2015-17 Theme:
Senses and Longings

The Eisenberg Institute proposes to explore perception and feeling in relation to the time-scapes of human experience. We aim to find a place in history for longings, i.e., yearnings for a state of affairs—perhaps lost to the past or beckoning as an imagined future—that differs from a given present.

The “affective turn” of the past twenty-odd years contends with a default assumption that human action is rational, the result of goal-oriented choices made by actors seeking the most effective means to their ends. Historians bring a rich perspective to this “turn.” We know that human action and decision arise in definite historical situations, brought to us by the senses; moreover, choices to act are frequently steeped in one or more emotions—hope, sorrow, love, resentment, desire, and more. Thus we see a complex of elements. The senses stir feeling; feelings can arouse or dull the senses. Both are contingent on time—through the education of the senses, for instance, and in the temporal dimensions of memory or anticipation that frequently constitute emotions. We propose to capture this complex of sense and feeling particularly in longings that imaginatively traverse long stretches of historical time.

Today the look forward is clouded by conditions of economic disorder, political violence, and environmental disaster, leading observers to recognize a “crisis of futurity” manifested in an inability to imagine better times to come, in mythic embroidery of old times, or in fear of bygone calamities returned to haunt the world. Such a crisis—a loss of fruitful longings—will be just one of the problems we hope to broach, as the Eisenberg Institute invites discussion of all these aspects of situations, from all periods and places: modes of perception (histories of the human senses), textures of emotional response, the profound temporality of experience, and the framing of long-range time-scapes looking toward past and future.