Eastern Spiritualities and Peripheral Modernisms under State Socialism

Deadline: Dec 20, 2025

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We are delighted to invite submissions of abstracts and full chapters for the forthcoming edited volume titled "Imaginary Spiritual Homes: Eastern Spiritualities and Peripheral Modernisms under State Socialism". With this volume, we aim to explore how “Eastern spirituality”—encompassing diverse traditions originating in Asia, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism—shaped the artistic practices and visual expressions of artists working under post-1945 socialist regimes.

In the context of state-enforced atheism, censorship, and the politicization of religion, spirituality often emerged as a complex field of negotiation—simultaneously personal and collective, private and political. While global interest in “Eastern spirituality” is often associated with the influence of New Age movements in the 1970s, the aim of this volume is to move beyond the diffusionist model and highlight that such fascinations often began much earlier. “Eastern spirituality” often reached the region in mediated forms, but it was not solely transmitted via Western intermediaries. While local and pre-war traditions, underground knowledge networks, circulating publications, and oral transmissions played a primary role, the writings of Carl Jung and various esoteric currents—including Theosophy, which incorporated elements of Eastern philosophy—also contributed to shaping how Eastern thought and visual and artistic vocabularies were imagined and adapted. As Timothy Rudbøg and Mikael Rothstein argue, Theosophy did not simply transmit Indian or Tibetan teachings, but rather produced a distinctly Western “imaginary Orient”—a symbolic geography of wisdom and authority blending projection, fantasy, and selective appropriation. Therefore, we want to ask whether a specifically Central and South Eastern European version of this “imaginary Orient” also emerged—one that found expression in distinctive visual practices and in theoretical reflections shaped by local philosophical / ideological debates, political realities, and artistic vocabularies formed under socialism.

Thus, the term "imaginary" in our title emphasizes both the creative and the constructed/projected dimensions of these spiritual “homes”—not as fixed realities, but as evolving symbolic geographies built at the intersection of desire, displacement, and imagination. Following Mandakini Dubey’s notion of “esoteric orientalism,” we also wish to stress that the orientalizing of spirituality in these contexts was not only a matter of exoticizing the East, but also of generating new spiritual identities through fantasy, longing, and symbolic re-mapping.

A central aim of this volume is to move beyond dominant center–periphery narratives in art history and instead focus on spiritual, aesthetic, and ideological exchanges between regions historically marginalized in global art discourse. Rather than tracing cultural flows from Western centers,

we examine the entangled dialogues between different peripheries—particularly between Central and South Eastern Europe and parts of Asia—and how these exchanges, driven by engagements with Eastern spirituality, contributed not only to the emergence of distinctive “peripheral artistic modernisms” but also to innovative artistic practices across different media. In this context, spirituality functioned not merely as a subject of artistic interest, but as a driving force shaping new aesthetic, ideological, and symbolic vocabularies in the region.

We are further interested in artistic travels to Asia—especially to India and China—that took place within Cold War political frameworks or through cultural diplomacy, and how these ideologically driven movements contributed to long-lasting spiritual engagements. These encounters often created unexpected forms of identification and symbolic exchange, challenging colonial binaries and inviting new modes of seeing and being. They also raise questions about how imagination—as a mode of spiritual and political agency—shaped the ways artists constructed meaning under socialism.

We ask to what extent these appropriations were shaped by projection and fantasy, and to what extent they reflected genuine spiritual commitments. Likewise, we consider whether the 'East' in these artistic practices functioned as a literal source of knowledge, or rather as a symbolic homeland—an imaginary space of resistance, belonging, and spiritual transformation.

We especially welcome contributions that engage with new methodological perspectives—particularly those informed by postcolonial and decolonial thought—exploring how Eastern spiritual practices functioned not only as forms of inner emigration, but also as instruments of critique, healing, resistance, and transformation, as well as sites of cultural translation and appropriation, shaping artistic practices and visual experimentation.

Topics of interest include, but are not limited to:
- How did artists engage with Eastern spiritual imagery inside and outside official doctrine or institutional frameworks?
- In what ways did “Eastern spirituality” provide a symbolic visual language for dissent, introspection, or community-building?
- How were individual quests for meaning (or “spiritual homes”) shaped by the political, social, or aesthetic constraints of socialism?
- What iconographies, narratives, or rituals were reactivated, subverted, or reinterpreted in this process?
- How did pre-war and interwar traditions of esotericism and Eastern philosophy/spirituality influence socialist-era art?
- The role of artists from India and China in shaping local artistic environments.
- What role did Theosophy and other esoteric frameworks play in shaping visual imaginaries of “the East,” and how can these be interpreted through the lens of esoteric orientalism?
- Can “Eastern spirituality” in art be read as a form of “soft resistance,” inner exile, or cultural continuity?
- What role did artistic travels to India, China, or other non-Western contexts play in reshaping spiritual and visual vocabularies?
- How did Eastern spirituality shape understandings of the function of art and contribute to the co-creation of artistic theories and visual languages?

- How did transnational contacts between marginalized regions generate alternative models of cultural exchange?
- How did exchanges between peripheral regions (e.g., Central and South Eastern Europe and Asia), often driven by spiritual engagements, contribute to the emergence of peripheral modernisms?
- How did engagements with Eastern spirituality inform artistic processes, experimental approaches, and visual vocabularies across different media in Central and Eastern European art?
- To what extent was engagement with Eastern religions a superficial adaptation or stereotyping, and to what extent did it represent a profound, genuine commitment?
- How do postcolonial, feminist, eco-spiritual, or comparative religious approaches help us reread these artistic spiritual engagements today?
- In what ways did these practices anticipate or shape post-socialist reconfigurations of artistic spiritual life and the understanding of “spirituality” in post-socialist countries?

Submission Guidelines
Abstract: up to 400 words and a brief author bio (max. 250 words)
Abstract submission deadline: 20 December 2025
Notification of acceptance: 5 January 2026
Submission of full chapters in English (8,000 words, including notes and bibliography): 1 June 2026

Submission Email:
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