

Session at SCSC 2026 (Chicago, 29–31 Oct 26)

Chicago (IL), Oct 29–31, 2026

Deadline: Apr 1, 2026

Eelco Nagelsmit

“Dangerously Promiscuous:” Ekphrasis, Evidentia, and the Epistemology of Objects in Early Modern Thought

Organizers: Eelco Nagelsmit, Margo Weitzman.

Panel at the Sixteenth Century Society Conference.

In early modernity, the description and documentation of materials such as art objects, religious and secular artefacts, natural specimens, and antiquities played a crucial role in mediating knowledge about the world. Whether serving religious debates, scientific inquiry, or disseminating new knowledge about other cultures and areas of the globe, acts of seeing, collecting, and describing generated forms of evidentia that reinforced epistemic discourse and claims to truth. Texts and images alike sought to make objects and experiences “present” to absent audiences, shaping how early modern people imagined the authority of sight in empirical evidence, as well as both the limits and persuasive power of observation.

W.J.T. Mitchell famously positioned ekphrasis as a “dangerously promiscuous” discursive encounter between word and image existing within a hermeneutical zone, exposing cultural desires and anxieties about the limits of representation and meaning. Current scholarship in art history, history, and literary studies continues to reconsider how early modern knowledge about the world was simultaneously shaped by transcontinental objects, the natural sciences, texts, and missives. These fields address related questions around the authority of vision, the credibility of witnesses, and the circulation, collection, and description of material evidence, yet the conversations often remain disciplinary.

By placing interdisciplinary scholarship into dialogue, this panel seeks to examine how ekphrastic and documentary practices framed visual and material evidence within religious, intellectual, or proto-scientific contexts. We invite contributions from scholars who scrutinize how descriptions, inventories, and illustrations functioned as epistemic tools to corroborate, interpret, or contest the significance of objects—be they relics, curiosities from across the globe, or fragments of antiquity.

Papers might address:

- Rhetorical or affective dimensions of evidentia in religious or scientific texts
- The role of drawings, prints, and written descriptions in mediating the authority of sight and eye-witness interpretation
- Travel accounts, epistles, atlases, or books describing the exotic or foreign as a form of new

ethnographic knowledge, or as evidence of natural or divine order

- The interplay between “faithful” documentation and “persuasive” representation
- Ekphrasis as a cross-domain practice linking art theory, theology, and/or empirical observation
- The role of description as a record of empirical evidence in the early natural sciences
- The relationship between word and image, particularly in knowledge formation
- Performative and phenomenological aspects of the visuality of texts and descriptions

By convening a range of scholars working in visual and material culture, literary and textual analysis, and the history of science, religion, and antiquity, the panel seeks to rethink how documentation shaped knowledge systems where art, faith, and experimentation were intertwined. We welcome proposals from senior and early-career scholars, as well as advanced graduate students. Please submit an abstract (c. 250-words), brief bio/CV (1 page), and contact details to e.d.nagelsmit@vu.nl and margo.weitzman@rutgers.edu by 1 April 2026.

Reference:

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