The Gigantic in Medieval and Early Modern Art (Vienna, 18–20 Jun 26)

University of Vienna
Deadline: Jan 2, 2026

Esther Pitoun

The Gigantic in Medieval and Early Modern Art: A Global Perspective

Giants were a source of enduring fascination in the medieval and Early Modern periods. They were not merely figures of myth or allegory, but imagined as real beings whose traces could be found in colossal bones, ancient ruins, and monumental landscapes. Giants haunted the pages of Arthurian romances and Nordic sagas, filled Islamic Aja'ib literature (□□□□□) and travel accounts, and reappeared in Rabelais' exuberant tales of Gargantua and Pantagruel. Their representations adorned both sacred and secular spaces: holy sanctuaries, town halls, city walls, marketplaces, fountains, harbors, riverbanks, and even private dwellings. The discovery of oversized bones, often interpreted as relics of mythological heroes like Siegfried or saints such as Christopher, further encouraged their cultic veneration. Yet this fascination was not confined to Europe. Between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries, giants also gained prominence in the Islamic world and East Asia, occupying comparable positions in cultural imagination and allowing their genealogy to be traced on a global scale.
While giants were sometimes regarded as members of particular clans or as singular figures, the qualities ascribed to them were often abstracted into a more general concept: the 'Gigantic'. This term denotes both an epistemological and ontological category that could be applied to saints, historical actors, or fictional characters. The 'Gigantic' encompasses a web of associations: an excess of power and violence capable of being transmuted into compassion and virtue; hyper--masculinity, which could in turn be de-gendered; and connections to foreign lands, mythic times, imagination, and magic. In this way, the 'Gigantic' could bridge geographies, conjure memories of antiquity (such as the Colossus of Rhodes), and articulate ideals of grandeur and potency.
This conference seeks to explore the global art-historical significance of giants and the 'Gigantic' in the Medieval and Early Modern periods. Why were giants so pervasive in the cultural imagination of these centuries across diverse regions? What visual properties did they share? What social strata and systems of patronage were they associated with, and what cultural functions did they serve? As liminal beings, giants oscillated between abjection and sublimity, cruelty and compassion, rejection and acceptance, irrationality and rationality. By examining the visual culture of excess embodied in giants, the conference aims to investigate the broader global cultural concept of the 'Gigantic'.

We invite proposals on, but not limited to, the following themes:
• Giants in literature and the visual Arts – From sagas and romances to monumental and decorative art.

• The ‘Gigantic’ and imagination – Conceptualizing enormity, myth, and fantasy across cultures.
• Colossi and their revivals – Representations of monumental figures from antiquity to the early modern period.
• Temporalities of the Gigantic – Memory, history, and the perception of time in relation to giants.
• The minuscule and the Gigantic – Interactions between scale, perspective, and narrative.
• Surplus, excess, and spectacle – Embodied, visual, and performative manifestations of the Gigantic.
• Scale and measurement – How proportions and systems of measurement were used to construct, visualize, or perform the idea of the Gigantic.
• Somaesthetics and experience – Sensory, bodily, and immersive encounters with the Gigantic.
• Identity and the constitution of the self – How giants and gigantism shape social, personal, and cultural identities.
• Mirabilia – Giants within collections of marvels and curiosities.
• Nature, the Cosmos, and the Gigantic – Representations of natural and cosmic scale.
• Ritual, performance, and civic Spectacle – Giants in processions, pageants, and public displays.
• Sacred Giants and the liturgy of the Gigantic – Saints, relics, and devotional monumental figures.
• Cults of Giants and popular belief – Veneration, superstition, and local traditions.

Organizing Committee:
Prof. Assaf Pinkus
Giosuè Fabiano, PhD
Esther Pitoun, MA

Please send your proposals, including a 200-word abstract, short CV (2 pages maximum), and short bio (150 words) to esther.pitoun@univie.ac.at.
Deadline: January 2nd.
Speakers will be notified by 2nd February.

Reference:
CFP: The Gigantic in Medieval and Early Modern Art (Vienna, 18-20 Jun 26). In: ArtHist.net, Dec 2, 2025 (accessed Oct 31, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/51272>.