

Iconoclasm: practices of the past; interpretations of the present

Iconoclasm was not a common term in the pre-modern world. The Byzantines – who are normally believed to have initiated the concept – used the word ‘iconoclast’ as a pejorative label, but called the debate about images ‘iconomachy’ (the struggle about images). Iconoclasm as a term only comes into currency in the mid-sixteenth century. In modern usage, the term iconoclasm has come to cover a wide semantic field and a multitude of practices, and rather than impose pre-modern terminology, we have elected to retain the term, but in the plural, to emphasise the diversity of the phenomema that it has been used to encompass.

The study of this historiographical shift is a way into understanding changing attitudes about the values and functions of images and the development of visual cultures. The value of objects – and how this was expressed – is a critical issue in modern cultural and art history, and iconoclasm provides a neat way into these debates by raising questions about how images are used to mediate power relations. Images are good to think with, and they always have been.

Some comparative work has been done on the different constructions of ‘iconoclasm’,¹ but little has been done on how the similarities and differences between these phenomena (and their historiography) illuminate discourses about cultures. The themes and questions that we would like the scholars involved in this round table to consider are aimed at addressing how words about images – and words not used about images – open up larger cultural issues about how and why the visual communicates, about the interface and friction between verbal and written communication, and about what later understandings of earlier practices tell about the reception and reconception of the past.

Issues and questions/themes for discussion:

- How do ideas about ‘iconoclasm’ – and the terms used to articulate them – ripple out into wider cultural discourse? How do wider cultural discourses feed into ideas about ‘iconoclasm’?
- Is the historiographical emphasis on breaking in understandings of ‘iconoclasm’ productive? Or is breaking always remaking?
- To what extent should ‘iconoclasm’ be understood as means of mediating power relationships?
- ‘Iconoclasm’ is often about sign transformation and we need to consider its relationships with wider forms of transformative practice (e.g. carnival, charivari, caricature, graffiti, some forms of *ex-voto* display)?
- Does ‘iconoclasm’ scholarship pay sufficient attention to the treatment of objects that are not readily categorisable as ‘images’ or ‘art’? Does undue focus on privileged sets of objects limit our understanding of their ‘iconoclast treatment’?
- ‘Iconoclasm’ and space. What is the scope for fuller scholarly inquiry into the relationship between ‘iconoclasm’ and the meanings, values, and functions of spaces in which objects were displayed?
- What new questions could/should scholars of ‘iconoclasm’ ask? What are the established, unused, or misused methods and sources that we might employ?

¹ E.g. Gamboni, *The destruction of art*; LaTour & Koerner, *Iconoclasm*; Clay & Boldrick, *Iconoclasm: contested objects, contested terms*; McClanan & Johnson, *Negating the Image*.

Format:

Most of the suggested participants have published (some extensively) on 'iconoclasm', so rather than present new material for discussion, each speaker circulated in advance:

- an earlier article/chapter that encapsulates their position (or, if they prefer, a freshly written précis of their thoughts)
- a brief paragraph or list of bullet points that talks about unresolved issues, and ways forward

These were then used to structure an agenda (pre-circulated) for the round table discussion.

Participants:

		Institutional affiliation	Area of expertise
Adrian	Bantjes	Wyoming	Mexico
Leslie	Brubaker	Birmingham	Byzantium
Richard	Clay	Birmingham	French revolution
John	Haldon	Princeton	Byzantium
Ioli	Kalavrezou	Harvard	Byzantium
Simon	Baker	Tate Modern (UK)	Modern and contemporary art
Eric	Reinders	Emory	Asia
James	Simpson	Harvard	Late Medieval England