Van Gogh Museum Visiting Fellow in the History of Nineteenth-Century Art

The Grotesque in Late Nineteenth-Century European Art

Professor dr. Frances Connelly
3-8 June 2018
Van Gogh Museum
This year’s Visiting Fellow is Frances Connelly, Professor of Art History at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. Her research focus is modern European art, with a particular interest in the intersection of art history and anthropology. She has published two books on the grotesque: *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play* (2012) and *Modern Art and the Grotesque* (2003), as well as essays for exhibitions on this topic for the Museo Picasso Málaga and the Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt and the Neue Galerie, New York. Other publications focus on the phenomenon of primitivism, including *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907* (1995). Her research has been supported by the Rockefeller Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Mellon Foundation.

The seminar will consist of **three sessions** of three hours each, plus an **afternoon excursion** to the exhibition *Van Gogh and Japan*. A public introductory lecture will take place at the Van Gogh Museum on Sunday, 3 June. The seminar meetings will take place at the Van Gogh Museum (Monday and Wednesday from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., and Friday from 1-4 p.m. Exact location to be announced.) The date and time of the excursion will be announced before the start of the seminar.

**The Grotesque in Late Nineteenth-Century European Art**

The grotesque plays an outsized role in modern and contemporary art, and finds especially fertile ground in the artistic movements of the late nineteenth century. The monstrous, uncanny, abject, aberrant: all find new expression in the *fin-de-siècle*. To be sure, the expressive range in this period is striking, easily demonstrated by comparing the hybrid creatures imagined by Redon with those of Böcklin, the distorted bodies of Rodin with those of Beardsley, or the cadaverous crowds of Munch with the satirical masquerades of Ensor. The enthusiastic assimilation of Japanese imagery spurred even bolder experimentation in the realm of the grotesque for many artists, including van Gogh. This seminar will explore the workings of the grotesque in this unsettled and unsettling period and explore why it is a particularly powerful means to grapple with its social upheavals and cultural shifts.

**Session 1: The Grotesque at Work**

Taking up the imagery of Van Gogh’s era, we will explore the elusive and protean identity of the grotesque. Although it is most commonly linked to the monstrous, traumatic, and uncanny, other strands of the grotesque include caricature and the carnivalesque, as well as improvisation and fantasy. Resisting the traditional categories of style, genre, or iconography, it defies simple definitions. This is
due, in part, to the fact that grotesque images are visually unstable, thrown into flux through aberration, metamorphosis, and combination. These unresolved and ambiguous forms enabled artists to conjoin disparate realities, resulting in dramatic visual experiments. In addition, artists deployed the grotesque’s ruptures and fusions to subvert existing conventions and cultural narratives, unloosing a contest of meaning. It is not surprising that the late nineteenth century is rife with grotesque imagery, hovering as it does between the collapse of the old order and yet-to-be-determined shape of the new. This session will establish a conceptual approach to the grotesque that is culturally based and draw upon a wide range of late nineteenth-century imagery to explore these ideas.

Readings:


Additional:

Session 2: The Abject and the Dispossessed
Society’s abject and dispossessed constitute an abiding theme in the work of Van Gogh, and that of many other artists of the period. Two expressive elements of the grotesque, caricatural distortions and abjection, play prominent and complex roles in these representations. While it would appear that they lack any visual connection, abjection and caricature both share longstanding cultural associations with low culture in general and the lowly and outcast in particular. Through very different means, abjection and caricature expose the vulnerability of the body (and undercut the classical ideal). Each can bring their subject low through abuse and mockery, but it is also the case that each can serve to reveal deep truths and provoke profound empathy for the human condition. Further, it is instructive to compare
images that incorporate grotesque modalities with the heroic or nostalgic representations of the working poor from this period.

Readings:


Additional:


Session 3: Japonisme and the Grotesque

The infusion of Japanese images and objects into European culture precipitated a wide range of artistic experimentation; however, we can draw a distinction between the initial forays of the impressionists and the more radical impact in style and substance forged by the artists associated with symbolism and art nouveau. The intermingling of Japanese and European visual traditions is by its nature a negotiation of boundaries, and it is significant that, to a great extent, this later, more transgressive Japonisme enlists the grotesque, the ultimate boundary creature. This session will consider the ways that grotesque modalities were put into play in Japonisme, opening new potentialities in form and content. In addition, it is productive to consider the different ways that the grotesque was deployed by artists who perceived Japanese culture through the frame of exoticism, as opposed to those, including Van Gogh, who perceived it through the frame of primitivism.

Readings:


Additional: