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The Destructive Power of Fire and Water in the Representation of Naval Battles in 16th Century Art and Festivals

In Early Modern Europe, representations of naval battles—from paintings to festival re-enactments—spoke to pretensions of political power in this age of territorial expansion and conflict. Scholars of art and festivals have rightly emphasized the manipulation and visual splendor of water in these impressive maritime displays. But by looking at the pairing of water and fire, we can see this remarkable genre in new ways. Naval battles struck contemporaries in their wondrous but terrifying displays of fire on water, whether in the form of fireworks, firearms or, in some cases, water literally set on fire.

This paper will explore the pairing of fire and water in the representations of naval battles in 16th-century Europe, particularly in France and Italy, drawing on my current research on the politics of water in art and festivals of Medici Florence. Examples include naval battles staged at Reims, Lyons and Nantes as well as two events put on for the 1589 wedding of Granduke Ferdinando de' Medici to Christine of Lorraine, one being the well-known *naumachia* set inside the Pitti Palace courtyard in Florence. Sources reveal how water and fire conveyed an impression of destructive power, in some cases, eliciting concern for the safety of the festival participants. By bringing together these normally opposing forces of nature in the context of displays of political power, these naval battles will address two of the conference's axes of inquiry ("Contexts and environments" and "Oppositions and complementarities").

Felicia M. ELSE is Associate Professor and Chair of Art History at Gettysburg College, Pennsylvania. She has published on Bartolomeo Ammannati's architecture and sculpture in the *Burlington Magazine* and the *Sixteenth Century Journal* as well as interdisciplinary studies on water, cartography and science in *Imago Mundi* and *Medicea: Rivista interdisciplinare di studi Medicei*. She has completed work on a forthcoming book in conjunction with the Society for European Festivals Research entitled *The Politics of Water in the Art and Festivals of Medici Florence: From Neptune Fountain to Naumachia* (Abingdon UK and New York: Routledge, 2017).

