

Press release

Mysticism – Yearning for the absolute

23 September 2011 to 15 January 2012

The Museum Rietberg is proud to present the world's first culturally comparative exhibition on mysticism. This elusive religious phenomenon will be illustrated by the example of forty male and female mystics: their lives and writings demonstrate just how richly varied spiritual experience can be. The mystics chosen for the exhibition come from the great religions of the world – Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity – and span the period from the 6th century BC until the 19th century.

Mystics strove for the absolute, the union with the divine, and either attempted to grasp the energy of God or endeavoured to harmonise the forces that move the world. They cultivated the art of self-annihilation and surrender; they fathomed the void, the origin, and strove to find the Dao. Sacred writings, prayers, meditation, ecstatic dances, chants or strict asceticism, but also sensual pleasures, inspired the mystics and helped them on their journey. They wanted to realise the experience of union with God or a transcendent reality in this life, rather than waiting for “redemption” after death or in another life.

The word “mysticism” is derived from the Greek term *mystikos*, which means “inscrutable”, “inexplicable” or “hidden”. As of the 6th century, Christianity referred to the experience of the divine presence or union with God as *theologia mystica*. The word mysticism has only existed since the 17th century. Yet when people speak about different religions and *mysticism*, it could be assumed that this term has always existed – and in all religions. However, this is not the case. Only in the 19th and 20th centuries did mysticism evolve as a general religious phenomenon or an aspect of inter-religious spiritualism.

Visualising a world that is full of allusions and secrets in an exhibition means developing and implementing unconventional representational concepts. The theme will be illustrated by 153 works of art and original documents, but also by 30 film, audio and multimedia installations.

What will be on display at the exhibition? Portraits, pictures of saints and devotional objects belonging to some mystics have survived. However, the most important sources of mysticism are the texts, sermons, poems, prayers and chants left to us by the mystics. Their language is often full of ecstatic and associative imagery. However, mystic texts can also appear rational, have a clear propositional logic or be sober, expressing profound insight and serenity. Many of the protagonists wrote wonderful poetry and number among the great poets and singers of their time and culture.

The forty mystics are presented in the exhibition both individually and in their cultural context. However, a tour of the exhibition will also reveal that they shared ideas that transcended the boundaries of religion: the Christian and Islamic mystics were inspired by the ideas of antiquity espoused by Plato and Plotinus. As the latter said, the human soul is capable of climbing a stairway to the "One" and thus of returning to its divine origin. Central themes include ascending to God in Christian mysticism, and the path to enlightenment in Buddhism, According to Daoist ideas, rising above, or rather hovering along, the axis of the universe leads to immortality.

The theme of love and desire is explored under the title "Yearning for the absolute". One characteristic of Hindu mysticism is *bhakti*, or "loving participation". The *bhakti* saints not only wanted to revere God verbally and in ritual, but also to possess him, and to be possessed, filled, overwhelmed and enslaved by him. The "Tantra of the Hidden Union", a Buddhist text, teaches a method of meditation that is expressed in representations of Buddhas or divinities conjoined in acts of sexual love. In Islam, in Sufism, the aim of mystical practices is to struggle against the desires of one's own soul and to become one with God. The absolute love of God played a central role.

The Christian mystics interpreted the love between man and woman described in the Old Testament's *Song of Solomon* as an expression of the relationship between God and the human soul. This passionate love also included the profound sympathy felt for the crucified Christ, which was experienced as a union.

The recovery of divine unity was also a concern of the Cabbalists in Judaism, who attempted to harmonise the ten divine powers, Sefirot, within themselves and in the world. According to Daoism, man in the course of his mystical journey attempts to fathom Dao, the power that underlies all being. This power enables him to master his own body. He becomes a human incarnation of Dao, and is thus immortal.

Selection of mystics

The selected mystics include a Tibetan ascetic, an immortal from China, an unconventional Zen master, an abbot from the monastery of Sinai, an uncompromising social revolutionary and an ecstatic poetess from India, a Swiss hermit who used a stone as a pillow, a Jewish scholar who searched for the hidden names of God, and a Sufi poet intoxicated by love whose poems are among the pearls of world literature.

Laozi (6th century BC)
Plotinus (204–270)
Kobo Daishi (774–835)
Lin Moniang (10th century)
Milarepa (1040–1123)
Farid ad-Din 'Attar (c. 1145–1221)
Francis of Assisi (1181/1182–1226)
Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207–1273)
Mechthild of Magdeburg (1207–1282)
Abraham Abulafia (1240–1291)
Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1328)
Gregory Palamas (1296–1359)
Niklaus of Flüe (1417–1487)
Mirabai (c. 1498–1546)
Moses Cordovero (1522–1570)
Jacob Böhme (1575–1624)
Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768)
Bhima Bhoi (1850–1895)

Sponsors of the exhibition

The exhibition is supported by Swiss Re and the Parrotia Foundation.

Media partner: NZZ am Sonntag

Lenders of the 153 exhibits

Aga Khan Collection, Geneva; Badische Landesbibliothek, Karlsruhe; Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München; Braginsky Collection, Zürich; Burgerbibliothek, Berne; Collection Ludwig Habighorst; Christophe Guye Galerie, Zürich; Dr. Jörn Günther Rare Books AG, Stalden; Stiftsbibliothek, Einsiedeln; Etnografiska Museet, Stockholm; Fondation Martin Bodmer, Geneva; Graphische Sammlung der ETH Zürich; Gross Family Collection, Tel Aviv; Haltadefinizione, Cultural heritage services; Hisamatsu Shin'ichi Memorial Museum, Gifu, Japan; Historisches Museum Basel; Historisches Museum Thurgau, Frauenfeld; Ikonen-Museum Recklinghausen; Islamica Collection Heinrich Foss; Kantonsbibliothek Frauenfeld; Vadianische Sammlung, Kantonsbibliothek St. Gallen; Kanton Thurgau, Denkmalpflege, Ehemalige Klosterkirche von St. Katharinental; Kunsthaus Zürich; Meiyintang Collection; Musée d'Art et d'Histoire, Geneva; Musée Guimet, Paris; Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid;

Museum Bruder Klaus, Sachseln; Museum der Kulturen Basel; Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst Köln; Pfarrkirchenstiftung Sachseln; Nidwaldner Museum, Stans; Sammlung Boris Berkowitsch, Berne; Schweizerisches Nationalmuseum Zürich; Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum; Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst; Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde München; The British Library, London; Victoria & Albert Museum, London; Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich; Wereldmuseum Rotterdam; Zentral- und Hochschulbibliothek Luzern; Zentralbibliothek Zürich; Zisterzienserinnenabtei Maigrauge, Fribourg.

Multimedia

30 multimedia projects in the exhibition illuminate the world of mysticism.

New website as of 20 September: For detailed information on the mysticism exhibition, visit www.rietberg.ch.

Ladders to heaven: An old Indian mystical game (“Snakes and Ladders”), reinterpreted. Free app for iPhone, iPad and iPod touch, available from the App Store at the end of September.

The Museum Rietberg’s Multimedia Department is supported by: Ernst Göhner Foundation, Gebert Rüt Foundation, Schwyzer Foundation, Avina Foundation and Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne.

Catalogue

Mystik – Die Sehnsucht nach dem Absoluten
Edited by Albert Lutz, Scheidegger & Spiess publishing
Hardback with dust jacket, 328 pages, 141 colour illustrations
19 x 26 cm, ISBN 978-3-85881-335-0, CHF 49 | EUR 38

Concerts

23 September 2011, 20.00, Enge Church
Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179): UNIO MYSTICA
Ars Choralis Coeln, conductor: Maria Jonas

8/9 October 2011, Museum Rietberg
Festival: Mystical sounds from India
Ustad Ghulam Mohammad Saznawaz: Sufiana Kalam – Sufi music from Kashmir
Mohammad Abdullah Bhat Shaksaz: Chakri folk songs from Kashmir
Parvathy Baul: Baul chants from Bengal
Ashwini Bhide: Classical Khyal chants

2 December 2011, 20.00, Museum Rietberg
Zurich Chamber Orchestra at the Museum Rietberg

Lectures

Wednesday, 26 October to 14 December, 19.30

Mystik – Sehnsucht nach dem grösseren Ganzen

Lecture cycle in German at the University of Zurich.

Volkshochschule des Kantons Zürich. Programme and registration: www.vhszh.ch

Zürcher Lehrhaus, guest at the Museum Rietberg

Three lecture series on mysticism

Programme and registration: www.zuercher-lehrhaus.ch

Film matinee at the Filmpodium cinema

Filmpodium cinema (Nüscherstrasse 11), 12.00

20 November, **Bodhi Dharma**, Yon-Kyung Bae, South Korea 1989 (Zen)

27 November, **Das verborgene Gesicht**, Ömer Kavur, Turkey 1991 (Sufism)

4 December, **Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter... and Spring**, Kim Ki-duk, South Korea 2003 (Buddhism)

Programme: www.filmpodium.ch

Guided tours and workshops in the exhibition

Offers for adults:

Public guided tours (in German): Sundays 11.00, Wednesdays 18.00, Thursdays 12.15

Private guided tours (German, English, French), tel. + 41 (0)44 206 31 11 / 31

Workshops for adults, children and families:

Open workshop Every Sunday, 10–16.00

Make your own joss sticks and packaging for them

29 October, 5 and 6 November, 14–17.30

Three-part video workshop for young people from the age of 12

OMG (Oh my God!)

Young people experiment with digital media on questions relating to God and the world. The video clip they produce will be published on YouTube.

13 November, 10–12.30

Children's workshop

Devils and other monsters: a workshop to give you the creeps.

27 November, 14–16.30

Workshop for grandparents and grandchildren

Angels and devils.

4 December, 14–16.30

Family workshop

Something always interferes...! Illustrating temptation.

For detailed information, registration and other offers, also for schools, visit www.rietberg.ch

Information and contact

Further information and download of photographs on www.rietberg.ch

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Opening hours:

Tues–Sun 10–17.00 | Wed and Thu 10–20.00

Admission:

adults CHF 16 | reduced CHF 12 | up to the age of 16 free

Access:

Tram 7 (direction Wollishofen) to the «Museum Rietberg» stop (4 stops from «Paradeplatz»). No parking; disabled parking available.

RailAway offer:

By train to Museum Rietberg – www.railaway.ch
20% reduction for train tickets, transfer and admission.