Panel at ISECS 2027 (Zaragoza, 12-16 Jul 27)

Zaragoza, University of Zaragoza, Jul 12–16, 2027
Deadline: Nov 30, 2026

Agnieszka Ficek

The Art of Staging the Empire: Spectacle, Materiality, and the Colonial Imaginary.
Panel at the 17th International Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ISECS) Congress 2027.

How was empire made visible, tangible, and even spectacular in the eighteenth century? This panel considers the ways that performance and material culture transformed colonial relations into aesthetic experiences, asking how empire was staged not only in theatres but across a broader range of spaces, objects, artworks, and through ephemeral forms of art that are more difficult to collect and replicate. From masquerades, festivals, fireworks, and ceremonial entries to stage sets, interiors, decorative objects, temporary architecture, and exhibitions, spectacles of empire offered European audiences opportunities to encounter, imagine, and participate in an expanding world. The Enlightenment expansion of scientific inquiry invited the discovery of the other through taxonomy, classification, and the accumulation of empirical knowledge. But this same apparatus had another side: the instruments of observation that produced genuine botanical and ethnographic knowledge were also those through which otherness was rendered visible, tangible, and stageable.

Rather than treating spectacle simply as a representation of colonial power, this panel asks how aesthetic experiences actively produced ideas about empire, geography, cultural difference, and global exchange. What happened when distant peoples and places were translated into scenery, costumes, objects, performances, and built environments? How did materials and objects themselves “perform” within these spectacles? And how might attention to the ephemeral—the temporary pavilion, theatrical performance, firework display, procession, or masquerade—complicate an art history traditionally oriented toward enduring objects?

The panel also invites reflection on the relationship between ephemerality and the archive. Although many eighteenth-century spectacles were designed to disappear, prints, drawings, descriptions, souvenirs, objects, and other forms of documentation generated lasting material, memory and ideological traces that circulated and gave the ephemeral its durable form. How might such remains allow us to reconstruct experiences that were deliberately transient while also revealing the fantasies, omissions, and structures of power through which the wider world was imagined? We welcome papers addressing spectacle broadly conceived across visual and material culture, theatre and performance, architecture, decorative arts, festivals, collecting, and display. Together, the papers will explore how fleeting aesthetic experiences helped give durable form to eighteenth-century fantasies of empire and the global.

Please send a title and an abstract of 200 words to Agnieszka Ficek (agnieszka.ficek@outlook.-com) and Elisa Cazzato (elisa.cazzato@unina.it) by November 30.

For more information, please visit the conference website: https://www.isecs-zaragoza2027.net/en/en-home/

Reference:

CFP: Panel at ISECS 2027 (Zaragoza, 12-16 Jul 27). In: ArtHist.net, Oct 25, 2026 (accessed Nov 24, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/54730>.