

Monday, 11.03.2024; 4:15 - 6:00 pm CET

Eva Seemann, German Historical Institute, Paris, France

Privileged Curiosities: Dwarfs, “Living Marvels” and Asymmetrical Dependency at German Courts (sixteenth- eighteenth centuries)

Abstract:

This talk explores the social status of dwarfs and other human curiosities at early modern German courts. As elsewhere in Europe, the popularity of court dwarfs was a widespread phenomenon among German princes of the early modern period. Princes and nobles from all territories of the Holy Roman Empire surrounded themselves with dwarfs as court wonders, entertainers, playmates for the children and symbols of princely status. As such, dwarfs lived in a highly ambiguous status of “privileged dependency”. Drawing on a broad range of archival evidence and printed material as well as pictures, I will address different aspects of dwarf’s lives at court, including recruiting patterns, their legal status, and possibilities for social advancement. While, until recently, court dwarfs have often been aligned to slaves and pets, this talk takes on a more nuanced perspective. In order to understand the complex position of human curiosities at early modern courts, I will argue that we should analyze their status within the larger context of asymmetrical dependencies in early modern court societies, and adopt an intersectional approach that allows to detect “small differences” between social groups.

Bio:

Eva Seemann is a postdoctoral researcher at the German Historical Institute in Paris. She studied History and French and previously served as research assistant and lecturer at the University of Zurich, where she earned her PhD in 2021. Her research focuses on the history of the body and gender, migration, as well as courts and elites in the early modern period. Her recent book, *Hofzwerge. Kleinwüchsige Menschen an deutschsprachigen Fürstenhöfen der Frühen Neuzeit* explores the life and history of c. 250 dwarfs at German-speaking courts in the Holy Roman Empire (ca. 1550–1750). It was awarded the Gleim Literature Prize and the Franz Stephan Prize in 2023.