

ESNA Conference 2024: Living apart together? (Otterlo, 23–14 May 24)

Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, May 23–24, 2024

Deadline: Feb 1, 2024

Lotte Kremer

ESNA Conference 2024: Living apart together? The troubled and treasured relationship between nature and human beings in art 1789-1914 (May 23-24, 2024).

Organising committee:

Mayken Jonkman (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam)

Sara Tas (Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam)

Scientific committee:

Renske Cohen Tervaert (Kröller Müller Museum)

Eveline Deneer (University of Utrecht)

Rachel Esner (ESNA, University of Amsterdam)

Julia Kantelberg (Rijksmuseum Amsterdam)

Alice Lemaire (Muséum nationale d'histoire naturelle, Paris)

Colin Sterling (University of Amsterdam)

With the growing realisation that nature and the earth's climate are at risk of being destroyed, this conference aims to centralize the interconnectedness between nature and human beings, by analysing the depiction of their relationship in Western-European art, including the effects of colonialism, during the long nineteenth century.

Within art, the natural world was long seen as a repository of motifs and forms from which artists borrowed to fashion their representations of social reality. Landscapes, for example, have traditionally been interpreted as a fixed image, viewed from a certain distance or as a vessel for human emotions, in other words: nature for human's sake. Centuries of anthropocentric thinking, based on influential sources such as Aristotle's writings and the Bible, have ingrained notions that human beings have dominion over the world and its inhabitants and this was reflected in the depiction of nature in art. In addition, with the discovery of geological time in the late eighteenth century, came the realisation that the earth was eons older, and that human civilisation only occupied a fraction of a great terrestrial span. These concepts created a seemingly irreconcilable divide between humans and nature.

However, even in the long nineteenth century, such notions were questioned. Around 1800 Alexander von Humboldt had already indicated the interdependence between nature and mankind. In 1847 Théodore Rousseau painted a landscape with felled oak trees, while men are in the process

of cutting down others. Rousseau later stated that he 'wanted to arouse remorse on the part of people who unthinkingly chop down trees'. In the art dealer Boussod & Valadon's stock books the painting was listed under the title *La mort des innocents*. In that same year Rousseau's good friend the art critic Théophile Thoré attacked the French government for its mismanagement of the forest lands near Barbizon. Their actions helped lead to the Western world's first state-established land preserves in 1853.

Some ten years later Charles Darwin corroborated Von Humboldt's thesis that all life is essentially interconnected and dependent upon each other in his *Origin of Species*. Moreover, with the advent of industrialisation and the enormous growth of the global population – the so-called Anthropocene – human beings actions gained such power that the world's ecosystem is in danger of being annihilated. This realisation increasingly questioned man's dominant position in epistemological and ontological paradigms, in exchange for more an integrated approach which puts co-dependency of life first.

This conference centralizes the depiction of the troubled relationship between nature and humans, both around the corner as well as overseas, including the fascination for non-indigenous flora and fauna.

It aims to answer questions such as:

- Did changing opinions on nature have effect on nineteenth-century art?
- Did nineteenth-century art have effect on the changing opinions on nature?
- How was the relationship between nature and human beings depicted?
- Which role did the advent of working en plein air play in artists' bond with nature?
- Which role did ecology play in the depiction of nature?
- How did artists and critics manage to evoke their awareness of the changing attitudes towards nature in their work?
- Which role did colonialism play in artists' perception of nature?

Please send your abstract (max. 200 words) and biography (150 words) by February 1, 2024 to esnaonline@hotmail.com. The scientific committee will answer all applicants by February 19, 2024.

Reference:

CFP: ESNA Conference 2024: Living apart together? (Otterlo, 23-14 May 24). In: ArtHist.net, Nov 30, 2023 (accessed Dec 17, 2025), <<https://arthist.net/archive/40738>>.