organisation: Johannes Grave, Sonja Scherbaum, Arno Schubbach

In the 18th century, the concept of the sublime constitutes a genuine novelty and a driving force for advancements in philosophy, theoretical reflection on the arts, and painterly practice. From its beginnings, this novelty was not limited to one country alone, but covered the whole of Europe. A first step was Nicolas Boileau's French translation of Pseudo-Longinus' "Traité sur le sublime" in 1674. Further decisive steps were Edmund Burke's "A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful" from 1757 and Immanuel Kant's "Critique of the Power of Judgment" from 1790. Thus, a discourse concerning the sublime could develop that extended across European languages and traditions, a discourse which, at least at first glance, is characterized much more strongly by its diversity than by a common conceptual basis or homogeneous philosophical framework.
Moreover, the sublime was not merely the subject of philosophical discourse; it was also embraced by the theoretical reflection on the arts, such as literature and painting. In this context, the sublime constitutes a challenge not only due to the fact that Burke and Kant distinguished it sharply from the beautiful, i.e., the traditional organizing subject of treatises on painting and literature. The sublime also raises questions because, according to Burke and Kant, the sublime breaks with classical standards of pictorial or literary representation; its excessive strain on the senses, its incommensurability with any measure, and its irreducibility to any bounded shape serve as a harsh contrast to the beautiful and the aesthetic values associated therewith. The attempt to incorporate this concept into aesthetic reflection not only gave rise to tensions but also offered an opportunity to establish new approaches. It is therefore no coincidence that the concept of the sublime was readily taken up by treatises on landscape painting in order to foster this newly reappraised pictorial genre.
Finally, the sublime was also a challenge to artistic practice. Theoretical discourse concerning the sublime often referred much more directly to our experience of nature than to our experience of artistic works. Particularly in the case of Kant, it was not evident that the arts are at all able to evoke anything sublime. Furthermore, the specific characteristics of the sublime do not make it seem to be a suitable subject for painting. It was by no means evident that it would be possible to represent the boundless greatness of sublime nature within the limited frame of a picture.
Nevertheless, various attempts to paint the sublime can be seen in the genre of landscape painting and its many European varieties. And there are good reasons to assume that such attempts

can also be found in other genres, whether in figurative representations, in ruin paintings and architectural representations, or even in book illustrations. The sublime challenged artists to push the limits of painting and to explore its capabilities anew. To evoke the incommensurable and paint the sublime requires, we would suggest, purposefully exploring and exploiting these capabilities in relation to the reception of the painting and, above all, the limits of the viewer's perceptual capacities.
The international conference “Evoking the Incommensurable – Painting the Sublime” thus discusses the conception of the sublime as an innovative force on a Europe-wide scale, both in respect to the formation of the aesthetic discourses pertaining to it and in reference to the practice of painting and its exploration of the capability of pictures to evoke the incommensurable in their reception.

The conference will be held in English. Conference presentations should be 30 minutes long.

We will reimburse travel and accommodation costs.

We warmly welcome papers from doctoral, postdoctoral and senior scholars. Please submit your abstract (250 words) along with a short biography, in English, to paintingthesublime@uni-jena.de by December 15, 2022. Speakers will be notified by January 31, 2023.

Reference:
CFP: Evoking the Incommensurable - Painting the Sublime (Jena, 26-28 Jul 23). In: ArtHist.net, Oct 9, 2022 (accessed Nov 1, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/37613>.