Early European Puppetry (New Haven, 12-15 Oct 23)

Yale University, New Haven, CT, USA, Oct 12–15, 2023
Deadline: May 1, 2023

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Early European Puppetry Studies Conference.

From moving statues to artificial animals to marionette performances, puppetry seems to have appeared in every sector of medieval and early modern European society. Jointed religious figures illustrated the liturgy, while dragon effigies processed through cities on feast days, and popular and courtly audiences enjoyed puppet shows of legendary and historical events. Despite the ubiquity of medieval and early modern puppets in Europe, scholarly consideration of these performing objects is often limited to case studies. Consideration of "puppetry" as a particular form with its own norms and commonalities is also uncommon, due in part to the marginal position of puppetry in Western culture. However, considering the variety and complexity of medieval and early modern European puppetry provides an opportunity to reassess the role of figural objects and performance in Western culture.

As objects used in performance, puppets enrich expanding scholarship on the inter- and multimedial dimensions of medieval and early modern theater, liturgy, and entertainment. As imitative objects, puppets inform discussions about representation in medieval and early modern Europe. And as objects unsettling boundaries between animate and inanimate, puppets nuance conversations about object agency, object-oriented ontology, and the so-called "material turn" happening across the humanities.

This conference aims to bring together scholars from art history, history, European literary and language studies, theater, and other fields to formally establish early European puppetry studies as a cross-disciplinary field and scholarly community. To that end, sessions will provide an opportunity for collecting and sharing resources as well as sites for setting the terms and questions that structure early European puppetry studies. We intend to build on the conference's presentations to produce the first edited volume in early European puppetry studies in the following year.

Considering a wide range of objects and practices under the rubric of puppetry, the conference is interested in what defines a puppet. How might movement, interaction, animation, liveliness, or spectatorship, matter? How do the contexts of puppet performance (professional, amateur, civic, courtly) or its sites (church, stage, fairground, street) affect its possibilities? How did puppetry operate as a site of cross-cultural encounter that allowed swift exchanges across the continent? In what ways does the materiality of a puppet shape its modes of embodiment as it plays characters ranging from human and animal to divine? How does actual puppetry practice complicate or resist prevailing cultural metaphors of puppetry in relation to power and aesthetics?

We invite work on all manner of performing objects that can usefully be examined or theorized in terms of puppetry. We welcome proposals from scholars already working explicitly on puppetry as well as those newly imagining their work in relation to puppetry. In particular, we are interested in papers that resist dominant cultural discourses that limit puppetry to “popular” or “folkloric” spaces, seeking instead to locate fruitful avenues for using puppetry as a framework to analyze art, literature, culture, and performance traditions in late medieval and early modern Europe. In other words, we hope to expand the field of inquiry from puppetry as metaphor to puppetry as praxis.

To propose a paper, please submit a 300-word abstract to Michelle Oing and Nicole Sheriko at earlyeuropeanpuppetrystudies@gmail.com by May 1, 2023.

Reference:

CFP: Early European Puppetry (New Haven, 12-15 Oct 23). In: ArtHist.net, Feb 1, 2023 (accessed Nov 24, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/38452>.