Landscape and the Visual Hermeneutics of Place, 1500-1700

Co-organizers: Walter Melion (Emory University) and Karl Enenkel (Universität Münster)

Scholars of Northern and Italian art have recently called attention to the exegetical form and function of landscape in various genres and proto-genres of early modern painting. Bruegel’s Seasons (1565), for example, viewed through the lens of Augustine’s reading of Psalm 47, operate as signifiers of divine beauty, goodness, and being, even while insisting, through their mutability and inconstancy, on the immutability and constancy of God. The descriptive effects that make these landscapes visually compelling, are complementary to motifs and structural devices—such as analogy, antithesis, chiasmus, and periphrasis—that invite or, better, demand sustained hermeneutic engagement. Between 1500 and 1700, the efflorescence of pictured landscape went hand in hand with the literary and rhetorical exploration of landscape’s affective and signifying effects. Countless lyric poems and cycles visualize landscape as the place whither one goes in search of the poetic source; in heptametal poetry, it epitomizes divine potency of the Creator; in epic poetry, it is the place through which one journeys to achieve a goal; in sacred literature, it marks the stages of the soul’s journey toward God. The visual evocation of place also constitutes one of the chief topics of rhetorics and poetics. These literary and pictorial examples bear witness to the discursive context within which landscape imagery functioned as a visual hermeneutic in paintings, drawings, and prints produced in Italy, Germany, and the Low Countries between 1500 and 1700.