The proposed title of this conference is “Interpreting Empathy.” The subject is the power of empathy as a catalyst in the artistic imagination in the West between the early Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period. Prospective contributors to the conference have written distinguished studies bearing on empathy implicitly or explicitly in a number of major fields, and one anticipated major result of their collaboration in this conference will be a cross-disciplinary profile of how empathy worked on the artistic imagination, and thereby on social values and action, in a decisive era of world history.

There are challenges in discussing a subject before it was named. In this case, long before Schleiermacher introduced the practice of Einfühlung into hermeneutics and even longer before the word “empathy” was invented. Empathy requires a double reflex. It requires a sense of common identity (e.g., human nature) with some one else; it also requires a sense of distance from the other. Thus, one way we can talk about empathy avant la lettre is by exploring projects of self-knowing that reached for commonality and acknowledged difference. The odds are that, as they address empathy’s pre-history, contributions will address some key aspects of the subject, including the awareness of empathy as an affect quite different from (i.e., less self-centered than) sympathy, the possibility and limits of empathy, and the risk that value placed on techniques of expressing (and manipulating) emotions, unmasked as blatant subjectivism, could negate actual empathy through the vernacular of art, as may have been one cause for the so-called A death @ of religious art by the end of the age of the Baroque.

Thus, mimesis is likely to enter the conversation, the creation of a virtual reality mirroring that in nature and human affairs, and the ebb and flow of styles as communities’ ways of picturing reality changed. A second, related aspect of the subject that is likely to be considered is art’s power to shape ethical and affective faculties in minds and hearts. Can non-mimetic arts (such as music in the form of plainchant) shape empathies as well as poetry, painting and architecture? Moreover, what is said about shaping ethical and affective responses when the arts are used to draw the limits of empathy, shutting out whole categories of people, as was done by caricatures of Jews in pictorial and narrative arts, and by Gothic churches building flamboyantly honoring the victorious alien minorities and disgracing the conquered indigenous peoples in Cyprus and the East Baltic region? Finally, participants in the conference are likely to set empathy in context as one of a large repertory of catalysts in art, some of which excluded it, as did those conveyed by mystical inwardness, iconoclasm, and remnants of Stoic indifference.

Recently, Lois Parkinson Zamora has recovered and told the strange story of how, after centuries, styles of Spanish Baroque art, introduced in Latin America as tools of colonial domination, became vernaculars of anti-colonial discourse sharpened to subvert
the colonial legacy’s status quo.¹ There is a complex dynamic in art. From quite different points of view, and with reference to different media, the participants in this conference are likely also to uncover self-subversive forces in the arts of empathy from which the Spanish Baroque derived and, to be sure, in the cost of withholding empathy.

Participants:

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Rachel Fulton
Herbert Kessler
Richard Kieckhefer
Sabine MacCormack
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Barbara Newman
Thomas F. X. Noble
Barbara Rosenwein
Theofanis Stavrou
Nancy Van Deusen