

Crafting Place: Visual and Material Practices of Placemaking in the Premodern World

University of Michigan History of Art Graduate Student Symposium
Symposium Date: March 28, 2026 | Abstract Deadline: December 1, 2025
Keynote Speaker: *to be determined*

While “placemaking” originates in contemporary discourses on urban planning and community development, scholars across the humanities have begun to explore how this concept can illuminate the spatial/placial practices of earlier worlds. In premodern contexts, place was often made not only through architecture and landscape but also through the movement, use, and display of portable objects, images, and materials. Pilgrims, for instance, returned from Jerusalem with lead flasks bearing depictions of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, widely disseminating its infamous visual and architectural forms.¹ Porcelain elephants produced in Jingdezhen, China, traveled through maritime trade and ended up in Portuguese palaces, Dutch homes, and Iranian chinikhanas.² While, in the summer triclinium or dining room of Herculaneum’s House of Neptune and Amphitrite, marine shells, portraits of aquatic deities, and water features are gathered in a dynamic, multisensory practice that curates place through material culture. Across the premodern world materials and visual forms actively constructed a sense of place through their sensory, cultural, and geographic associations.

This symposium seeks to explore how objects—whether enduring or ephemeral—participated in the making and unmaking of place in premodern contexts. We invite papers that engage with theoretical frameworks such as new materialism, actor-network theory, and ecocriticism to consider the agency of objects and their various entanglements with human and non-human actors. How did visual and material practices help define, disrupt, or reimagine placial experiences? How might we understand place as a relational and processual formation shaped through the interactions of people, materials, memories, and meanings? We especially welcome submissions that address the tensions between materiality and immateriality; that consider the mobility of objects and materials; that engage questions of (dis)placement; or that reflect on the politics of presence and permanence. Through case studies from across global premodernities, this symposium aims to reconsider the boundaries of place and the many forces—seen and unseen—that bring it into being.

Abstracts concerning the premodern period from all geographical contexts are welcome. Submissions will be considered for 20-minute presentations in English. Please send a title and abstract (300 words or less), through this [Google Form](#) by December 1, 2025.

¹ See, for example, British Museum 1876.1214.18 dated between the 12th - 13th century.

² See, for example, Metropolitan Museum of Art 68.180, second half of the 17th century; and Adriaen Van Utrecht, *Still life with parrot or Allegory of Fire*, 1636, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, 4731.

