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Artist, Occultist, Sensualist

An Essay
By
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(taken from the exhibition Catalogue)

I saw my first original Austin Osman Spare painting hanging above the seething bookshelves of Atlantis, the occult bookshop that I spent my late teens lurking inside. In fact there were several of his paintings and I could not believe my eyes. Until then I had only been aware of his name and had been conscious of seeing the recurring and haunting image of “PAN”, which was actually a section of the late pastel called “The Vampires Are Coming.” This image was widely used in the seventies on several occult type book jackets and was a key figure in the promotion of the eclectic magazine series ‘*Man, Myth and Magic*’.



Here were a clutch of excitingly vivid and dynamically coloured originals. My mouth went dry, my head reeled and I was shocked into a state of genuine awe. These were the real thing. I remember a dual self-portrait in which the two facing heads of Spare seemed to be locked into some perpetual argument. There was an eerie study of a transported medium, her eyes neither open nor closed, and then there was a Martian coloured astral landscape with a single figure of a seated satyr looking into the orange-red void. I liked this one the most. Unfortunately I couldn't afford to buy any of the pictures and very soon they went to various acquaintances who could afford them. I was desolated and vowed then to one day own one of my own. The painting with



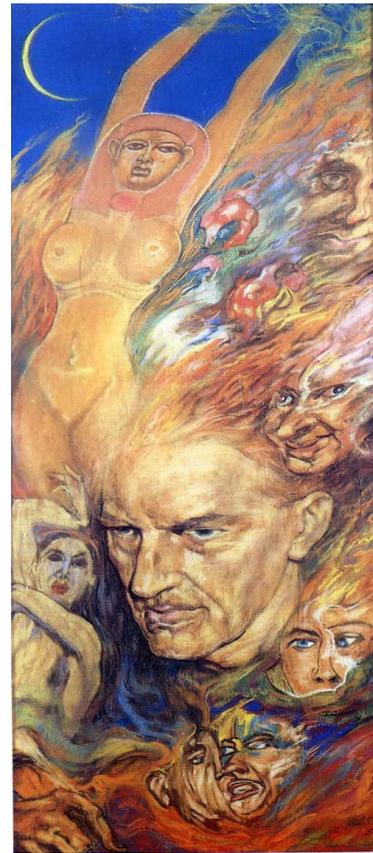
the solitary satyr, soon vanished into its own hinterland after being left on a tube train by the person charged to deliver it to Heathrow to begin its journey abroad to a new home with a foreign buyer. But my appetite had been whetted. From that day on I sought out as much information about Austin Osman Spare as I could find and tried to see as many original works or reproductions as I could.



and altars, and as a Princely Magickian in the fashionable Japanese style of the era, bound up in the rich apparel of his Sorceries. I began an ever evolving quest to understand and appreciate the dynamic mystery of his art and life.

This new exhibition of his work will give the visitor a chance to acquaint themselves with the extraordinary sensual properties of the artist's work. For I believe that the art of Austin Spare – more so than any other artist I am aware of - is capable of existing on multiple layers of interactive experience. The casual viewer will be seduced and enthralled by the surface beauty of his art and the way he handles the various media of his craft, while those familiar with his work may linger a while and enter through the portals of the images into a strange and more vivid hyper-world. Spare provides windows and doorways into the Spirits world – of this I have no doubt. And with practise and imagination we may be granted access to Spares “storehouse of memories with an Ever-open door”.

I soon began to realise that this man was an extraordinary and prolific artist and that with each new image a new facet was revealed, and the essential mystery of the man deepened. Even the sound of his name evoked something rarer and more exotic than the normal. I wondered whether there was an Irish connection as he sometimes signed himself Austin O' Spare. Friends asked was there a Persian connection with that curious middle name. Early photographs and pen and ink drawings of himself compounded the mystery as I came across beautiful images of the artist as a tousled haired bare-footed aesthetic, as a savage and exotic Mongol shaman with skulls



This quality to Spare demonstrates the high imaginative frequency at which he works. These images cannot be taken lightly. Rarely have pastels been forced to create such sumptuous crescendos and chaotic riots of colours as they were in his later pastel works. There can be few examples of draftsmanship in pen and ink as fine as the early magickal drawing of Spare, busy in the first opulent heights of his post Royal Academy flowering. Spare found himself in a starkly brilliant world of high Magick and decadence fueled by his experiences with Aleister Crowley and the A.A. and his experiments with narcotics and bi-sexuality.

There has been much speculation as to Spare's sexual orientation. Later on in life he had strong attachments to the women he knew, but in his youth, he seems to have had strong bi-sexual leanings, something that he shared with Aleister Crowley. For instance how are we to interpret this passage from *The Focus of Life*:

“The degenerate need women, dispose with that part of thyself. Give unto her all thy weaknesses, it is the suffering half...

Awake! The time has come for the new sexualities!
To improve the species ye men must love one another...

“Thou art that which thou dost prefer.”

“...to supercede the sexualities.”



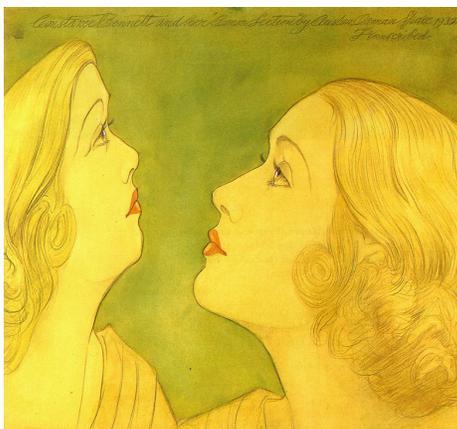
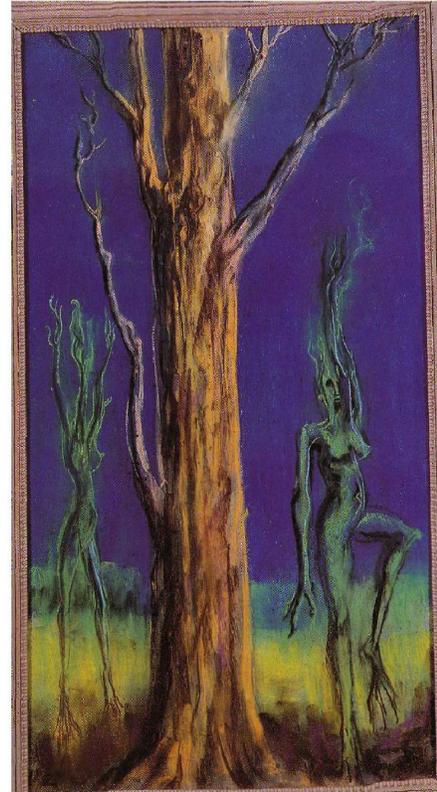
It was a time when he consciously turned his back on fame and fortune and instead chose the grim path of asceticism and sorcery. These dramatic themes were to weave in and out of his life like a crimson thread as he constantly reinvented himself and strove to find new ways to express his dedication to the artist/outsider. So take your time in looking at this body of work. Try an experiment and stop in front of one of the Self-portraits and engage the attention of the eyes. Give the artist as opportunity to speak and you will hear him.

There are many thematic twists and turns in Spare's work. There is wonderfully dark and brooding chthonic leaning in the early works, where fabulous animals prowl amongst the dreaming humans. Snakes and dragons and other representations of primal forces

writhe and proliferate across the paper. And Spare himself is often portrayed as the sorcerer and the Magickian surrounded by familiar animals. He seems to possess the ability to place his consciousness outside of his species, his gender, society and the age in which he lived and to represent this faculty in his art.

And look for the occurrence of the tree in his work. Arboreal energies abound. In several of his works there is the appearance of hybrid ectoplasmic columns that snake and writhe in a semi-solid flux. There is a definite sense that these might represent orgasmic energies, the sexual charged stuff with which the Magickian makes his Magick. This stuff is a recurrent symbol in his work. In the illustrations to the powerful *Book of Ugly Ecstasy*, this plasma is seen forming and reconstituting into winged serpents and tiny dragons and connecting the ground with the air. In the later more colourful pastels, the symbol of the tree seems to be linked in some way to ancestor worship.

Pictures such as “Trees” present the viewer with a dark glimpse of plant forms as personalities, as if they were posing for a group photograph. And trees can also be used by the denizens of his more witchcraft-based Sabbath pictures to symbolise the accumulation and generation of astral energies. We see the wild fleshy women clutching at trees whose surfaces swarm with the swirling miasma of ancestral faces – the tree trunks seemingly made up of one mass of undulating physiognomy.



Spare is a superb painter of personality. He was just as capable of dashing off sketches of the rough working-class characters who drank in his local pubs, as he was of making glamorous portraits of actors and actresses, copied from film magazines and posters. So we see both fabulous Hollywood portraits of stars like Clark Gable and Delores Del Rio and the wonderfully titled “Constance Bennett and her Conic Sections” and stunning portraits of doctors, grifters and street characters which have a much darker, earthly appeal.

He is capable too of imaginary portraits of more unearthly denizens. There exist near photographic quality pictures of satyrs and half-human creatures rendered in crisp, life-like clarity, as if they had just walked in off the Walworth road and into his studio for a sitting. All of his portraits of actors and tramps and faerie folk resonate with a strong sense of his London roots. His use of coloured auras, halos, symbols and sigils add up to create an enhanced style of portraiture that he called “Glyphographs”.

Spare’s women are always powerful in a way that strongly links them to the *fin de siecle* cult of the female in an artistic vision that flows from the sumptuous art nouveau forms through to the streamlined art deco ideal of the feminine. He is subtle and sensitive in his handling of all human and non-human forms, but it is to women that he gives the most ravishing attention. His female forms possess strength and sensuality, and a mystery that is both beautiful and intoxicating. And he paints them in so many different aspects, from the strong statuesque Amazons and the intensely active and nubile sorceresses that inhabit the pages of the *Focus of Life* series, through to his later portraits of film stars and starlets. He continued to depict witches in many forms from these early potent women at their craft to the later grotesques such as in the “Incident On the Way To The Sabbath” series, where the limbs of the contorted hags seems to writhe in the glyphs of flesh. These are raw and primal depictions of earthly human essences. Spare sought to reclaim such images for his own.



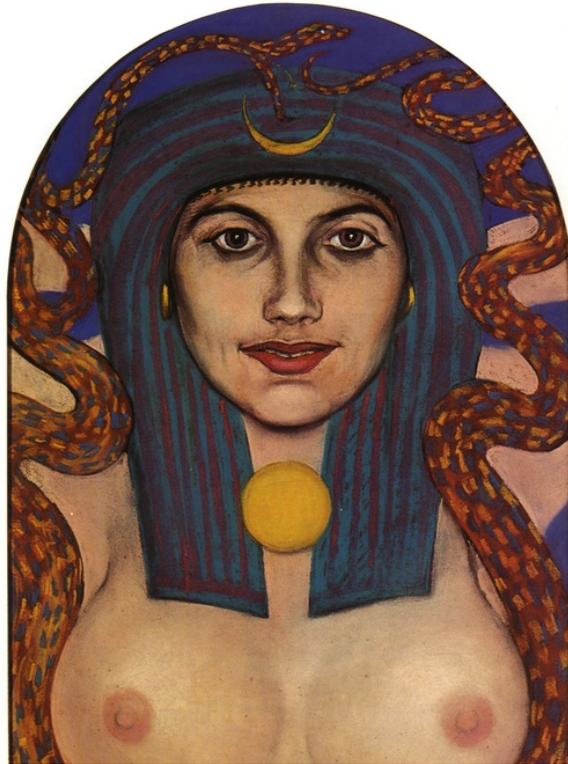
He writes in *Earth Inferno*:

“The desertion of the “Universal Woman,” lying barren on the parapet of the Subconsciousness in humanity: And humanity sinking into the pit of conventionality. Hail! The convention of the age is nearing its limit. And with it a resurrection of the Primitive Woman.”

And then there are his film stars. They are sidereal seductresses, sirens and cyphers, pictures of ravishing beauty that resonate with bewitching frequencies. ‘Sidereal’ means relating to or involving the stars. Spare developed a curious technique of subtle distortion in which his slightly askew portraits seem to suggest much more of the sitters personality and magickal content than is apparent in a more conventional depiction.

“Ghosts are sidereal” he wrote and it seems to me that his strange geometric experiments pierce through to the soul of the stars.

From this I can find a definite magickal thrust that culminates in the commissioned work he did for his friend Kenneth Grant’s occult group, the Nu-Isis Lodge in the 50’s. Spare was commissioned to produce numerous magickal paintings including depictions of Isis the Star Goddess. The stunning pastel ‘Isis Smiles’ is perhaps the most famous of these. There also exists a very novel picture called ‘Female Nebula’ that shows a swirling spiral galaxy, literally the body of the Stars: a depiction of the feminine mystery of Space and a reference to the children of Isis being the Stars themselves. This in turn recalls Aleister Crowley’s maxim “Every Man And Every Woman Is A Star” from the Book of Law/Liber AL Vel Legis.



Stars are a recurrent motif in Spare’s work from the luxurious and sybaritic pen and ink oeuvre of his early years through to the late magickal pastels such as “Cacophonous Fugue (Soul, Mind, Body etc.)”. He remains truly conscious of the fact that all existence is set within *The Starlite Mire*. In the pages of *The Book Of Ugly Ecstasy* I came across a curious image, that of a flaming Star that appears to be made of hair. A hairy star as if the fur of the animal were burning bright, and the bestial becoming celestial.





Beautifully realised animals swarm and stampede through the whole of Spare's oeuvre: Swans, owls, antelope, cattle, tigers, wart-hogs and giant tree shrews amongst them. He felt an affinity with all creatures and placed them as equals with mankind. He donated pictures to help raise money for horse charities at a time when their welfare was low in most people's agenda, and he kept an open house for cats in the various places he lived. In some earlier pictures it seems as if more than half the image is made up of scales and feathers of the winged and crawling creatures that intertwine with captured humanity.

Their constant companionship accompanies Spare's twilight journeys through the spirit worlds. Equality with the beasts seems paramount to his vision.

Spare's obsession with the hybrid and grotesque in nature and supernature, something which takes in the full spectrum of Ovidian metamorphoses, suggests in the artist's mind a vision of the active trafficking of creatures between one world and the Other. All of the Janus-headed, multi-faced, theriomorphic swarms which proliferate in "Spare's paintings threaten to break out of their world and spill into ours.

"The Soul is the ancestral animals." A.O.S...

Spare is a sorcerer and a shamanic artist – He attempts to represent the occult, the hidden, the unseen, to illustrate the unseeable, to portray sensations and subconscious energies: to delineate and draw into focus the astral forms of the spirits and shells who swarm about him in his everyday world. Few are capable of perceiving these layers of existence, even fewer of making a lifelong attempt to illustrate this hidden inner world.

The shaman is a person who deliberately remains in a perpetual spiritual crisis and this can sometimes conflict with his earthly needs.

Early in his life Spare was a Super-Sensualist – He loved the textures and the stuff of life and surrounded himself with objects of richness and taste that fuelled his visions. His books from that period such as *The Book of Pleasure (Self-Love)* subtitled *The Psychology of Ecstasy*, acknowledge that the celebration of the corporeal and the physical, allows a state of grace that leads to a Spiritual enlightenment. His love of the world and the spiritual acceptance of everything in it, lead to a heightened awareness of sense and sensation. As he got older he tempered this with an increasingly strong Stoic streak, which helped him cope with his impoverished domestic situation.

There are few examples of practicing Shaman artists. One can cite the painters such as Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, Oscar Domiguez, Leonora Carrington and Ithell Colquhoun as creators who acknowledged a strong interest in the occult and its various manifestations. But it is to the contemporary artist Jose Ameringo that I turn to find a comparison with Spare’s graphic art.



As a learned practitioner of the cult of Ayahuasca, Ameringo has undertaken extensive shamanic training as a “vegetalisa” and is skilled at psychic healing, astral travel and

other more arcane practises. He also paints, and his highly coloured depictions of the psychic realms contain striking thematic similarities to the work of Spare.

Transformations of man into animals along with animal totems and familiars populate his dense pictures. There are also numerous chthonic serpent, snake and large dragon-like creatures in his work, in addition to spirit portraits and the inclusion of multicoloured auras and rainbows. It has been left to anthropology to find precise meanings in all these various phenomena depicted in Ameringo's art. Perhaps such a correlative anthropological precision could be applied to the study of Spare's art and his use of similar devices. They are clearly not there for mere decoration – such areas of investigation are perhaps waiting to be explored.

“Having renounced both good and evil conveniently, one should engage in spasmodic madness.” *The Focus of Life*

This proto-surrealist maxim can be seen as bravely preceding Andre Breton's credo that surrealism was founded on the principle of convulsive beauty, an idea which can be linked to Arthur Rimbaud's belief in “the systematic derangement of the senses.”



Spare himself demonstrates that he went through several magickal crises and his detractors leapt upon such admissions as evidence of psychosis. In 1924 around the time of the publication of the *Anathema of Zos* subtitled (A Sermon To The Hypocrites) and around the same time as he drew the grotesque and powerful *The Book Of Ugly Ecstasy* he seemed to plunge headlong into a pit of loathing that deeply affected his view of

mankind. The flesh that he drew seemed to overwhelm him in brutal floods and he withdrew deeply into himself, haunted by the intensity of the maelstrom of images he was receiving. And again in 1954, towards the end of his life there emerges an unsettling sense that the Vision was becoming too unsupportable, too vivid and too painful, and something of this experience is reflected in the intense shattered techniques he used to paint the later Chaotic series of pastels. In these, the modern world and all its elements flow into highly coloured reconfigurations and juxtaposing patterns. We might compare these to the works of the brilliant artist Louis Wain whose charming portraits of cats

became increasing tessellated and jewel-like, shattering into shards of colour and pure sensation before his schizophrenic Universe finally submerged him.

There is a feeling in these later works that the senses have become inflamed and flooded with information in a way that sets the nerves jangling in both the viewer and the artist. But if this direction into synaesthesia wasn't entirely deliberate, it was certainly kick-started into colour by the arrival of a gift of a new set of pastels courtesy of Kenneth and Steffi Grant. Spare's handling of this medium and his bold experimentation with flux and form sees him pre-empting and pre-figuring the extravagant and drug-induced art of the 60's and 70's. Yet again he is attuned to the social pre-echo of the entire psychedelic movement. His artist shamanic antennae were feeling their way ahead of time through the colonization of entire psychic geographies. Again he reaches for a "Pure Art" "Of becoming entirely sensation."

Spare was to write at the end of one of his books, "If you cannot understand this primal script of magic – swallow the whole damn book."

I cannot endorse this most epicurean approach for the viewers of the pictures in this exhibition, as most are very kindly loaned. That really would be a "Feast for the Super-Sensualists. But it is an excellent idea to take one's time to savour the atmospheres that the pictures exude, and to take in the strange nourishment that they provide upon careful examination. It is a very rare feast indeed that they are gathered here together. And I recommend that if at all possible you come back and take a second or a third look at the exhibition. A primary reason to do so is to perceive how the work continually changes for the viewer.

The extraordinary metamorphic qualities of Spare's work are best pronounced when viewed in conjunction with other people. I have experienced marvelous revelations taking place in the pieces in my own collection, seeing one set of subtle attributes with one person, and having an entirely new set revealed to me as I viewed them with someone else. Very often hidden faces leap out of the chaotic backgrounds, and trees and vegetation reveal nyads and dryads. I have a small psychic landscape in which the weather looms over a Fairie hill. I have sat with my friend and watched as the brooding sky has opened and drenched the whole of the picture with rain.



I personally have had a very unsettling incident when, after having visited a friend's house to view his collection of Spares, I had to travel home by bus or by tube train to find myself dead amongst a living, heaving throng of exactly the same hybrid creatures as were in the pictures I had just viewed.

Even now, I have a tendency to check my fellow passengers to see if they have pointed ears and hairs sprouting from the bridges of their noses – to see what stage of satyrification they are showing, in their journey through the underworld.

There is a very definite sense that, through my contact with the art of Austin Osman Spare, the previously unseen spirit world has become tangible and palpable, more reachable and more real.

Powerful stuff indeed.

John Balance

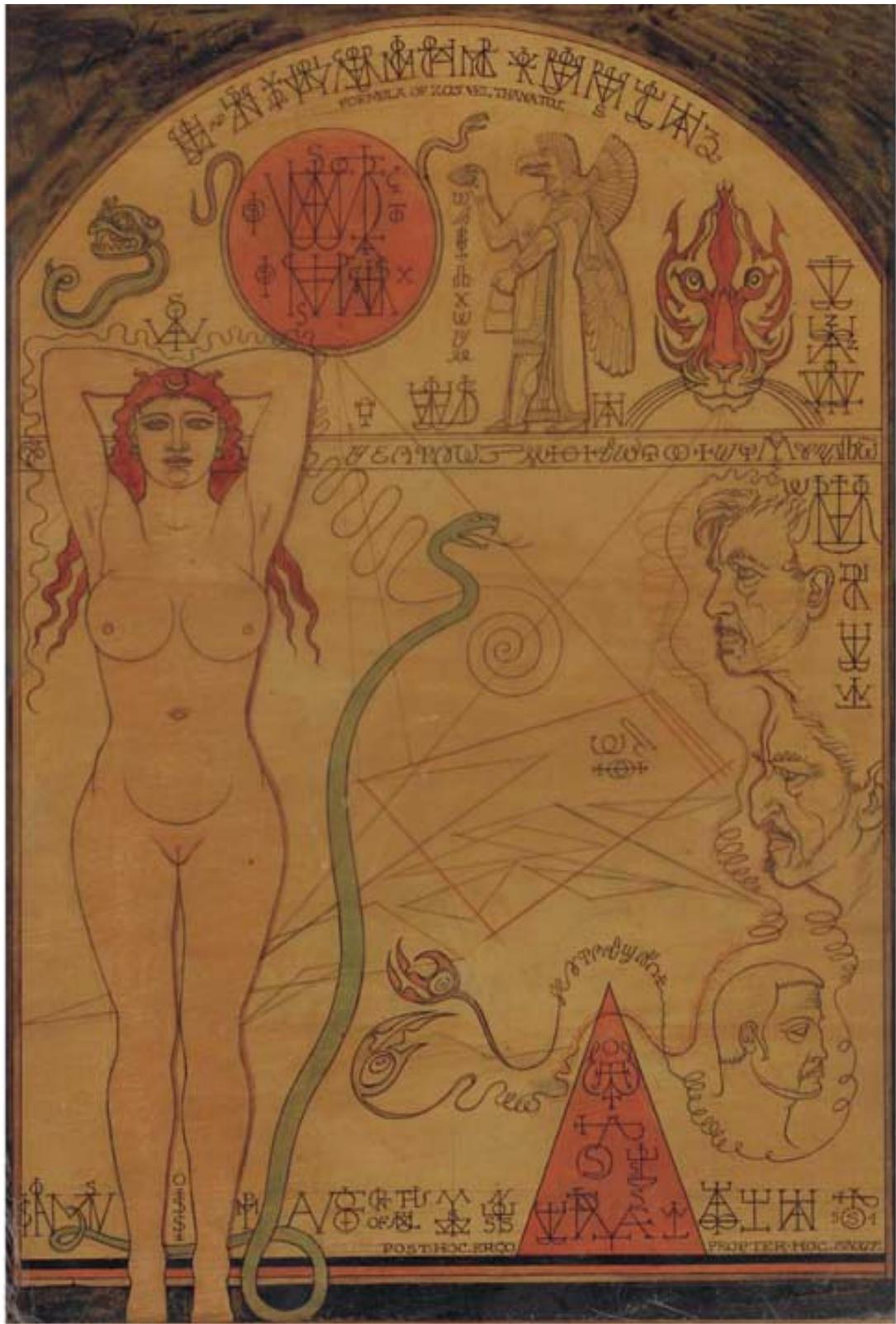
















Logo

Nothing is over or under sexed but there are maladjustments.





