

Masonic and Esoteric Heritage (21 Oct 05 Amsterdam)

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Conference:

Masonic and Esoteric Heritage.
A New Perspective for Art and Conservation Policies

21 October 2005, Amsterdam, The Netherlands
[Deadline: 1 August 2005]

Organizers:

- OVN, Foundation for the Academic Study of the History of Freemasonry in the Netherlands,
- Chair for Cultural Heritage, conservation and restoration, Dept. Art, Religious and Cultural Studies, University of Amsterdam,
- Sub department History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents, Dept. Art, Religious and Cultural studies, University of Amsterdam.

This conference will highlight the need for documentation and preservation of the cultural heritage of Masonic and Western esoteric organizations (including 17th-20th century architecture, lodge-interiors, ritual and decorative objects, works of art, prints, books, archival and photographic materials). The emphasis will be on Freemasonry as an organization with a particularly rich material culture, but other currents, such as Hermeticism and Modern Theosophy, will also be discussed. The issues raised will be relevant to the field of study in general. The aims of the conference are:

1. To introduce art historians, conservation specialists, heritage organizations and cultural policy makers to the wide spectrum of the material heritage of Masonic and esoteric currents and its important place within our western cultural heritage as a whole;
2. To draw attention to the growing interest in this heritage category within various academic research disciplines, and the need for an overview of the remaining examples of Masonic and esoteric heritage on a local and (inter)national level;
3. To bring together experts in the field of cultural heritage and

Western esotericism, as well as curators of relevant collections, to address the problems concerning the preservation of this heritage, in order to create an interdisciplinary dialogue, facilitate solutions and stimulate research and education.

Since the 1970s there has been a growing academic interest in the study of so-called Western esoteric currents. With chairs for the study of Western esotericism and Freemasonry now established at the Universities of Paris, Amsterdam, Sheffield and Leiden, as well as research groups at other European Universities, the field is now widely recognized as a new academic discipline. The main European Masonic libraries and museums are making their historic collections and archives accessible through internet databases, facilitating research by students and scholars from disciplines such as the Social Sciences, Study of Religions and Cultural Studies. The Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica, a private collection available for researchers, was placed on the official list of protected Dutch cultural heritage. The Theosophical Society in the Netherlands has recently decided to transfer its entire historical archive to the Amsterdam Municipal Archive in order to guarantee its preservation and accessibility for future research. Recent dissertations demonstrate that esoteric symbolism was an important aspect of the work of such celebrated artists as Mondriaan and Picasso.

All these developments are making us more aware of the influence that esoteric organizations have had on the development of modern western culture, and of the importance of these organizations' material culture as a research tool and a part of our collective cultural heritage.

Within art history and heritage conservation, there is a long tradition of documenting, preserving and restoring important examples of both religious, social and domestic art and architecture. But since the study of Western esotericism and related currents, such as Freemasonry, is a relatively "young" academic discipline, questions concerning their material heritage have failed to attract equivalent attention among art historians, conservation specialists and heritage organizations.

Insufficient familiarity with the domain in question, not infrequently aggravated by prejudice, has played an important role in creating this situation. The private and sometimes "secret" character of many esoteric currents was another important factor.

While it is widely accepted that world religions such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism have profoundly influenced art, art historians have only just begun to realize that the membership of such organizations, as Freemasonry and Theosophy, has influenced many of our most celebrated artists in the same way. Most art historians and

cultural policy makers are unaware of the research that has been devoted to the subject within Religious Studies in recent years, and hence are unable to recognize related symbolism in a work of art or an architectural design. This can have adverse effects on decisions that are made as part of a restoration process, or as part of an application for alterations or even the demolition of a historic building. Recent cases, such as the renovation of the building of the Nederlandse Handelsmaatschappij in Amsterdam (designed by architect/freemason/ theosophist K.P.C. De Bazel in 1919), illustrate how important it is to include interdisciplinary co-operation between art historians, restorers and experts in the field of Western esotericism in such a decision processes.

The conference organizers would like to make an inventory and compare the current "status" of Western esoteric heritage in different European countries. Now that the study of Western esotericism is recognized as an academic discipline, it is becoming clear that its cultural heritage deserves the same care and attention, which is already given to other examples of art and monuments. New insights have to be implemented into conservation policies, heritage laws or subsidy schemes. It is of the utmost importance that Masonic and esoteric monuments, landmarks, objects and other categories of cultural heritage are documented and registered in the near future. For instance, stock-taking of Masonic heritage on a local or (inter)national level, would make valuable information about one of the most influential currents in European history available to researchers of all disciplines, as well as heritage organizations and cultural policy makers.

Furthermore, information about the care and conservation of historic objects and buildings needs to be made available to esoteric organizations and their individual lodges, as well as the caretakers and curators of larger esoteric collections, in order to help preserve a unique category of cultural heritage for future generations.

This conference will address these complex issues for the first time. (Details on the location and attendance fee will be made available at a later stage.)

Keynote speakers will include:

- Prof. Andrew Prescott (Centre for Research into Freemasonry, Univ. Sheffield),
- Prof.dr. Wouter J. Hanegraaff (Subdept. History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents, Univ. of Amsterdam),
- Prof.dr. Frans Grijzenhout (Chair for Cultural Heritage, conservation and restoration, Univ. Amsterdam / The Netherlands Institute for Cultural Heritage).

Call for papers

Scholars of all disciplines are invited to submit paper proposals (of max. 250 words) on related topics. All papers are to be presented in English in sessions of ca. 30 minutes. Participants are encouraged to illustrate their papers with slides or power point presentations. The deadline for submissions is 15 April 2005. The organizers aim to publish a selection of the presented papers in the conference prints. Papers that are to be included will have to be made available to the editors before 1 August 2005.

Papers on the following topics are especially welcomed:

- the wide spectrum of the material heritage of Masonic and Western esoteric currents (17th-20th century architecture, lodge-interiors, ritual and decorative objects, works of art, prints, books, archival and photographic materials) and its importance as a source for academic disciplines such as Social, Religious and Cultural studies;
- the place of Western esoteric heritage within Western (religious) art and social history in general;
- the deliberate destruction of Masonic and esoteric heritage following Nazi orders in World War II and the long process of returning missing objects and archives to their rightful owners;
- ongoing research projects concerning Masonic and esoteric architecture, objects or collections that are at risk of alteration or destruction;
- interdisciplinary research into the influence of esoteric symbolism on the work of artists, architects and designers; how new insights are of importance to the decision process for restoration projects and planning permissions, and/or the policies of heritage organizations;
- the need for documentation and registration of esoteric heritage on a local and (inter)national scale; possible strategies to be followed in creating such a registration or database; the future use of such data as a research tool and reference framework for historical research or conservation decisions;
- ongoing projects, new initiatives and suggestions for co-operation between the curators of esoteric collections and buildings and academic organizations in the fields of Art History, Cultural Heritage and Religious Studies, that will help document, preserve and restore Western esoteric heritage, and stimulate education;
- the need for (structural) funding of documentation, conservation and restoration of Western esoteric cultural heritage.

For more information and submission of proposals, as well as preliminary conference registration, please contact:

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Reference:

CFP: Masonic and Esoteric Heritage (21 Oct 05 Amsterdam). In: ArtHist.net, Mar 3, 2005 (accessed May 2, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/27029>>.