

## The initiated artist. Western Esotericism in Art 18th–20th c.

Andrea Kroon

Call for papers:

The Initiated Artist. Methodological Introduction into Western Esotericism in Art, 18th-20th Centuries

SUN Publishers in Amsterdam has taken the initiative to publish a book on Western esotericism in art between circa 1800 and 1940. The publication aims to provide an introduction to this new field of study within art history. Scholars researching the relationship between art and Western esotericism are invited to submit paper proposals that fit into the conceptual frame outlined below. Additionally, museums are invited to participate in an international exhibition on the subject.

Methodological basis: Western esotericism

Within Religious Studies the modern term „Western esotericism“ is used as a general label for a great variety of religious currents and trends in Western culture since Late Antiquity. These currents are characterized by their belief that true knowledge of the divine (theosophia), the world, and man can only be attained by means of personal spiritual experience or inner enlightenment (gnosis).

After the Reformation, the occult sciences (magic, astrology, alchemy) and Kabbalah gave rise to such movements as Theosophy, Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry. The new structures of culture and society originating in the scientific revolution of the 17th century and the Enlightenment of the 18th have thoroughly reshaped Western esotericism. The modern revival of esotericism extends from Romantic Naturphilosophie around 1800 to 19th century occultism involving Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism, Spiritualism, modern Theosophy, Anthroposophy, and (ceremonial) magic. These modern esoteric currents are the result of processes of modernization (notably the separation of church and state around 1850), secularization, and disenchantment of the world. Its representatives sought to present their esoteric perspectives as compatible with or superior to mainstream science. All these movements were profoundly influenced by the belief in progress, the discovery of non-European cultures and the emergence of various popular conceptions of psychology and psychotherapy. Modern

society has seen a proliferation of esoteric fraternities and organizations, up to the New Age movement and other diffuse „cultic milieus“ of today. The most comprehensive, scholarly and up-to-date standard work on the subject is: W.J. Hanegraaff (ed.), *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, Leiden 2006. The editors recommend this dictionary as an academic frame of reference for the proposed publication.

#### Western esotericism as a new discipline

Within academia it is increasingly acknowledged that Western esotericism has exerted a profound influence on the development of Western religion and science, culture and literature, politics and society. Seminal for the development of Western esotericism as an individual academic discipline was the institution of the *Chaire d'histoire des courants ésotériques et mystiques dans l'Europe moderne et contemporaine* at the Sorbonne University in Paris in the 1960s. Since then, several chairs for the study of Western esotericism and individual esoteric currents have been founded at universities in Sheffield (UK), Brussels (Belgium), Amsterdam and Leiden (the Netherlands). The Chair for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam now offers a complete BA and MA education program on Western esotericism. Other numerous universities, academic research centres, and members of professional organisations (such as ASE and ESSWE) as well as independent scholars, conduct research into this subject from Religious, Cultural and Social Studies. While within Art History no clear distinction is made between terms such as „occult“, „esoteric“, „spiritual“ and „mystical“, developments within Religious Studies and the study of Western esotericism have resulted in a better definition of esoteric currents and relevant terminology. The word „esoteric“ is clearly defined in either a typological way - in the sense of initiated or secret - or as a historical definition of a tradition in religious and philosophical thought. Currents are equally well-defined within the tradition of Western esotericism, by focussing on the essential characteristics of a current, and its indebtedness to and its deviations from the tradition.

#### Necessary change of paradigms in art history

The study of esotericism in general uses the same methodology as the Study of Religions, such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism, as most Western esoteric currents include a religious element. Empirical data such as texts, ritual activities, the application of mythological and symbolic concepts, the use of religious objects and the production of works of art are analyzed with research tools common to various disciplines within the Humanities, including history, anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, gender studies and psychology. Especially the Social Sciences have developed important tools for understanding how social formations and

network relations are created within religious and esoteric currents, and how they are preserved or changed with the passage of time.

Art History however, and notably modern Art History, has not yet developed a methodology by which esoteric symbolism or iconography of art, architecture, applied arts and design can be identified and analyzed. This is due to several reasons. Iconographic methodology within art history still is firmly rooted in Christian tradition. Knowledge of a broader spectrum of symbolic meanings, especially esoteric, is virtually absent. Also, while it is widely accepted that world religions like Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Judaism have profoundly influenced art, art historians have only just begun to realize that esotericism has influenced many of our most celebrated artists in the same way. Most art historians 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. Moreover, only recently art historians have developed awareness that art is not only a product that can be viewed autonomously (as a work in its own right, with its own specific characteristics and merits), but that it is also a product of social dynamism - within society itself or, in a narrower frame setting, within artistic circles. Study of the social network of an artist, and his or her membership of an esoteric organization, has therefore not been acknowledged as a factor of importance in the creation of a work of art or design, and consequently relevant to the interpretation of its meaning and orientation.

Until now the study of esotericism and the study of art have developed along parallel lines, without significant interdisciplinary research. This is remarkable, as most esoteric currents and esotericists have made use of a rich visual language and symbolism, because esoteric „knowledge“ is thought to transcend rationality and discursive language. Thus Western esoteric currents have not remained limited to the theoretical, the domains of religion and philosophy, but have frequently overlapped with material culture, the visual arts, music, and literature. This interrelationship was until very recently insufficiently acknowledged by art historians. However, recent interdisciplinary research, which has integrated the traditional methodology of art history with that used by scholars with Religious Studies, has resulted in new approaches and methods by which esoteric elements in art can be identified and analyzed.

Focus on art from 1850 until ca. 1940

From 1800, Western esotericism takes on many new faces, as described above. Within art itself other developments have been instrumental in blurring the boundaries between esoteric currents even further. Most important has been the development of the Romantic idea of the individual

genius. Towards the end of the 19th century, artists viewed themselves as initiates and as visionaries of a new era, in which art would play an essential role in society by creating a Universal Brotherhood.

Unfortunately, there are no data available on the exact number of artists which belonged to an esoteric organization, to quantify their influence on modern art. Although the circles of artists, in which esotericism became the leading source of inspiration, may have been small - compared to the total quantity of artists active in society - they have developed into the forerunners (avant-garde) of all major modern currents in art: Symbolism, Expressionism, Futurism, abstract art, etcetera.

Whereas the influence of freemasonry on art is a virtually absent theme in modern art historical studies, esotericism as such has already been subject of study in connection with art historical currents of the fin de siècle. Pioneering work was done by e.g. Sixten Ringbom, in his book *The sounding cosmos. A study in the spiritualism of Kandinsky and abstract painting* (1970) and Robert Pincus Witten, in his dissertation *Occult Symbolism in France: Joséphin Péladan and the Salons de la Rose et Croix* (1976). The theme has also been subject of large exhibitions - that usually function as a filter of current research - as part of a larger theme, such as *Towards a new art. Painting 1910-1920* (Londen 1980), *Der Hang zum Gesamtkunstwerk* (Zürich 1983), *Vom Klang der Bilder. Die Musik in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart 1985), *Vergangene Zukunft. Tschechische Moderne 1890-1918* (Kassel 1994) and *Lost Paradise. Symbolist Europe* (Montréal 1995). Other exhibitions focussed on this theme exclusively, such as *Kunstenaren der Idee. Symbolistische tendenzen in Nederland ca. 1880-1930* (The Hague 1978), *Zeichen des Glaubens. Geist der Avant-Garde: Religiöse Tendenzen in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart 1980), *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985* (Los Angeles/Chicago/The Hague 1986-1987), *Okkultismus und Avantgarde. Von Munch bis Mondrian 1900-1915* (Frankfurt am Main 1995), *Im Reich der Phantome. Fotografie des Unsichtbaren* (Mönchengladbach 1997) and *Das Bauhaus und die Esoterik* (Hamm/Würzburg 2005).

All research in this field, on which exhibitions and publications until this day are based, has used esoteric terms and categories indiscriminately. Influences of e.g. Theosophy, Spiritualism or Anthroposophy are mentioned readily, but analyses have not been based on any coherent discrimination between the essential characteristics of an esoteric current, by which e.g. „theosophical art“ can be pictorially or structurally distinguished from „anthroposophical art“, let alone from „masonic art“ or „occultist magical art“. Esoteric influences have generally been viewed from within the traditional categories in art history, generally based on iconographical characteristics. Thus, most of the modern „esoteric art“ has been categorized as an integral part of Symbolism or early abstract art. However, recent research has shown that

e.g. figurative art can be just as esoteric in essence as Symbolist or early abstract art. Also, the traditional categorization of currents in art in itself has proven to be superficial and faulty. Any „established“ current in art in fact has many faces and many inspirational sources, due to the individuality of an artist, and boundaries often are arbitrary, as they are based on superficial, mostly visual elements and interpretations.

There are even more reasons why art history of the 19th and early 20th century is in need of fundamental revision. For instance, during the last decennia more knowledge has been gathered on the art of the 19th and early 20th centuries. A host of documentary evidence of the relationship of artists with esoteric societies and esoteric thought has surfaced, as the historical archives and membership records of esoteric currents are being made more and more accessible to researchers. The results of recent research have not yet found their way to mainstream exhibitions, publications or journals on art.

The larger part of previous research (and exhibitions) has focussed on two-dimensional art, whereas esotericism has also shaped and fundamentally changed applied arts and architecture. Historical evidence shows that modern artists did not restrict themselves to one discipline. The historical truth is quite the opposite: most of them shifted their attention easily between several disciplines. As visionaries of a total aesthetic makeover of society they were creators of true Gesamtkunst.

#### Methodological foundations

Future research on esotericism in art should use the now established categorization of esoteric currents and terminology, as defined in W.J. Hanegraaff (ed.), *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*, Leiden 2006. This will lead to a redefinition of the already known inspirational sources of artists, the identification of new sources, the introduction of new artists, and the identification of important networks. It will lead to a fundamental restructuring of art history, to clearer insight into the real motives of artists and possibly to the identification of a new and distinct current in modern art history.

#### Handbook on esotericism in art, 18th-20th centuries

The proposed „handbook“ on esotericism in art before c. 1940 will serve as an educational introduction in the new field of study. It will comprise a systematic overview of esoteric currents and relevant terminology, an analysis of their essential characteristics and their implications for the visual language of art, applied arts and architecture in this period of art history. Thus, it will lay the solid scientific foundations for further specialization in this area of research. Because of its introductory character, the book will focus on the main esoteric currents

within the stated period that have proven to be of major influence on (modern) art. In more or less chronological order of appearance:

Alchemy Esoteric aspects of Romanticism Freemasonry Christian esotericism Spiritualism Rosicrucianism Occultism Theosophy Anthroposophy

The publication will also include a glossary of relevant terminology.

#### Call for papers

Scholars currently involved in research into the relationship between art and Western esotericism are invited to submit paper proposals (max. 400 words), a short resume and list of relevant publications to the editors before 31 May 2007.

#### Prerequisites of papers:

As the publication aims to provide an introduction into a relatively new field of study within art history, papers proposed should provide a basic introduction into the relationship between art and individual esoteric currents, their iconography, symbolism and/or ritual or magical practice, and should be aimed at a wide audience. Papers proposed should be based on recent scholarly research and the current academic discourse on history of Western esotericism. Papers proposed should be interdisciplinary in character. They should preferably focus on and/or include methodological aspects of research in this field, bearing in mind the objective of this book. Papers may discuss all aspects of architecture, visual arts, applied arts and interior design, decorative and ritual objects. There is no restriction to type or discipline of art. Papers may reflect the importance of social and esoteric networks to the creation of works of art, the importance of women within esoteric circles and modern art, developments of new media such as photography and film, and other relevant topics. Although above the currents are mentioned in their chronological order, it can also be relevant to discuss the influence of one current on a later time period(s), e.g. Masonic influences in de fin-de-siècle or early 20th century or Spiritualism in Futurism (as long as anachronisms are avoided).

All articles will be peer reviewed. The review committee consists of academic experts on relevant fields of study, such as Western esotericism, visual culture and art. If the proposal is accepted, the author will be required to submit the finished article before 15 December 2007. The finished article may not exceed c. 15 pages (6000 words). At this stage of the preparations of the publication, the editors are applying for funding to various cultural funds. Provided the applications are successful, the editors aim to make a modest fee available to all authors, whose papers have been accepted. More information will be made available at a later stage.

## Invitation for participating museums

Museum directors and curators, who are interested in hosting an international exhibition and interdisciplinary conference on the subject of „The Initiated Artist. The History of Art and Western Esotericism“ to coincide with or follow the publication of the book, are invited to contact the editors. Dutch experts are offering a groundbreaking exhibition concept, aimed at a wide audience, and are inviting international partners to participate in a travelling exhibition. More detailed information will be made available at request.

## Publisher/Editors

For information on Sun Publishers, see: <http://www.uitgeverijboom.nl>. The book will be compiled and edited by:

- Mrs. Dr. Marty Bax, PhD, art historian and specialist in esoteric currents in art between 1850 and 1940, notably theosophy and anthroposophy. Member of ESSWE, see:

[http://www.esswe.org/member\\_detail.php?member\\_id=215&ref=10](http://www.esswe.org/member_detail.php?member_id=215&ref=10) - Mrs. Drs.

Andréa Kroon, MA / PhD student (University of Leiden), art historian and specialist in the material culture of freemasonry in the 18th-20th century. Member of ESSWE, see:

[http://www.esswe.org/member\\_detail.php?member\\_id=64&ref](http://www.esswe.org/member_detail.php?member_id=64&ref).

## Contact

For more information, please contact the editors Dr. Marty Bax and Drs. Andréa Kroon at: [esotericartbook@yahoo.com](mailto:esotericartbook@yahoo.com).

### Reference:

CFP: The initiated artist. Western Esotericism in Art 18th-20th c.. In: ArtHist.net, Feb 22, 2007 (accessed May 27, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/28966>>.