The World Inscribed: Linear Representation of the Early Modern Americas

This panel examines the complex use of line as script, contour, and coordinate in the early modern Americas. The European emphasis on empirical observation during this period yoked knowledge to firsthand experience, yet such a connection underscores a problem of representation: how might artists and scholars, whether from colonial expeditions or local populations, condense and convey information acquired through their physical engagement with the New World? This panel takes as its premise the view that the inscribed line—at once an indexical mark of bodily movement and a wholly abstract sign—served as a crucial interface between lived experience and intellectual abstraction. We seek papers that investigate linear representations of the Americas during the early modern period, including script and images from European incursions and their concomitant botanical, zoological, and ethnographic researches, as well as papers that examine the inscribing practices of indigenous communities. How might colonial and local practices overlap, respond to, or counter one another? Presentations that address the articulation of the body, as in body painting and tattooing; the relation of text, specimen, and image; and the delineation of space (including the adoption or refusal of perspectival and cartographic grids) are especially welcomed, as are papers that more broadly interrogate inscription as an epistemological model.