

Volcanos in art: Enlightenment, Power and Revolution

Date/Time	12 th April 2027 6 pm	Price	N/A
Venue	Zoom (recording available for 4 weeks)	Lecturer	Matthew Morgan

This lecture explores the explosive presence of volcanoes in art from the late 18th to the early 19th century — a period when science, politics, and aesthetics were all undergoing seismic change. Far from being mere spectacles of nature, volcanic eruptions became powerful symbols through which artists grappled with the forces reshaping their world.

We begin with the Enlightenment, when travellers, natural philosophers, and painters flocked to Vesuvius in search of sublime experience and empirical knowledge. Their images reveal a new fascination with geology, observation, and the drama of natural law. From there, we trace how volcanoes became charged with political meaning: emblems of divine judgement, metaphors for revolutionary upheaval, and visual shorthand for the instability of empires. Artists such as Joseph Wright of Derby and Pierre-Jacques Volaire transformed eruptions into meditations on power, fragility, and the volatility of human ambition.

Lecturer

Dr Matthew Morgan is an independent art historian, educator, and museum professional with a passion for sharing the joy of art, focusing primarily on European painting of the 18th and 19th centuries.

He has lectured widely across Britain and Europe, in settings as diverse as universities, festivals and cathedrals as well as Galleries such as the National Gallery, the Royal Collection, the Wallace Collection, the Courtauld Institute and the Victoria and Albert Museum. He received his PhD from Birkbeck, University of London, his MA from the Courtauld Institute and his degree is from Cambridge. He has taught for more than eight years at Birkbeck, University of London, and worked as a Director in the Valuations Department at Christie's.

Beyond museums, he has contributed to TV documentaries, podcasts, and radio programs, and created a series of short films about paintings available on YouTube.