

Kabbalah & Alchemy

Exhibition Embassy of the Free Mind

13 June - 16 November 2019

The Embassy of the Free Mind (EFM) is proud to present its first exhibition in its new premises The House with the Heads: *Kabbalah & Alchemy*, which is on show from 13 June -16 November 2019. The EFM is a library, a museum and a platform for free thinking. Kabbalah and alchemy were traditionally regarded as hidden currents in European cultural history. The EFM wishes to explore with this exhibition the relatively unknown relationship between these two disciplines by means of richly illustrated manuscripts and printed books from the 16th-18th centuries, deriving from its Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica Collection and seven special Hebrew loans from the Amsterdam Ets Haim – Livraria Montezinos, the oldest still functioning Jewish library in the world.

Closer to God

Kabbalah is a Jewish mystical tradition that was passed down from generation to generation in circles of adepts. Kabbalists based themselves on the assumption that the Hebrew language was divine in origin, the language also in which God had created heaven and earth. By meditating on the letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the various divine names, kabbalists hoped to be able to come closer to God. The mystical longing to know God is also reflected in the image of the tree of life, represented in the exhibition by the oldest known printed woodcut from 1516. The ten divine attributes - Hebrew: *sefirot* – of this tree of life are the attributes through which God reveals himself to man.

From lead to gold

Alchemy has its roots in the Graeco-Roman Egypt of the first centuries CE. Alchemists tried to convert base metals into precious ones, such as silver and gold. This process was known as transmutation. Alchemists broke down substances to purify them and recombined them. In the Middle Ages many alchemists sought for the Philosophers' Stone, the substance with which they could perform a successful transmutation. By the time of the Renaissance, it was also the universal medicine that purified the human body and cured all diseases. Some alchemists were not merely concerned with purifying substances; they also strove for purity in their relationship with God and to perfect the world.

The natural and the supernatural

The exhibition in particular explores the 16th- to 18th-century phenomenon of 'Cabala chymica' in the Christian world. How are alchemy and Kabbalah related? One of the oldest works to have inspired Kabbalah, *Sefer yetzirah* (Book of Formation) urges the reader to 'combine' and 'form' – alchemists, too, combined substances in the laboratory to create something new, something better. The Swiss physician and alchemist Paracelsus (1493-1541) was one of the first to regard kabbalah (or: cabala) as a part of magic – a means to connect the natural (alchemy, working with nature) with the supernatural (God, the angels). The logo of this exhibition is a circular engraving from the best-known work by the German alchemist and Christian kabbalist Heinrich Khunrath (1560-1605): *Amphitheatrum Sapientiae Aeternae* (Amphitheatre of Eternal Wisdom). He said that 'Kabbalah, magic and alchemy should be used in combination', making it one of the earliest examples of the phenomenon of Cabala Chymica.

Collaboration between the Jewish Cultural Quarter and the Embassy of the Free Mind

Peter Forshaw, head of the EFM's Ritman Research Institute, has conducted scholarly research into this fairly rare phenomenon. Together with curator Cis van Heertum he presents his findings in the exhibition *Kabbalah & Alchemy*. The exhibition connects with the international exhibition *Kabbalah. The Art of Jewish Mysticism* on view in the Jewish Cultural Quarter (JCQ) from 29 March - 24 August. The EFM has loaned six rare printed works and manuscripts to the JCQ and has received seven unique loans from the JCQ for its exhibition *Kabbalah & Alchemy*. It highlights a fine collaboration between the Embassy of the Free Mind and its Bibliotheca Philosophica Hermetica collection (EFM) and the Jewish Cultural Quarter and the associated Ets Haim - Livraria Montezinos stretching back more than thirty years.

Talks and tours

The EFM has developed a programme of talks and tours in collaboration with the JCQ and Ets Haim. Among the speakers are Mirjam Knotter (curator *Kabbala. The Art of Jewish Mysticism* exhibition, JCQ), Heide Warncke (curator Ets Haim) and John MacMurphy (PhD candidate, Chair of Hermetic Philosophy, University of Amsterdam).

The exhibition *Kabbalah & Alchemy* will be opened on 12 June by Emile Schrijver, general director of the Jewish Cultural Quarter. The exhibition can be viewed from Wednesday-Saturday in the EFM until 16 November 2019.

For images, click [here](#).

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