

LIST II, HT, SS

HIU34580 - Making a Spectacle in Modern Europe (Erin-Marie Legacey)

Assessment: Essay One (40%) and Essay Two (60%)

This module explores the history and cultural significance of spectacle and performance in Modern Europe, with a particular focus on the nineteenth century. It investigates how public displays—ranging from scientific demonstrations to executions—have functioned as tools of cultural expression, social control, and political power.

"Spectacle" here is defined broadly, encompassing events and performances designed to captivate, entertain, and shape public perception. Case studies include balloonmania in the 1780s, public executions as state theatre, and imperialist narratives embedded in colonial exhibitions. Additional topics address the commodification of risk in amusement parks, the role of music in forging national identities, and the cultural politics of food and celebrity chefs in modern Europe. The course also examines how contemporary popular culture has made a spectacle of the nineteenth century itself—through film, television, and trends such as steampunk. Taken together, these case studies reveal how spectacle has always been more than amusement: it plays a central role in constructing social norms, shaping national identities, and reinforcing (or resisting) political ideologies.



John Alais, "Madame Saqui" (1820). Image from the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.