Proposed panel title: “Water Symbolism in Art”

The representation of water in a work of art can symbolize many different things. As a life-sustaining force, visual references to water may offer many positive associations and meanings. Such meanings can vary in nature from the sacred to the secular – as an element of nature, a spiritual symbol, a means of pleasure and enjoyment, or an element suggestive of socioeconomic and political advancement. There are also visual representations of water as a powerful, malevolent force that can threaten life – violent storms, bodies of water, or sinister watery manifestations that render destruction and loss of life. The fact that water may symbolize such a broad range of ideas is a testimony to its rich potential as a source of artistic inspiration. Since much of water symbolism involves its power to serve as both a giver and/or taker of human life, the role of human agency – the actions individuals or groups undertake in their interaction with the water source in question – are key to deciphering the water symbolism present in a work of art.

This panel will explore four examples of water symbolism in art that illustrate various approaches to the ways in which human societies think about water and its use. The overall goal of these papers is to present a deeper understanding of visual representations of water in art that will shed light on the potential for water to communicate a wide range of spiritual, psychological, socio-cultural, and political messages. In addition, these papers will take as their premise
that water as a symbol in art both shapes, and is shaped, by human action and the various ideologies individuals or groups impose upon it. In this manner, references to water in works of art reveal a practice that social theorist Anthony Giddens describes as "both enabling and constraining." (Giddens 1979: 69). In this scheme, symbolism and human action are mutually interdependent, and the framework – in this case, the work of art - in which a source of water is presented becomes "both the medium and the outcome of the practices that constitute [these] systems." (Ibid) As artists create an infinite variety of works of art with water symbolism in order to communicate important messages and ideologies, so, too, do the deliberate actions and ideologies that human beings impose on their interactions with water continue to shape and reshape the various meanings associated with water in relation to human life.

Work cited:

Papers to be presented as part of this panel:

Dr. Laura Dufresne, “Water & Rome - from Aqueducts to Fountains”.

Dr. Clara Paulino, “Representations of the Sea in Portugal's Fascist Propaganda (1926-1974)”.

Dr. Karen Stock, “Pierre Bonnard's Bathtub as Tomb”.

Dr. Alice Burmeister, “Water Symbolism & Political Campaign Propaganda in West African Factory-Printed Textiles”.

(All participants listed above are faculty members at Winthrop University.)