

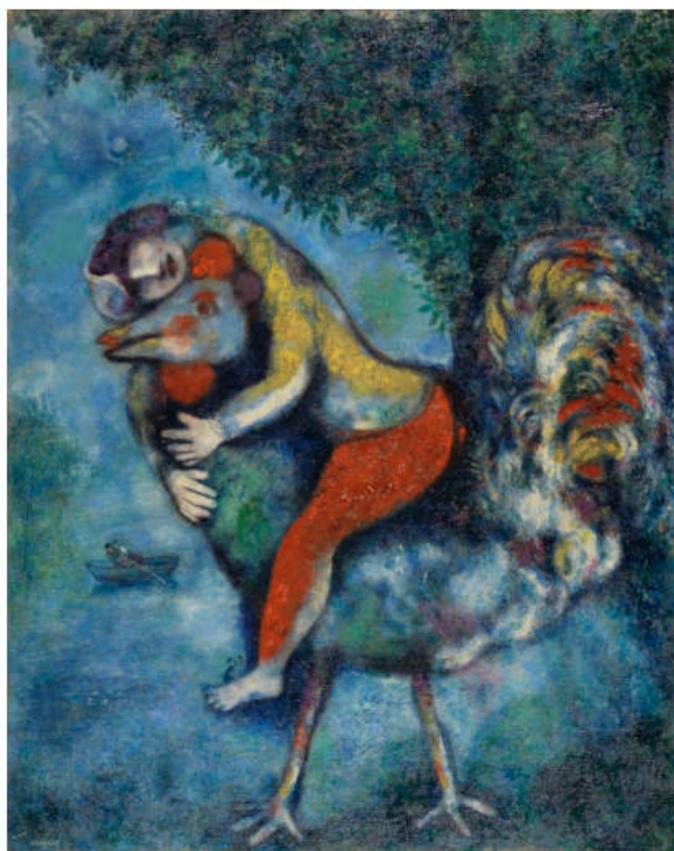
# Embracing the Esoteric - Inside the Mystical Realm of Occult Art | Widewalls

June 19, 2023 Eli Anapur

Numerous religions, beliefs, and ideologies have fought for supremacy throughout the ages. Hostile cultural climates dominated by hegemonic religions often stifled and tried to eradicate other competing beliefs, expanding, in turn, the ability of these practices to camouflage and persist in parallel or intertwined with the dominant ones, with their symbolic repertoire and distinctive visual language preserved.

Among them were different esoteric and occult ideas and practices that were also not foreign to artists, who often used occult symbolism in their works. Throughout art history, traces of these beliefs are visible in various mediums and genres, from painting to sculpture, video art, and film, and from genre art to religious imagery.

The exhibition staged at Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Spain explores the heritage of **occult art** and brings together 59 works from the museum collection in collaboration with the Comunidad de Madrid.



**Left:** Workshop of Peter Paul Rubens - St Michael expelling Lucifer and the Rebel Angels, ca. 1622, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid / **Right:** Marc Chagall - The Cock, 1928. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid © Marc Chagall, VEGAP, Madrid, 2023

## The Occult

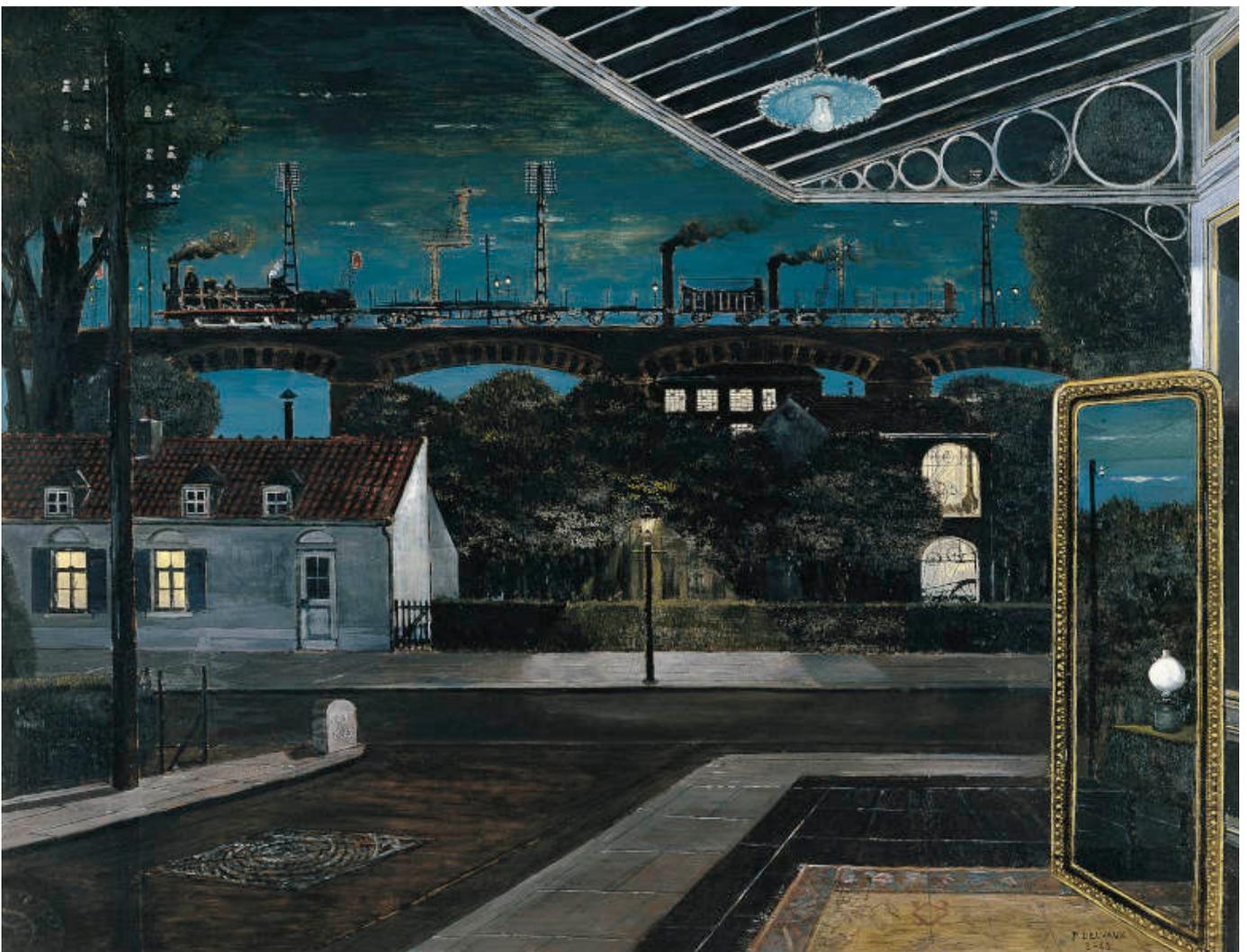
The occult has been defined as a group of practices and knowledge, including alchemy, astrology, demonology, spiritism, shamanism, and magic, among others. The practitioners of the occult have tried, since antiquity, to penetrate **the secrets of nature** in order to become its masters. Surviving in hostile environments, esoteric knowledge has been present throughout centuries, with its most fervent persecution happening in periods of

religious fervor.

In the middle ages and early modern period, religion and (black) magic were considered two separate but also closely related practices, with those involved in magic and other dark arts prosecuted by society, including alleged witches. However, this did not stop the development of esoteric knowledge and traditions through various codes that can be traced in visual culture.

Fading in and out over centuries, the occult returned to the public arena in the 19th century, marking its first widespread revival since the so-called age of reason. The birth of modernity brought also a widespread **disillusionment**, further heightened by the atrocities of World War I. The search for alternatives drew renewed interest in occultism, with one of its most fascinating legacies being a more complex understanding of femininity and **the female archetype**.

The interest in the spiritual and esoteric also marks contemporary times. With rampant capitalism and materialism, magic and the occult hold the promise of empowerment.



Paul Delvaux - The Viaduct, 1963. Colección Carmen Thyssen, Madrid © Foundation Paul Delvaux, Koksijde, Belgium / VEGAP-SABAM

## Occult Art

Practiced in different civilizations, alchemy was revived in the Renaissance period, with paintings carrying numerous alchemical allusions. In a period that put humans back in the center of investigations, the mastery of the living world became a kind of obsession among intellectuals, and artists actively participated in this new cultural climate.

Besides symbolic elements referring to alchemy depicted in paintings, many artists directly represented **alchemists** in their pieces, including Pieter Brueghel the Elder and Jan Steen, among others.

Although the Earth was removed from its centrality in the universe by Galileo's findings, astrology and the exploration of human destinies in relation to stars and planets continued to draw attention. [Zodiac signs](#) were among common motifs in art, and the Moon's symbolism and its influence were reflected in both secular and religious works.

The interest in otherworldly beings, including [demons and spirits](#), was also strongly felt in art, with artists exploring using these motifs also for subversive purposes. Among the popular themes were witchcraft and [witches](#), whose representation over time became less connected to religious ideas but was, for example, a reaction to science and rationalism during Romanticism. Goya, Blake, and Fuseli explored this topic in several of their pieces, demonstrating its unwavering appeal to artists.

Occultism, however, as a group of *"various theories and practices involving a belief in and knowledge or use of supernatural forces or beings,"* as defined by Britannica, is not only a phenomenon of the past, but is also widely present in modern and contemporary art.



**Left:** artist Bramantino - The Risen Christ, ca. 1490, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid / **Right:** Joan Miró - The Lightning Bird Blinded by Moonfire, 1955, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid © Succesió Miró

## The Resurgence of the Occult in Art

In modern times, occultism, as a subcultural phenomenon, attracted artists and individuals who resisted dominant culture, strived to build alternative communities, and explored ancient practices, including tarot, in

search of solutions for contemporary problems.

"During times of disruption, people look to alternative avenues of spiritual sustenance. Many feel let down and alienated by institutionalised religions...So where do they turn? They go back to ancient religions, to things that were hidden and esoteric," explains art historian Susan Aberth.

Surrealists were particularly interested in the occult, as many of their works demonstrate, especially the fascinating pieces by Leonora Carrington, who found a reclamation of women's power in ancient cultures and goddesses. Before them, Symbolists carried the torch of occultism in arts with works that explored the elusive notion of the spiritual. The occult and esotericism, especially Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, and Anthroposophy, also inspired abstract artists, particularly [Wassily Kandinsky](#), [Piet Mondrian](#), and **Hilma af Klint**.

In recent years, a broader shift in interest in occultism, tarot, and esotericism has been noted in the art world, with several exhibitions returning the focus to these topics. Among them were the 2013 Venice Biennale, *The Encyclopedic Palace*, and several shows that brought back to light forgotten practices by occultists such as Marjorie Cameron, Georgiana Houghton, and Hilma af Klint. Popular culture has also been saturated with images of the occult, including digital art, prints, and posters.

In 2016, Pam Grossman curated *Language of the Birds: Occult and Art* at 80WSE Gallery, New York University, presenting 60 modern and contemporary artists and tracing over 100 years of occult art.



Edward Munch - Evening, 1888, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid © Munch Museum / Munch-Ellingsen Group / VEGAP, Madrid, 2023

## **The Occult at Thyssen-Bornemisza**

The exhibition at the Thyssen-Bornemisza is divided into **seven sections**, following the repertoire of the principal disciplines and currents within the occult tradition.

The first section, [Alchemy](#), narrates its history through different civilizations and time periods, from China and India, to Renaissance Europe and beyond. [Surrealists](#) were also interested in its ideas and principles, as [Max Ernst](#)'s painting *Solitary and Conjugal Trees*, 1940, shows. The canvas features two cypresses, which colors evoke the idea of a chemical marriage of mercury and sulfur in the alchemical process.

Astrology, explored in the second section, brings a selection of various painters and periods, including several pieces by [Joan Miró](#), *The Risen Christ* (ca. 1490) by Bramantino, and *New York Street with Moon* (1925) by [Georgia O'Keeffe](#).

Demonology and Spiritualism sections show opposing aspects from Christian iconography, including a fascination with the demonic and devilish and an obsession with **the spirits of the dead**, which re-emerged in the 19th century. The artworks include *St. Michael expelling Lucifer and the Rebel Angels*, (ca. 1612) by the studio of Rubens, *The Nymph at the Fountain* (1530-34) by Lucas Cranach, *A Moonlit Evening* (1888) by Atkinson Grimshaw, and *The Viaduct* (1963) by Paul Delvaux.

**Theosophical Society**, founded by Helena Blavatsky and Henry S. Olcott, is explored in the Theosophy section, with works by Kandinsky and Mondrian illustrating the system that combined Neo-platonic philosophy, the hermetic tradition, and Asian religions.

Shamanism became especially popular during the period of the early 20th century when avant-garde artists became interested in various tribal cultures and their art. *Study for the Head of "Nude with Drapery"* (1907) by [Pablo Picasso](#) and *In the Bright Oval* (1925) by Kandinsky are among the selected pieces.

The final section of the show is dedicated to dreams, oracles, and premonitions, and features works by surrealists, such as Dalí, Ernst, Tanguy and Delvaux.

The exhibition *The Occult in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collections* will be on view at [Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza](#) in Madrid **from July 1st until September 24th, 2023**.





**Left:** Salvador Dalí, - Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee around a Pomegranate a Second before Waking, 1944. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid © Salvador Dalí, Fundación Gala-Salvador Dalí, / VEGAP, Madrid, 2023 / **Right:** Christian Schad - Portrait of Dr. Haustein, 1928. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid © VEGAP, Madrid, 2023



Wassily Kandinsky - Picture with Three Spots, No. 196, 1914. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid © Wassily Kandinsky, VEGAP, Madrid, 2023





Charles Ephraim Burchfield - Orion in Winter, 1962. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid © Burchfield Penney Art Center



Lucas Cranach The Elder - The Nymph at the Fountain, ca. 1530-1534. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

Featured image: artist Max Ernst - Solitary and Conjugal Trees, 1940. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid © VEGAP, Madrid, 2023