Documenting the Ephemeral (Naples, 29-30 Jun 27)

Naples, Jun 29–30, 2027
Deadline: Dec 14, 2026

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EPHEMER-ART. Documenting the Ephemeral: Materiality, Contexts, Politics and Exchanges Between the Italian States and Europe (15th–19th Centuries).

The international conference promoted by the research project EPHEMER-ART explores the concept of the ephemeral and its relationship to materiality in the visual arts between the fifteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century. Despite their temporary nature, artistic practices connected with the design of ephemeral events and settings survive through material traces, specific documentary evidence and contextual records. The memory of festival machines, funerary apparatuses, temporary theatres and scenery painted on perishable supports is preserved in archival documents, visual materials, and published and unpublished testimonies linked to a collective memory.

The privileged point of observation is the Kingdom of Naples, considered in its relations with the other Italian states and within a network of European exchanges, with particular regard to Northern Europe and the Scandinavian courts. The artistic cities and capitals of the Italian peninsula, destinations for the training of foreign artists, emerge as hubs of circulation reaching not only the main European artistic centres, but also the courts of the North, from Stockholm to Copenhagen. Here, the wealth of graphic and documentary collections and the survival of eighteenth-century court theatres – among them Drottningholm with its original scenery and stage machinery – offer a significant vantage point for the study of the materiality of the ephemeral. The career of the French artist Louis-Jean Desprez (1743-1804), who moved from the Académie de France in Rome to the provinces of the Kingdom and finally to the court of Gustav III of Sweden, is emblematic of the complexity of this enquiry.

Alongside these wide-ranging itineraries, the movements of scenographers, decorators and artisans between the Italian states form a dense network of exchanges. Within the Kingdom of Naples, relations between the capital and the provinces shaped a complex geography, in which provincial centres were not mere recipients of models, but places of independent elaboration and patronage. These exchanges have so far been only partially investigated, and the conference aims to approach them from a polycentric perspective that moves beyond the hierarchy between centres and provinces. Practices connected with the staging of spectacle, civic ritual and religious devotion were, in these contexts, strong markers of cultural identity, serving as sites of formal and technical experimentation. The chronological limit of the research is marked by the technological revolution brought about by photography, understood as a tool for the physical documentation of the ephemeral and for the optical reproduction of reality.

Proposals may address circulation between the Kingdom of Naples and the other Italian states, as well as relations with Europe. Particular attention will be given to Northern Europe and the Scandinavian courts, a privileged focus of the EPHEMER-ART project. The aim is to give greater visibility to contexts that have so far remained decentred with respect to the major European centres of artistic and theatrical production. Contributions are invited on the following thematic strands:

- Spaces and Rituals of Spectacle. Sacred architecture (altar furnishings, machines for the Quarant'Ore or Forty Hours' Devotion, apparatuses for solemn obsequies and more); the transformation of spaces of spectacle, from temporary installations in palaces, bastions and warehouses to the construction of theatres.

- Travel Networks. The circulation of artisans, models and techniques: entrepreneurial dynamics and patronage networks. The role of architects, scenographers, painters and woodcarvers, reconstructed through documents, inventories and contracts, as well as the often poorly documented presence of women as artists, patrons and theatre entrepreneurs; the comparison between the accounts of foreign travellers and local sources.

- Materiality. Materials, techniques and processes of ephemeral production: how the choice of materials conveyed the transient, time-bound nature of an event, and how an informed use of materials could turn a fleeting occasion into a lasting marker of identity, historical consciousness, or both. In the face of loss, the strand also invites reflection on how historical reconstruction through archival documents can take materiality into account.

- Nature. Natural scenographies: landscapes, gardens, volcanoes and ecocriticism, understood as a tool for interrogating the ideological implications of the spectacularisation of nature in art. The relationship between ephemeral apparatuses and nature is not limited to the use of natural elements as scenic materials (fire, water, vegetation), but also encompasses the representation of natural phenomena (volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, avalanches and more) as a scenographic subject and as a challenge to the artist's representational capacities.

- Otherness. The scenic and iconographic construction of the Other through processes of racialisation, in sacred symbolism, theatre scenery and court festivities, from the memory of specific events such as the siege of Otranto in 1480 to the broader colonial imaginary. The conference invites reflection on how ephemeral spectacle constructed, conveyed or challenged these representations.

Proposals, written in Italian or English, must be submitted to the Scientific Committee by 14 December 2026, by sending the application to the project leader and to the conference coordinator (elisa.cazzato@unina.it; andreafiore82@gmail.com). Submissions should include:
- the title of the paper and the relevant thematic strand;
- an abstract (max. 2,000 characters, including spaces);
- a short biographical profile of the proposer, with academic affiliation (max. 1,000 characters, including spaces).

Selected papers will be included in an open access scholarly publication. Authors will be invited to submit the final text of their contribution by 1 October 2027.

Support covering travel and accommodation expenses will be available for a limited number of doctoral candidates.

The conference is promoted by the University of Naples Federico II with funding from EPHEMER-ART – Immaterial circulation: tracing artists and practices of ephemeral art from Italy to Europe (1700–1880), financed under Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) – Mission 4, Component 2, Investment 1.2 'Funding projects presented by young researchers' (Project code: MSCA2024_0000053; CUP: E63C24002780005). Project leader: Elisa Cazzato.

Reference:

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