2016 NERC at the RSA

Renaissance Now! A New England Renaissance Discussion
Saturday, April 2, 2016 at the Park Plaza Hotel, Fourth Floor, Back Bay Room

In 2015-2016, the New England Renaissance Conference will take place as a series of panels at the Renaissance Society of America’s Annual Meeting. Please join us for these important discussions.

Panel 1: “The Renaissance and New Epistemologies” Artifacts Pageant
Saturday, April 2, 2016, 10:30am-12:00pm, Park Plaza Hotel, Fourth Floor, Back Bay Room

Scholars are constantly experimenting with new sources and methods to expand and refine knowledge of the Renaissance. At the same time, contemporary developments such as new technologies are reshaping what we know and how we interpret the past. In this session, panelists present a single artifact – perhaps one that poses a puzzle – that exemplifies new methods and encourages discussion, exploration, and engagement with the audience. Examples of artifacts include a short portion of a text, object, image, musical piece, film clip, etc. Presenters will open by sharing the artifacts and the audience will weigh in with questions and proposed “readings”/interpretations of the artifacts.

Chair: Sarah Ross (Boston College)

Mary Gallucci (University of Connecticut) – “The Skull and Hair of Alessandro de’ Medici: Reading Racial Signs in Historical Perspective”

In this essay I discuss the racial formations of Alessandro de’ Medici, first duke of Florence. These formations derive from different sources: verbal descriptions, portraiture, and the material evidence of Alessandro’s remains. I examine whether a painted “description” tallies with a verbal one, considering the variety of terms used to describe and display skin tones. I survey the ways that particular features, such as skin and hair texture, were interpreted in the centuries since the assassination of Alessandro de’ Medici (1537). The verities of racial difference took a considerable leap forward in the nineteenth-century, when practitioners of phrenology and students of “primitive peoples” established the division of humans into specific categories: Caucasian, Negroid, Mongoloid, etc. Alessandro’s skeleton was exhumed and found to bear traces—in his hair and skull—of a damaging mongrel type. That skull has since been re-interpreted, casting doubt about the idea and the epistemology of race.

Lianne Habinek (Bard College) – “Renaissance flap-books and the brain: A case for neuroscientific plagiarism”

Flap anatomies are one of the early modern period’s stranger print innovations: they invite the reader to become a paper anatomist by lifting successive layers of the human body, and they popularize contemporary anatomical understanding. Given the centrality of the brain to anatomical and philosophical study, why were there almost no flap representations of the organ? I propose as an artifact a curious example of plagiarism: in the late 17th century, a revised English edition of Johann Remmelin’s resplendent flap-book Captoptrum microcosmicum appeared in London, with new (miniaturized) pictures of the brain pilfered directly from Thomas Willis’s and Christopher Wren’s Cerebri anatome (England’s first dedicated neuroscientific text). How these two texts collided raises important questions about the relationship between scientific advances and print culture. With Wren’s iconic drawings of the brain, readers of the Catoptrum could “read” the brain like a book.

Emily Monty (Brown University) – “Mannerism and Mobility in the World of Federico Zuccaro”
Italian mannerist painter Federico Zuccaro (c.1540–1609) facilitated a global exchange of artistic ideas and production through his prominent network of academics and followers. Zuccaro, a shrewd painter-theorist who painted in Spain, England, and the Netherlands, mobilized a group of Mannerists skilled at attracting international attention from powerful patrons. Working together with Zuccaro on illustrious projects like the Sala Regia in the Vatican, the Oratorio del Gonfalone, and the Villa d’Este in Tivoli, artists including Matteo Perez d’Aleccio, Bernardo Bitti, and Angelino Medoro later found success in Peru, where they maintained their transatlantic association with Zuccaro’s Academy of Saint Luke in Rome. Other Mannerists, like the Spaniard Pablo Cespedes, travelled to Rome to paint alongside Zuccaro and gain his friendship and favor. This paper considers the global authority of this famed Roman academician, and systematically investigates his network, which shaped painting in the late Renaissance, for the first time.

Panel 2: The Renaissance and the Public
Saturday, April 2, 2016, 1:30pm-3:00pm, Park Plaza Hotel, Fourth Floor, Back Bay Room

Renaissance studies, like other academic fields, faces the challenges of reaching audiences and asserting its relevance in the twenty-first century. Yet, from a bestselling novel on hidden codes in da Vinci’s works to a hit television series on the Tudors, to award winning movies on Shakespeare and the Virgin Queen, and to blockbuster exhibitions on Spanish Golden age painting, the Renaissance remains strong and vibrant in the collective imaginary. In light of these trends in popular culture, as well as recent moves by some scholars to engage in the public humanities, this panel highlights work presenting the Renaissance to a broader audience. We encourage papers on new methods to reach students and broader publics, new ideas of conceptualizing scholarship and the public, and new institutional developments.

Chair: Kenneth Gouwens (University of Connecticut)

Felicia Else (Gettysburg College) and Kay Etheridge (Gettysburg College) – “The College Curiosity Cabinet: Bringing the Renaissance to the Present”

In 2012, the Gettysburg College community bore witness to an unusual site—a recreation of a Renaissance-style curiosity cabinet composed of items from campus collections and the local community. The exhibition, “The Gettysburg Cabinet,” was the culmination of an undergraduate course team-taught by an art historian and a biologist/science historian using pedagogies and methodologies emphasizing an interdisciplinary approach, creativity and hands-on work. Students selected items, conducted research for the exhibition catalog and curated the show. Like the kunst- and wunderkammern of old, works of art and nature were brought together to create a microcosm, a “theater of the world.” The objects—ranging from paintings to pufferfish—served to bring the Renaissance notion of curiosity and wonder to a contemporary audience. The exhibit, which still can be accessed on-line, evoked an age when art and science were not distinct disciplines and resonated with a public still fascinated by such marvels.

Christine Hoffmann (University of West Virginia) – “Robert Burton, Laughing Democritus and Tumblr: The Anatomy of Public Shaming”

Robert Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy offers readers a curious service: dissecting, bemoaning and paradoxically substantiating an abnormal condition—melancholy—after showing that condition to be woven inextricably into normativity. This paper will first outline Burton’s public service: a non-discriminatory inclusion of the legitimate and the illegitimate that displays the paradoxes of knowledge-making—irresolvable dissention between schools of thought; the proximity of elite, common and deviant acquaintance. Second, I’ll introduce the imitators and inheritors of Burton’s strategy: social media websites that specialize in public shaming. While these sites seem designed to separate the inarticulate and uninterpolated—the shamed—from the knowing and legitimate—the shamers—these categories are made indistinct by a non-discriminatory structure that moves, constantly, between serious and silly, tragic and comic, rude and cute. Public-shaming sites, like Burton’s Anatomy, train readers toward a charitable horror, an (anti)humanism as relevant and perplexing today as it was in the Renaissance.
Panel 3: New England Renaissance Conference Stakeholders’ Discussion
Saturday, April 2, 2016, 3:30pm-5:00pm, Park Plaza Hotel, Fourth Floor, Back Bay Room

The New England Renaissance Conference at the RSA culminates in a discussion that explores the organization’s past, present, and future. To celebrate the NERC’s 75th diamond jubilee anniversary, please join us to learn about our heritage and share and brainstorm ideas for the future.

Chair: Tara Nummedal (Brown University)

Christopher Carlsmith (University of Massachusetts, Lowell) – “Diamond Jubilee: 75 Years of the New England Renaissance Conference”

This contribution will briefly summarize the history, significance, and major individuals in the history of the New England Renaissance Conference from 1939-2015. It is based upon the extensive article published in Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History (2015), and upon a previous RSA roundtable of 2014. In addition, this presentation draws from NERC’s own archive as well as the archives of the RSA, ACLS, and other scholarly societies involved with Renaissance Studies. The only previous publication in this area was Edward Cranz’s short talk of 1989 on the 50th anniversary of the RSA, which used virtually no archival sources. I will consider the unique characteristics of NERC and the historical challenges it has faced. If time permits, I could also describe the digitization of NERC’s archives, although I hope that Emily Jarmolowicz will discuss that topic.

Emily Jarmolowicz (University of Massachusetts, Amherst) – “NERC Digital Archives”

My contribution to the roundtable will be a discussion of the NERC archives, in conjunction with Prof. Carlsmith’s presentation on the history of NERC. The NERC archive consists primarily of correspondence and planning materials related to the annual conference, containing documents that date from the 1950s to 2014, and is housed in both physical and digital formats. We completed the reorganization, preservation, and digitization in Spring 2014. I will discuss the content of the archive, the process of preserving the documents and creating an archive that is useful to researchers, and the future of the archive as both a physical collection and a digital entity. I will also discuss the variety of challenges associated with maintaining an archive of this type, particularly as communication becomes increasingly electronic. The archive provides a unique perspective into the development of NERC throughout its seventy-five year history, in terms of themes, members, and leadership.


With access to new technologies, the NERC is rethinking its identity while respecting and honoring its past as the oldest Renaissance society in the United States. This discussion will allow us to share thoughts on brand, innovation, community, and outreach.