Carousels and Other Colonial Spectacles (Copenhagen, 20–21 Aug 26)

Copenhagen, Aug 20–21, 2026
Deadline: Dec 15, 2025

Konrad Krčal

Carousels and Other Colonial Spectacles.
Performing race and racialization at European courts c. 1500–1700

International conference, University of Copenhagen, 20–21 August 2026. Organizers: Emil Elg and Konrad Krčal (University of Copenhagen)

Confirmed keynotes:
Noémie Ndiaye, University of Chicago
Bram van Leuveren, Utrecht University

The central role of performance in the development and practice of racial categorization and discrimination in Early Modern Europe has found much needed attention in recent scholarship. Within this larger framework, the two-day international conference is dedicated to the "race-making" practiced as part of court spectacles and publicly organized festivities as it had profound impact on the dissemination of racist ideas and stereotypes in Europe.

The temporal frame suggested for this conference extends from early colonialism in the Americas to the turn of the 18th century, when the slave-based plantation economy was firmly established as integral to European trade, capital accumulation, law, imperialist politics, and culture. A well-documented early example for the kinds of colonial spectacles that we will discuss is the reception of some seventy Mexica and Tlaxcala people at the court of Charles V in 1528, where they accompanied the conquistador Hernán Cortéz. While the nobles among them were treated accordingly and most likely dressed no differently from European courtiers, the task of performing "Indianness" fell to a group of indigenous "entertainers" and athletes. This display of racialized people as a spectacle is paradigmatic for the ensuing circulation of people, objects, and ideas that would feed into various types of court festivities, including carousels.

The title of the conference is connected to its location in Copenhagen: Inspired by the sumptuous Grand Carrousel hosted by Louis XIV in 1662 at the Louvre, Christian V of Denmark staged several carousels during his reign (1670–99). A theatrical amalgamation of jousting, dressage, and pageantry, such spectacles had long included aspects of exoticism and racialization, but the Carrousel of 1662 was exemplary in integrating colonialism and racism to the aesthetics of absolutism. In the Danish context, the central role of varying racial and colonial representations in the staging of these spectacles is well documented by a series of 12 anonymous paintings from the 1690s in The Royal Danish Collection.

As part of the conference program, the participants will have the opportunity to see and discuss the paintings and other objects related to the local carousels. That the exchange of both non-Euro-

pean objects (and sometimes people) and racist ideas and images is deeply tied to court spectacles not least in their function as diplomatic vehicles will be further explored at the Danish National Museum. There, 17th century featherwork artifacts of the Brazilian Tupinambá people are on display together with Albert Eckhout's paintings representing different "categories of people" in Dutch Brazil from the early 1640s having reached Denmark as diplomatic gifts in 1654. While ethnographic objects are readily interpreted in terms of the ritualistic and performance, one aim of the conference is to highlight the ways in which racialization was achieved through the incorporation/production of the Other as part of European spectacles.
We encourage proposals for papers from various disciplines including art history, cultural studies, history, literature, and performance studies that engage with the intersections of race and court spectacles across the historical frame and their European and imperial scope.

Questions that this conference aims to address include:
- Exoticism, "race-making" and colonial representation at the Danish court
- Historical perspectives on carousel performances in Europe
- The construction and performance of blackness at court over time in relation to the transatlantic slave trade
- Performing race and the ethnographical gaze: interplays of exhibiting racialized people and the performance of race at court spectacles
- A European subaltern? The dehumanization and stereotyping of peasants, religious, and other minorities in spectacles in relation to colonial racialization
- Performative intersections of race and gender in Early Modern spectacles
- The circulation and use of non-European objects for European court spectacles
- Public spectacles and their aesthetics in the European colonies: similarities, differences, subversion
- The court spectacle as template and aesthetic norm for colonial visual culture and texts
- The popularization and longue-durée of the racist court spectacle

We invite individual and group proposals for 20-minute papers with a special encouragement for contributions by PhD-students and early career researchers. Please send a 250–300-word abstract with a title, up to seven keywords, and a maximum 150-word biographical note in one document to krcal@hum.ku.dk and info@emilelg.dk or via the conference website by 15 December 2025. The conference language will be English. Travel costs and accommodation can't be covered by the conference. Participation and attendance are free of charge. The conference will take place at Copenhagen University, Department of Arts and Cultural Studies.

Reference:

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