ABSTRACT

“Trading Values: Money and Culture in Early Modern Europe”

Scholars in the Humanities are searching for new directions as universities, especially public urban ones like ASU, seek to establish deeper and more direct relationships with external communities by researching issues that affect their quality of life. One question that is of immense importance to a culture as wealthy as ours is how money structures lives, and, in particular, its relationship to our values. The symbolic system of money, which arose in modern western history in the fourteenth century, restructured every aspect of life, from work and the family to religious devotion and sexuality. Wealthy merchants and bankers amassed wealth, commissioned art and literature, and supported new values, less dependent on feudalistic concepts of physical strength, military courage, and aristocratic lineage. But some voices expressed concern about aspects of these changes, and popular religious movements held dear the ideal of poverty, and criticized usury and the hoarding money, among other practices. Our proposed research project will contribute to the current debates about money and values by seeking to understand one period of crises in humanistic values, Western Europe from the fourteenth through the sixteenth century. By looking at European culture, both then and now, rather than at specific national cultures, we can also explore the nature of a western identity. Is it tied to a free market system or to Christianity? How do economic values affect the way we view other religious groups, such as Jews and Muslims?

Our research project will be transdisciplinary by definition, with Principal Investigators in the fields of literature and art, who specialize in Flanders and Florence. If funded, we will begin in Summer 2006 by formulating a bibliography and a list of expert scholars from other universities. Our project will include a monthly meeting, which will begin in Fall 2006 and involve ASU faculty members and graduate students as well as invited guest scholars from other universities. It would culminate in Spring 2007 with a public symposium on the rise of the monetary economy and its cultural effects. The Principal Investigators also plan to apply for an NEH Summer Institute, to be held in Bruges and Florence. If this plan is successful, then the lecturers at the Institute, all esteemed scholars, would contribute essays to a book that would be edited by the PIs. Finally, this proposal, if funded, would move forward our long-range plan of co-authoring a book-length study of the economic, cultural, and religious networks that connected urban, economic centers, such as Bruges and Florence, in the late medieval and early modern periods.

Our project has the potential of not only bringing prestige and financial benefit to ASU, and creating a dynamic intellectual group of scholars on campus, but also of placing ASU at the center of major currents in the Humanities.