

Unseeing the Evil Eye (Munich/online, 29–30 Nov 23)

Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Munich / Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst,
Munich / online, Nov 29–30, 2023

Felix Jäger & Miriam Said

Unseeing the Evil Eye: Powers and Politics of the Apotropaic.

Since the nineteenth century, the ghost of apotropaism has haunted the humanities. Coined by classicist Otto Jahn (1813–1869), the term quickly gained traction in historical scholarship denoting all actions or objects conceived as provocative, obscene, and therefore offensive to the sensibilities of the time. Depictions of threatening animals, glaring faces and disembodied eyes, exposed genitalia and arcane symbols found throughout history, according to Jahn, served as protective devices warding off evil by mirroring its appearance. Patterns of "irrational" behavior in this reading transcend culture and history linking past artistic phenomena with present "superstitions," especially those belonging to non-Western cultures. In art history, the apotropaic continues to be evoked for the uncommon, whenever visual and textual evidence seems insufficient, or it undergirds ambitious theories on art's efficacy. Museums commonly situate the apotropaic within everyday culture, while art institutions shun the anonymous and uncommon in favor of artist genealogies and iconographic themes. With recent attention to our discipline's colonialist stakes and a push towards cultural and methodological diversification, the evil eye is due for a critical review.

This two-day international conference explores the relationship between contentious materials and anxious historians, and gauges the apotropaic's potential for recuperating marginalized voices. Its approach is two-fold: on the one hand, speakers center the term's nineteenth-century historiographic and museum legacies, its colonialist and primitivist attitudes, as well as the moral politics that sustain its use up to the present; on the other, they examine the term's stakes within current methodological and critical debates across the humanities. Diachronic and interdisciplinary in nature, the conference traces the apotropaic from its scholarly "invention" to its prehistoric origins and classic motifs in ancient art, through medieval and early modern magic and back to its impact on modern and contemporary art, as well as on museum practices and ethics today.

With its long history of pooling non-canonical art and non-normative experiences, the apotropaic is emblematic of scholarly erasure and rich in lessons to learn; and yet its uncompromising embrace of the so-called material misfits of history and its commitment to fostering emotional community across times and cultures warrant further attention.

PROGRAM:

Wednesday, November 29th

Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Katharina-von-Bora-Str. 10, 80333 Munich, Room 242

2:00–2:30pm

Miriam Said (Tufts University, Medford) and Felix Jäger (The Courtauld Institute of Art, London):
Welcome and Introduction

Session I: Beginnings and Ends

2:30–3:00pm

Reena Perschke (University of Leicester):
“Gazing into the Grave: Apotropaic Anthropomorphs in Megalithic Tombs”

3:00–3:30pm

Meg Bernstein (Alfred University) and Meg Boulton (University of York):
“Art after the End of the World? Vibrating Architecture, Uncertain Apotropaism and the Birth of the Romanesque”

3:30–4:00pm

Coffee Break

Session II: Eying Sex and Gender

4:00–4:30pm

Tamara Golan (University of Chicago):
“Gender and the Magical Ties that Bind: The Drawings of Niklaus Manuel”

4:30–5:00pm

Lorne G. Darnell (The Courtauld Institute of Art, London)
“Reflections on the Rural Exotic: Some 'Witch's Marks' in Pieter Brueghel's Peasant Feast”

5:00–5:30pm

Ulrich Pfisterer (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität / Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Munich):
“Attraction and Repulsion: Seeing Sex and Obscenity in Medieval and Early Modern Art”

5:30–6:15pm

Coffee Break

6:15–7:30pm / Keynote

Benjamin Anderson (Cornell University, Ithaca):
“Apotropaics and Aesthetics”

7:30–9:00pm

Reception

Thursday, November 30th

Staatliches Museum für Ägyptische Kunst, Gabelsbergerstr. 35, 80333 Munich, Auditorium

Session III: Materialities of Magic

11:00–11:30am

Jessica Lamont (Yale University, New Haven):

“Like Affects Like: Magic and Medicine in Classical Greece”

11:30–12:00pm

Minou Schraven (Amsterdam University College):

“Making Sense of Building Deposits: Cats, Coins, and other Miracle-Working Objects between Local History and Universalism”

12:00–1:00pm

Lunch (not provided)

Session IV: Resistent Apotropaics

1:00–1:30pm

Radek Przdpeński (Trinity College, Dublin):

“Apotropaic Media and Polish-Tatar Cosmotechnics”

1:30–2:00pm

Hana Gründler (Kunsthistorisches Institut – Max-Planck-Institut, Florence):

“The Subversive Power of Non-Official Art in the ČSSR”

2:00–2:30pm

Coffee Break

Session V: Unsettling Modern Art

2:30–3:00pm

Thierry Greub (Universität zu Köln):

“Cy Twombly’s ‘Aesthetics of Protection’”

3:00–3:30pm

Final Remarks and Open Questions

This is a hybrid event, hosted in person in Munich, and online at the following link:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85659345839?pwd=UmFZYU0xN1NxMGJ1MjlQM054NXgvZz09>.

Meeting-ID: 856 5934 5839 | Passwort: 148258.

This conference is generously hosted by the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte and the Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst in Munich, and supported by Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Tufts University, and the Courtauld Institute of Art. It is organized by Dr Felix Jäger (The Courtauld Institute of Art) and Asst Prof Dr Miriam Said (Tufts University).

Reference:

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