Shifting Images of Europe's East: An Art Historical Inquiry from the Margins.

Deadline: Nov 30, 2026

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Call for contributions for a peer-reviewed publication edited by Jana Graul and Seraina Renz.

In what ways were perceptions of the eastern parts of the European continent and the border region with Asia shaped by images? What contribution did visual media, artefacts or performative practices make to processes of spatial or cultural inclusion and exclusion in this region? And how have artistic perspectives, on the one hand, helped to shape the idea of 'Eastern Europe' and, on the other, counteracted it or contributed to its deconstruction? These questions are the focus of the volume Shifting Images of Europe's East: An Art Historical Inquiry from the Margins, which was preceded between autumn 2022 and summer 2023 by a research seminar series of the same name at the Bibliotheca Hertziana – Max Planck Institute for Art History in Rome, and for which we are delighted to be able to publish a call for papers today. Building on the seminal 2021 study Imaging and Mapping Eastern Europe by Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, which argues that images played a primary role in the construction of Eastern Europe, this publication sheds light on the visual Imaginarium of Europe's eastern regions and examines its influence within the tension between external attributions and self-identification. The aim is to examine, from a historical perspective, the diverse representational strategies through which the eastern parts of Europe, from the early modern period to the present day, have been imagined, visually shaped, constructed and defined, as well as subversively undermined, deconstructed and reinvented.

In a plea for ambiguity and the diversity of European worlds, the winner of this year's Leipzig Book Prize for European Understanding, the writer Miljenko Jergović, recently compared Europe's eastern expansion to an open-ended narrative and stated that it is impossible to draw a boundary here, "[…] because no matter where the boundary is drawn, beyond it there always remains a part of Europe that Europe cannot come to terms with. Or a part of Europe that does not wish to be Europe…" (Award-winner's lecture, Leipzig, 18 March 2026). In fact, from a purely geographical perspective, the course of the continental boundary between Europe and Asia is unclear (there is no binding definition under international law) and is subject to differing interpretations, particularly concerning the Caucasus region. This is because, geologically speaking, the two continents together form a single continental plate and are not separated by marine boundaries. The borderline, as well as the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural border region between Europe and Asia, has been the subject of debate and negotiation in Europe since the 14th century and increasingly so from the 16th century onwards. On the one hand, the continental boundary came into focus as a result of the gradual expansion of the Ottoman Empire from Asia Minor into the Balkans, culminating in the capture of Constantinople in 1453. On the other hand, the renewed availability of Ptolemy's Geography, decisive innovations in the field of cartography, as well as

more intensive contacts, travel and conflicts, heightened humanist interest in ‘Sarmatia’ and thus in the topographies, cultures and languages of the eastern regions of Europe; whilst, analogous to Europe’s expansion westwards, there were also aspirations for expansion eastwards. The fictitious ancient boundary along the Don and mythical mountain ranges such as the Rhipaean Mountains was increasingly called into question, as in Maciej Miechotwita’s influential Tractatus de Duabus Sarmantiis Asiana et Europiana (Krakow 1517), which for the first time discussed the possibility of establishing new criteria for the continental dividing line (Piechocki 2014; Piechocki 2019). In the 18th century, the geographer Philip Johan von Strahlenberg, in Das Nord- und Östliche Theil von Europa und Asia (Stockholm 1730), established a line running along the Ural Mountains and River, which has since been followed by the majority, albeit by no means unanimously or in every detail.

To complicate matters further, despite the lively academic debate surrounding the concept of ‘Eastern Europe’ – including questions about its validity (see, amongst others, Lemberg 1985; Tornow 2005; Pejić 2009; Forgács 2014) – it remains unclear what we actually mean when we speak of Eastern Europe. For where Eastern Europe begins or ends, which territories it encompasses, and which overarching characteristics (supposedly) define and unite the region in question and the people living there, depends largely on who made this attribution, when, from which perspective (geographical, political, historical, cultural, religious, ethnically or linguistically), and with what intention, and what it implies in each specific case. Thus, the term ‘Eastern Europe’ may refer equally to the territory of present-day Belarus, the European part of Russia and Ukraine, as it may to the spheres of influence of the Orthodox Church or all areas inhabited by Slavic peoples; it may include the Caucasus but, for example, exclude Russia – classifying it instead as part of the North – or, as during the Cold War, refer to all European Eastern Bloc states, including the Balkans, the former GDR and the Baltic states. It should be noted that, in any case, this is not a geographically defined area but a theoretical construct – in other words, an idea. This idea gradually took shape as, alongside the established North–South division at the beginning of the Early Modern period, ancient notions of a geographical symmetry of Europe into West and East were further developed, and over time a veritable West–East dichotomy emerged, within which Eastern Europe was then subjected to a powerful denigration as ‘uncivilized’ and ‘backward’ in Enlightenment discourse (Wolff 1994; Bisaha 2004; Piechocki 2019).

Images played a key role in these debates, negotiation processes and attributions. Regarding the continental border, for example, the frontispiece of the 1521 Kraków edition of Miechotwita’s aforementioned treatise depicts a battle between two mounted armies, reflecting the expansionist ambitions of the Polish King Sigismund I towards the east. For Sigismund’s armoured troops, who symbolize the European part of Sarmatia, are clearly superior in the woodcut to their Asian opponents – a Tatar army depicted without protective armour, helmets or visors – which is, moreover, characterized as treacherous and dangerous by the scorpion, its heraldic animal. Similarly, the demarcation between Asia and Europe is addressed in cartography: maps not only constitutively introduce and legitimize the abstract continental dividing line, but can also, at the same time, call it into question and shift it. In doing so, they too employ attributions regarding the peoples living in the East on either side of the continental dividing line; for example, when, following an ancient tradition, they depict monstrous creatures in the border regions or show people worshipping idols. The image of Eastern Europe, in turn, as Murawska-Muthesius has shown, is fundamentally shaped by the ambiguous visual formula of ethnically attired figures, which has been in

use since the 17th century and, although often interpreted as a symbol of Eastern European backwardness, has also been self-assuredly employed and (re)interpreted by Eastern Europeans themselves.

Following the end of the Cold War, the question of the relationship between East and West in Europe was raised once again with renewed intensity. When the IRWIN collective created the multimedia East Art Map in the early 2000s, it sought to map art from Eastern Europe and visualize its internal connections. A black A2-sized map accompanying the book, does not reflect the geographical location of the 18 countries represented but rather superimposes a timeline (1945–2005) onto clusters of artists' names – loosely arranged by origin – each entered an oval bubble. Countless lines between the bubbles reveal – or rather construct, for the first time – connections between disparate artistic positions across temporal and national boundaries, whereby the artistic landscape of Eastern Europe appears more as a sketch of constellations in a segment of the dark firmament than as a map, particularly as references to the outside world are absent from this rigorous mapping. The book itself, however, adopts a comparative approach that places 20th-century Eastern European art in dialogue with its Western counterpart. (IRWIN 2006) Over the following two decades, the concept of Eastern Europe became increasingly less self-evident among artists and curators, partly because the particularity of historical experiences once again came to the fore. As Bojana Piškur observes, however, situating oneself within the pre-socialist past – between the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, and Christian and Muslim religions – is not making the question of identity any easier. (Piškur 2024) As disillusionment with the policies of the West or the European Union grows, new points of reference move into the foreground. Thus, the 2025 Kyiv Biennale focuses on art from Middle-East-Europe, "a term encompassing Central & Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Central Asia, and the Middle East." (Near East – Far West 2025) The curators emphasize: "By questioning the (neo)colonial relationship between Europe and its so-called peripheries, the exhibition asserts that the fate of 'Greater Europe' is now being forged in its eastern borderlands." At the same time, artistic practices repeatedly illustrate that the "eastern borderlands" can run right through the centre of the continent. In Everybody Wants to Live by the Sea (2014), for instance, Nikita Dakan explores Tatar settlements in occupied Crimea, which reflect the precarious status of the Tatars as an 'Eastern element' within a Russia conceived as Western.

The book offers the opportunity to juxtapose the shifting images of the continental boundary and the border region between Europe and Asia with the visual constructions of Eastern Europe, thereby not only revealing the historical dimension of ideas about this region – some of which remain influential to this day – but also highlighting the role of art in shaping the collective imagination of Europe's East. The focus is therefore on self-attributions and attributions by others as negotiated through images, and on the relationships between the Eastern parts of Europe and the neighbouring continent of Asia, as well as with other European regions – particularly their self-declared counterpart, the West. The publication explores how images address questions of identity, meaning and geographical and cultural boundaries in these regions, with a focus on artistic perspectives, artefacts and exhibitions. The aim is to understand how Europe was continually reproduced and reconstructed in images amidst the shifting tensions between East and West, and under what circumstances and with what intentions these changes took place.

We welcome contributions addressing these specific topics and questions, as well as any other

proposal related to the overall theme of the call:

- To what extent do images address the dynamics and complex manifestations of the borders of Eastern Europe?
- And to what extent do they not only contribute to their precise geographical localization and description, but also resist this?
- How do images, artefacts or performances negotiate the question of Europe's constantly shifting and changing 'Other'?
- The role of exhibitions in the negotiation of external and self-attributions between West and East.
- How do artists, architects and other cultural practitioners challenge or resist the prevailing narratives about Eastern Europe and its internal divisions?
- What cultural mechanisms have led to certain groups being included in or excluded from the imagined community of 'Europe'?

We invite you to submit your paper proposals (in English) to Jana Graul (jana.graul@uni-hamburg.de) and Seraina Renz (s.renz@hum.leidenuniv.nl) by 30 November 2026. Please ensure it is around 600 words long and includes 3–5 keywords, a brief introductory bibliography, and your CV with a list of publications. If your proposal is selected, we look forward to receiving your full 6,000--word essay by 30 April 2027 for a double-blind peer review process.

Related literature:

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Piechocki, Katharina N. "Discovering Eastern Europe: Cartography and Translation in Maciej Miechowita’s Tractatus de Duabus Sarmatiis (1517)." In Polish Culture in the Renaissance: Studies in the Arts, Humanism and Political Thought, edited by Danilo Facca and Valentina Lepri, 53–69. Florence: Firenze University Press, 2013.

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Piotrowski, Piotr. “On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History.” Umění/Art 56, no. 5 (2008): 378–83.

Piotr Piotrowski: „East European Art Peripheries Facing Post-Colonial Theory“ http://nonsite.org/article/east-european-art-peripheries-facing-post-colonial-theory, No. 12, 2014.

Tornow, Siegfried. Was ist Osteuropa? Handbuch der osteuropäischen Text- und Sozialgeschichte von der Spätantike bis zum Nationalstaat. Slavistische Studienbücher: Neue Folge, vol. 16. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2005.

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Reference:

CFP: Shifting Images of Europe’s East: An Art Historical Inquiry from the Margins.. In: ArtHist.net, Oct 24, 2026 (accessed Nov 14, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/54740>.