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Introduction

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Introduction

The exhibition *Beauty as the Imprint of the Cosmos* is the result of a series of happy circumstances. One of the most significant is the mutual desire to further strengthen the cooperation between two unique institutions based in Amsterdam: the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica and the Centre for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam. This cooperation has been important for both institutions for more than a decade now, and has produced several beautiful fruits. However, it is refreshing to see that, with projects such as the present exhibition, not to mention the series of “Infinite Fire” webinars, it is now taking on even greater momentum. From the beginning, the exhibition was closely associated with the “Enchanted Modernities” conference which took place in Amsterdam between 25 and 27 September 2013. Originally conceived as an event that would give a visual, material counterpart to the topics that were discussed during the conference, the exhibition soon took on a life of its own, as is often the case with such projects. It grew therefore into something that could stand on its own feet, giving new visibility to some of the hidden treasures in the collection of the Ritman Library, but also taking advantage of works of art and objects generously lent by other institutions and private collectors.

Before I say something about the cultural meaning of the exhibition, a few words about the Enchanted Modernities project are in order. The project began to take shape when a group of scholars mostly based in the UK organized an exploratory colloquium at Liverpool Hope University in early November 2010. The title was “Enchanting Modernity: Theosophy and the Arts in the Making of Early Twentieth-Century Culture”. The organizers, and some of the participants in the colloquium, would later form the core group of researchers involved in the Enchanted Modernities project. Although I could not attend the colloquium at the time, I got in contact with the organizers, Christopher Scheer and Sarah V. Turner, and when the idea of applying for a research grant

began to materialize, I was invited to participate. The application, coordinated by Sarah V. Turner, was submitted in July 2011 to the Leverhulme Trust and, after several rounds of evaluation and selection, was included among the successful ones. This gave the Enchanted Modernities group the possibility to organize a number of activities and events over a period of three years. The Amsterdam conference has been the opening event, and will be followed by others, such as a visit to the headquarters of the Theosophical Society in Adyar, an exhibition at the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art in Logan (Utah) and another large conference at Columbia University, New York.

The purpose of the Enchanted Modernity project is to investigate the way in which theosophy has interacted with modern art and culture. Theosophy should be understood here in a sense that is historically specific but is at the same time not parochial. It obviously refers to the movement that was created by H.P. Blavatsky, H.S. Olcott and others in New York in 1875. But it also includes all the groups that developed out of that original body, as a result of schisms, creative reinterpretations, and direct influence. The fact that these groups often engaged in polemics with each other over issues of authenticity, authority, and preeminence, matters little for us here: seen in a broad perspective all these groups and organizations shared some common ideas and traits, which allows us to consider them as part of a single, albeit complex, current. Furthermore, it should be noted that the cultural impact of theosophy cannot be measured only on the basis of its institutional aspects. Although some of the movements related to it were quite successful and had a relatively large following, the influence of theosophical ideas went beyond the actual membership of those organizations, reaching out to an even larger public through books, periodicals, and public lectures. The theosophical movement contributed significantly, therefore, to the emergence of a particular *Zeitgeist* at the turn of the twentieth century, which was essentially reacting against 19th-century materialism and positivism on the one hand, and religious dogmatism on the other.

Surely, the theosophical movement was a complex phenomenon, and it would be problematic to generalize too much about it. But it seems nevertheless evident that one of its characteristics, at least during its early history and up to the Second World War, was its "progressiveness". As a result of a series of factors, which still have to be fully elucidated by historical research, theosophy acted as a powerful stimulus for challenging cultural and social norms. This influence could be perceived in various fields, such as gender relations, sexuality, psychology, politics (particularly in relation to colonialism), religion. Theosophy inspired persons to develop new visions that challenged existing, established paradigms. Something similar happened also with art and literature, as well as with other dimensions of artistic creativity such as music, dance, and theatre. In all these fields theosophists, anthroposophists, and members of cognate movements experimented, at one moment or another, with alternative models of thought and behaviour that anticipated later developments in society at large. Why did this happen, as I said, does not depend on a single factor. In the realm of artistic expression, theosophy could function as a source of inspiration for new esthetic approaches because it encouraged forms of self-exploration and offered a metaphysical framework of interpretation that would easily lead to a relativization of existing canons. The appeal to a primordial wisdom, essentially superior to modern forms of knowledge and ideology, was able to give artists the courage to challenge these established canons and elaborate radically new ones. At the same time, some artists had personal spiritual experiences whose content could only become the subject of artistic expression when the language of art was profoundly renewed.

The present exhibition is important not only because it shows some fine examples of artistic production directly inspired by theosophical and anthroposophical ideas, but also because it includes very interesting historical and textual documents that help understand this history. The resulting image is, from a cultural point of view, much richer than a show of artworks alone. This is precisely what has made exhibitions at the Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica so unique and important in the past, just as it is the case today.

And it is also along these lines that the cooperation between the Ritman Library and the Centre for the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents is likely to bear many more interesting fruits in the future.

Marco Pasi