This seminar explores the prospects and challenges of ecocriticism as a relatively new and emerging interpretive approach in art history, with a view to creating an interdisciplinary conversation about its potential reciprocal benefits for scholars in a variety of fields. After two decades of ecocriticism mainly in literature and cultural studies (led by key figures such as Lawrence Buell, Greg Garrard, and others), a few art historians recently have begun to embrace it as well. In so doing, they have directed attention toward new kinds of historical materials, artifacts, forms, and representations, but the long-term benefits of this development for art historians and non-art historians alike remain unclear. Does it promise not only to enrich art history but also create productive opportunities for interdisciplinary conversation? This seminar provides a venue in which to consider such questions about the upshot—the “so what”—of ecocritical art history for scholars across the environmental humanities.

Sample questions for position papers and discussion:

- Do works of art and visual/material culture require different strategies of ecocritical interpretation? If so, what are they? Are they analogous to those already used by scholars of literature or not? Does one need to be an art historian in order to do ecocritical art history?
- What particular challenges and opportunities do works of art and visual/material culture entail for ecocritical scholars across disciplines? Does the materiality of art and visual/material culture resist ecocritical interpretation and/or open avenues of investigation hitherto overlooked by art historians and non-art historians? Does ecocritical art history have something offer scholars in other disciplines? If so, what?
- How might emerging discourses of new materialism, object-oriented ontology, and affect theory (emanating from philosophy, literature, politics, and other fields) inflect ecocritical art history? How might the engagement of visual material through those discourses benefit ecocritical scholars outside art history?
- What historical and hermeneutic challenges or opportunities arise when interpreting works of art and visual/material culture that predate the emergence of “ecology” as a concept during the late 19th century?
- Can or should ecocritical art history contribute to environmental activism?
- Is it time to let go of the idea of “nature” in art history and other disciplines?
- What advice can scholars in literature provide to art historians (and vice versa) in addressing such questions?

Recommended readings:
