

CFP: Unseeing the Evil Eye: Powers and Politics of the Apotropaic [Extended Deadline]

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Subject Fields:

Anthropology, Art, Art History & Visual Studies, Intellectual History, Political History / Studies, Research and Methodology

Call for Papers // Unseeing the Evil Eye: Powers and Politics of the Apotropaic

Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte and the Staatliches Museum Agyptischer Kunst, Munich

29. November - 1. December 2023

Since the mid-19th century, the ghost of apotropaism has haunted the humanities. Coined by classicist Otto Jahn (1813-1869), the term quickly gained traction in historical scholarship denoting actions or objects conceived as provocative, obscene, and therefore offensive to the aesthetic sensibilities of the time. Depictions of threatening animals, glaring faces and disembodied eyes, exposed genitalia and arcane symbols, accordingly, served as protective devices warding off evil by mirroring its appearance. Patterns of 'irrational' behavior in this reading transcend culture and history linking past artistic phenomena with present 'superstitions' as much as non-Western cultures. In art history, the apotropaic continues to be evoked for the uncommon, whenever visual and textual evidence seems insufficient, or it undergirds ambitious theories on art's efficacy. Ethnological and archaeological museums often situate the apotropaic within 'everyday' culture, while art institutions shun the anonymous in favor of artist genealogies and iconographic themes. With recent attention to our discipline's colonialist stakes and a push towards cultural and methodological diversification, the evil eye is due for a critical review.

This three-day international conference considers anew the relationship between contentious materials and anxious historians, and gauges the apotropaic's potential for recuperating non-canonical art and non-normative aesthetics. Its approach is two-fold: on the one hand, speakers are invited to center the term's nineteenth-century historiographic and museum legacies, its colonialist attitudes, as well as the moral politics that sustain its use to the present moment; on the other, we solicit interdisciplinary contributions examining its place within current philosophical and psychological debates, empirical aesthetics, curatorial strategies, as well as critical postcolonial, queer, and disability studies. With its long history of pooling marginal

materials and 'other' ways of engaging the senses, the apotropaic is emblematic of our discipline's past failings and rich in lessons to learn; and yet its uncompromising embrace of the so-called

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material misfits of history and its commitment to fostering emotional community across times and cultures warrants further attention.

We solicit papers that respond to key apotropaic materials and methodological positions from any culture and period. Paper sessions will be complemented by a visit to Munich's Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst addressing hands-on material, formal, and practical features of apotropaic items, as well as the ethical stakes of museum categorizations and display strategies. Contributions should be mindful of but not limited to three main areas of inquiry proposed for discussion:

Art's Anxieties:

Anthropological discourses of the apotropaic to a certain degree view all art as a 'defense' against the outside world and its hazards. Ethnologists on the other hand point to the cultural framing of the evil eye, its geographic hubs, and historical diffusion. What evidence does cognitive, psychological, and historical research provide on the role of fear in apotropaism? Does this reflect innate material qualities or instead the historian's state of mind? What other emotions may have motivated the making of apotropaic devices or may have been evoked by their presence?

Powers and Materialities:

Scholars often trace apotropaic items to magical thinking and the 'superstitious' belief that like affects like. They are understood as 'fetishistic' substitutes for the spirits they disarm or as iconographic vehicles of verbal and gestural cursing. How does the apotropaic work and how do materials, production processes, ritual practices, and moral convictions impact its performance? How do material objects differ from immaterial actions, and what is the apotropaic's place in more canonical art? How do visual designs resonate with the way items are handled, placed, moved, and worn? What are the apotropaic's conceptual overlaps with adjacent notions of agency, animism, new materialism and relational ontology, and what is art history's contribution?

Knowing the Other:

By materializing the 'unacceptable' apotropaic devices are believed to sustain binaries between male and female genders, upper and lower classes, 'normal' and

non-normative bodies, kindred and foreign people. Conversely, postcolonial, gender, and queer studies highlight the progressive stakes of the offensive in challenging power structures. How do apotropaic items police or subvert social norms and cultural divides? How do primitivist and colonialist biases feed into these interpretations? What emic or indigenous epistemologies are more suitable to grasp the apotropaic's diversity, and how may a 'queering' and 'cripping' unsettle assumptions on what upsets the eye?

Papers should be 20 minutes in length, and may be delivered in German or English. Travel and accommodation costs will be supported subject to funding availability. Please send proposals of no more than 300 words along with a brief CV to apotropaism.munich@gmail.com by 31 January 2023 [extended deadline].

This conference is generously hosted by the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte and the Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst in Munich and supported by Tufts University. Organized by Dr. Felix Jäger (LMU Munich) and Asst. Prof. Dr. Miriam Said (Tufts University).