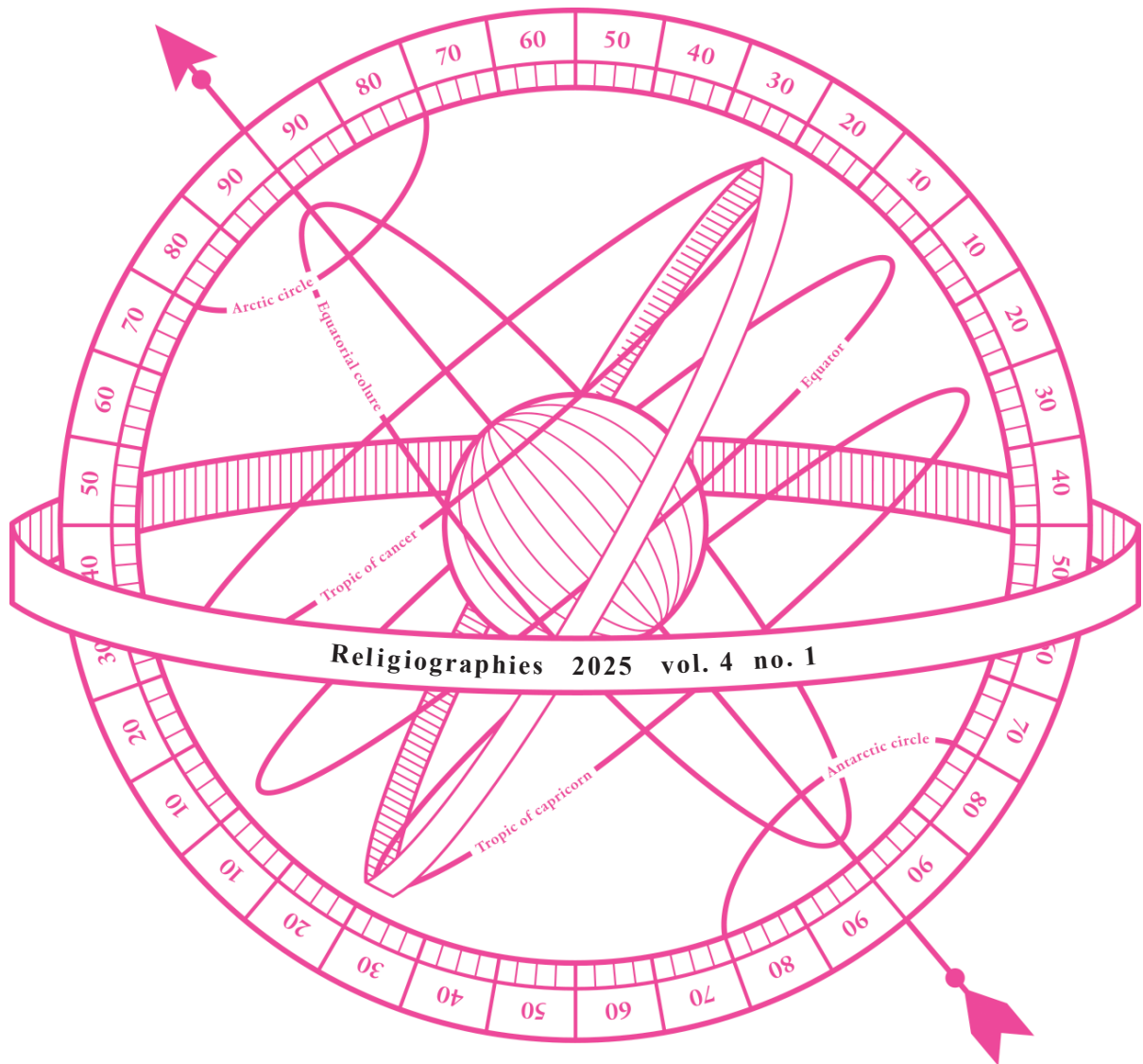


Religiographies



Special Issue

“The Eranos Experience: Spirituality and the Arts
in a Comparative Perspective”

edited by

Wouter J. Hanegraaff

Heterography

Luigi Pericle and Herbert Read: Encounters in Ascona through the Eranos Circle

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Ascona has been a unique cultural hub in the European scene, and a new institution, the Archivio Luigi Pericle, was recently established for an international audience and is becoming more and more well known. It all started in 2016, with the rediscovery of the artworks and library held in the house-cum-atelier situated on the slopes of Monte Verità in Ascona, which was inhabited by the artist Luigi Pericle from 1948 until the end of his life in 2001. The house remained an untouched treasure until it was acquired by the Biasca-Caroni family, who discovered an unexpected world, an intimate, highly articulated universe of drawings, pictures, and writings. The process of researching and promoting the figure and work of Pericle began in 2019 with exhibitions, conferences, and contributions by scholars from various countries and has opened up a host of hermeneutic and interdisciplinary possibilities. The first event, the retrospective entitled *Luigi Pericle. Beyond the Visible*, was held at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia in 2019, during the 58th Venice Art Biennale.¹ While the artist was still alive, the house welcomed illustrious visitors, including Hans Richter and, of course, as we will see, Sir Herbert Edward Read (1893–1968).

Pericle, the Swiss painter and illustrator of Italian descent, was born in Basel in 1916. He achieved success from 1952 on, when he conceived the textless comic strip Max the Marmot, which became famous in the undisputed capital of manga and anime, Japan, but also in the United States. Pericle worked as a successful illustrator and at the same time as a painter, but he decided to keep his two professions separate and sign his comics with the surname Giovannetti. In 1958, at the age of forty-two, Pericle destroyed all the figurative works in his possession (except for one) and began a new phase of his creative production, moving to informal abstraction using special techniques, which distinguished his work and made it the product of tireless experimentation. In the 1960s his work was displayed in numerous solo shows and important exhibitions around the UK and at the Kunstmuseum in Basel, along with the works of Karel Appel, Georg Baselitz, Joseph Beuys, Jean Dubuffet, Sam Francis, Alberto Giacometti, Asger Jorn, Henri Michaux, Pablo Picasso, Jean-Paul Riopelle, and Antoni Tàpies. His work was admired by figures such as Sir Herbert Read, the collectors Peter G. Staechelin and Martin Heinrich Burckhardt, and Peter Cochrane and Martin Summer of Arthur Tooth & Sons Gallery in London. In 1965, despite Summers's insistent requests for works and the high demand for interviews and exhibitions, Pericle chose to abandon the world of art, vernissages, and mundanities to devote himself to his exoteric studies and artistic practice. From the 1960s until the 1980s, in the tranquility of his home in Ascona, he created an endless series of works on canvas and masonite along with India ink drawings, in a creative and mystical endeavor that never abandoned him until his death in 2001.

From 1986 on, and until the end of his life, he worked on the unpublished novel *Bis ans Ende der Zeiten–Morgendämmerung und Neuanfang statt Weltuntergang* (*Until the End of Times–Dawn and new beginning, instead of the end of the world*).

Pericle certainly belongs to that group of twentieth-century artists and writers who entrusted their work to what could be defined, after Marco Pasi, as a case of “posthumousness,” which “manifests itself

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See Chiara Gatti, ed., *Luigi Pericle: Beyond the Visible* (Cinisello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2019). Exhibition catalog, Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venezia, from May 11 to November 24, 2019.

when an author does not wish or is unable to have their work acknowledged and appreciated while still alive, but the art work is endowed with such an aesthetic energy as to challenge and ultimately break away from its state of oblivion.”² In the case of Luigi Pericle, we do not know precisely the reasons behind his decision to turn to a solitary and ascetic life after a period of sudden and dazzling success in the 1960s. He clearly had an eclectic approach towards the dimension of spirituality and esotericism. Among the authors present in his rich library are Meister Eckhart, Saint John of the Cross, Jacob Boehme, Paracelsus and Rudolf Steiner, Sri Aurobindo, Paramahansa Yogananda, Sai Baba, D. T. Suzuki, and, last but not least, *The Secret of the Golden Flower* edited by Carl Gustav Jung. There are also Dürckheim’s writings on Zen and Fritjof Capra, in addition to a significant number of texts on ufology, pyramidology, astrology, and alternative and Eastern medicines (homeopathy, phytotherapy, Ayurveda, qigong) of which, according to several archival documents, Pericle was a passionate connoisseur.

From the perspective of art history, Pericle falls within the domain of modern art, which was marked by a pervasive need for spirituality and which originated in the German-speaking world between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It drew on the heritage of mystical and esoteric traditions in both East and West and was concerned with the “spiritualization” of the artist’s task.³

Wassily Kandinsky’s seminal work *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (*On the Spiritual in Art*, 1912) summarized many of these aspirations, becoming an essential reference point for the remainder of the century. The advent of the “spiritual triangle,” the great and much-longed-for age heralded in this famous book, was abruptly cut short by the outbreak of war in 1914. Yet, 1914 was also the year Kandinsky penned his *Über die Mauer* (*Beyond the Wall*), in which he distinguished between objectivists, who painted the world as it appeared, and subjectivists, who reached towards a higher universe. This theme—which concerns the identity of the artist, consciousness of the self, and the renunciation of ego to become a vehicle for higher values—is common among authors who work in the realm of spiritual abstraction, extending to affinities with the fields of music and philosophy. Here, we encounter another essential feature of spiritual abstraction, one that demands a return to the very origins of Kandinsky’s *On the Spiritual in Art* and the age in which theories of empathy—or *Einfühlung*—flourished.

Philosophers and psychologists—and above all Theodor Lipps (1851–1914)—analyzed the possibility of re-living the creative process, the movements and dynamics underpinning the production of forms and colors, on both a physical and emotional level.⁴ Such an approach echoes the morphological perspective and ultimately redefines the term “abstraction”: abstract painting abandons the “skin” of nature, not its laws. *Art can be great only if it is in a direct relationship with cosmic laws.*⁵ For Kandinsky, the origin of the work of art is akin to the origin of the cosmos, with fields of powerful energy composed of harmonies and contrasts. The observer of the works of spiritual abstraction “re-lives” within themselves the dynamics that underpin artistic production, sharing in the dance of its creation.

Pericle, for whom this tradition in German-speaking countries

2

Marco Pasi, “‘The Long Pursuit of an Absolute Beauty’: The Spiritual Dimension in Luigi Pericle’s Art,” in *Luigi Pericle*, ed. Gatti, 17.

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See, for instance, Stefano Poggi, *L’anima e il cristallo: Alle radici dell’arte astratta* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014).

4

See Martina Mazzotta et al., eds., “Una ‘scienza pura della coscienza’: l’ideale della psicologia in Theodor Lipps,” special issue, *Discipline filosofiche* 12, no. 2 (2002).

5

Wassily Kandinsky, *Complete Writings on Art*, ed. K. C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994).

proves to be fundamental, achieved success from 1952 on, when under the name of Giovannetti he conceived the textless comic strip, Max the Marmot. His little masterpiece, *Max. Die Reise nach Alfheim* (1984) is a miniature *Bildungsroman*, conceived by the artist with a sense of humor and real pedagogical verve to furnish new generations with suggestions and methods for following the spiritual path. The world of childhood and adolescence, of adventure conceived as a formative process, of epic narratives, myths, and sagas is fundamental to Pericle's poetics, in which obstacles or apocalyptic catastrophes are always the prelude to the triumph of light and life. Like his heroes, borrowed from mythology yet developed with great imagination, Pericle combines the discipline required for study and self-knowledge with a search for the absolute: "It is necessary to return to gathering the truth of everything as a transcendental property of being, which does not represent an abstract greatness, but the vital connection between the Absolute and the world. The only word that can define it is: Beauty."⁶

In his sketches, ink drawings, and paintings from 1958 to 1965, which Pericle called the years of "radical change," the free line of spiritual abstraction seems to prevail (and evokes the discipline of Chinese painters of shan shui/Samurai bushido).⁷ Pericle's calligraphic expression (one cycle of works from 1964 bears the significant title *Calligraphic Rapture*) reflects the continuous and empathetic relationship between body, spirit, and matter and is articulated through the lingering of the artist's gesture on the pictorial surface.

Closely observing Pericle's works in person can feel like embarking on a never-ending story. In the cycles of canvas paintings such as *Uranian Golem* or *The Archangel* (Fig. 1), figures emerge imposingly from a landscape that is both undefined and dense with matter and luminescence.



Fig. 1. Luigi Pericle, *L'Arcangelo IV, Matri Dei d.d.d.*, 1965. Mixed media on canvas, 51 x 65 cm. Ascona, Archivio Luigi Pericle. Courtesy of Archivio Luigi Pericle.

6

Eugenia Cosentino, introduction to *Luigi Pericle: Dipinti e disegni* (Novara: De Agostini, 1979), 9.

7

See Martina Mazzotta, "The Spirit of the Valley Never Dies: Works by Mao Janhua," in *The Spirit of the Valley: Works by Mao Janhua* (London, Edizioni Plan, 2019). Exhibition catalog, Saatchi Gallery, London, from June 27 to July 7, 2019.

These figures raise their hands in a position reminiscent of the anthropomorphic figures of prehistoric graffiti, or of Klee's *Angelus Novus*, or of the maideate, the characteristic helmet crest of samurai warriors that has been reused by the Japanese cartoon robot Goldrake. The basic idea is that the world is close to a catastrophe. But the destruction that will annihilate it is not completely negative: on the contrary, it will allow the planet to regenerate itself and to move forward to the beginning of a new era. The works on Masonite between 1966 and 1980 in particular (their technique remaining mysterious even today) offer the eye tactile glimpses of the material, which ranges from wood to metal and stone. From the dark inorganic substrate emerge flashes of light, lichen, organic forms that find space among the crevices in structures created by the overlay of color. The bumps on the surface resemble scar tissue, and we regularly encounter moons in his repertoire, positioned high and centrally. There are gateways, thresholds, arches suspended in the sky, ships, cities, palaces, flying vehicles that stand out in all their three-dimensionality against the perfectly smooth surface, often with a trompe l'oeil effect. The luminescence that pierces the intense blue, metallic grey, acid yellow, and burnt orange is structured within a space that imposes a constant change of perspective, passing from a frontal to an aerial view. For instance, it is only after following the meanders of *The Palace* (Fig. 2) (from the *Atlantide* series, 1974) that one realizes it could simultaneously represent an aerial view of ghostly ruins resulting from a violent conflict—and the process of reconstruction already taking place. The redemption occurs within the image, which is the visual order within the resulting chaos.



Fig. 2. Luigi Pericle, *Il Palazzo* (from *Atlantide*), *Matri Dei d.d.d.*, 1974. Mixed media on Masonite, 80 x 130 cm. Ascona, Archivio Luigi Pericle. Courtesy of Archivio Luigi Pericle.

This rapid overview can be concluded with a magnificent work that, somewhat unusually, is dominated by the color white, and bears no title or date: the masonite panel that was found on the artist's living room wall on the day of the rediscovery, in December 2016 (Fig. 3).

The interview found in the catalogue published by De Agostini in 1979 reveals that Pericle was in the habit of hanging the work he had most recently completed in his house. We are catapulted into a desert

of sheets of blue-hued ice, in places copper-tinged and subtly oxidized. At the sides emerge two small triangles, which in turn are arranged to form a larger triangle; the apex culminates in a full moon. The blinding effect of the white prevails everywhere, glacial and breathtaking in the reflections that scintillate from the surface of the work.



Fig. 3. Luigi Pericle, untitled, undated. Mixed media on Masonite, 80 x 130 cm. Ascona, Archivio Luigi Pericle. Courtesy of Archivio Luigi Pericle.

Within the whiteness are nature, sound, time, and silence; in *On the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky described the color white as “affecting us with the absoluteness of a great silence.” Its inner sound is like the absence of sound, often corresponding to pauses in music. “It is not a dead silence but one full of possibilities.” Nothingness exists before the beginning, before birth. “Perhaps the earth sounded like this in the white period of the Ice Age.”⁸

So, it is not a coincidence that someone like Read became a vital player in Pericle’s career (Fig. 4). He was a poet and art critic, a follower of T. S. Eliot, initially influenced by the imagism of Ezra Pound, and later a pupil of Carl Gustav Jung, whose collected works he would edit and publish in English. In addition to his many books of poetry and prose and his numerous works of art criticism, Read edited the monograph on Kandinsky published by Faber & Faber in 1959. It was a further sign of his interest in abstraction and the related spiritual framework that found full expression in *On the Spiritual in Art* (or, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*); the former is the translation I decided to use, after my direct collaboration with Peter Vergo.

Hans Hess (1907–1975) had the idea of introducing Read to Pericle’s work. Hess was curator of the City of York Art Gallery and a profound connoisseur of modern art. Together with Martin Summers from the Tooth Gallery, he made the greatest effort to promote Pericle’s art in England. They belong to the web of people and stories that contributed to Pericle’s success, in just three years and especially in England, where abstraction was about to be replaced by pop art: this movement in “Swinging London” swept away the serious, committed period of abstract expressionism. Across several museums in England, Pericle’s art thus received remarkable recognition from important institutions

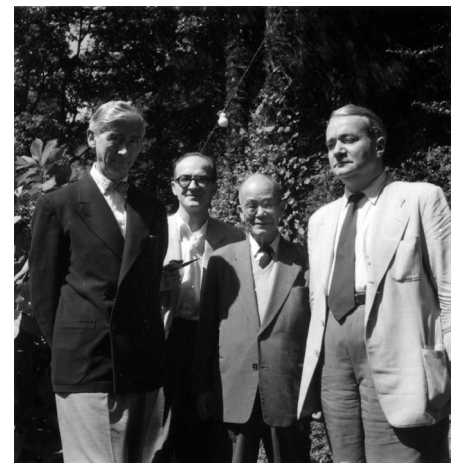


Fig. 4. From the left, the poet and literary critic Sir Herbert Edward Read, the historian of religions Mircea Eliade, the scholar of Zen Buddhism Daisetsu Teitarō Suzuki, and the philosopher and scholar of Islam Henry Corbin at Eranos in August 1953. Photo by Margarethe Feller. Eranos Foundation Archives, Ascona.

(in Newcastle, Hull, Bristol, Cardiff, and Leicester).⁹ In August 1964, Hess wrote to Pericle that Read would be in Ascona a few days later to attend that year's seminar. Moreover, that Pericle already held Read in esteem can be intimated from a copy in Pericle's library of Read's *Bild und Idee* marked January 11, 1962, with Pericle's annotations. We do not know exactly what happened next, but Pericle and Read definitely met, since Read then described his visit to Pericle's studio, expressing high praise for his paintings. Hess included Read's favorable opinion in the catalogue of the itinerant exhibition that he curated in 1965; this catalogue was then added to all successive publications devoted to Pericle's works, including of course the important retrospective catalogue published in 1979.¹⁰

In his short appraisal, Read says that he went to see Pericle and his work without great expectations, since he did not think an artist completely unknown to him, and whom he probably suspected of being an amateur, could hold any surprises. But he was indeed struck by the quality and "strange beauty" of the works he saw:

Sometimes there was a vague suggestion of naturalistic forms, but form itself was established beyond phenomenal appearances, to represent some inner essence, some spiritual condition that can be represented only in the abstract harmony of lines and colour. A metaphysical art, therefore, but one that remains faithful to the sensuous qualities of the material of the painter's craft. Luigi Pericle is a mature artist . . . the fact that he is not better known in other countries can only be attributed to the artist's extreme modesty and long pursuit of an absolute beauty.¹¹

Read's personal history made him particularly receptive to a form of art such as Pericle's. He entered the world of art criticism in the years preceding World War I, and was engaging with Kandinsky's writings for the English-speaking audience.

Even before the War, Read had been one of the British critics most committed in promoting abstract art and the new aesthetic of the avant-gardes. Not necessarily because he was fond of spiritual art, but because his approach to criticism, particularly inspired in those years by Jung's analytical psychology, gave him the key to understanding an art such as Pericle's, so full of references to possible archetypal forms. Read's assiduous presence at the Eranos meetings over the years testifies to his efforts to extend this perspective to the most diverse forms of modern art. Nevertheless, his views sometimes conflicted with those of Jung, as occurred on a memorable occasion in 1952, when Read participated for the first time as a lecturer at one of the Eranos meetings. As Read was delivering his speech, the Swiss psychologist stood up and left the audience, contesting him openly and challenging his interpretation of Picasso's art. Moreover, international artists after World War II were not inclined to express explicitly spiritual or esoteric themes, at least compared to the great creative ferment of the avant-gardes in the early decades of the twentieth century. The cultural climate was anything but favorable to the spread of these ideas, especially abstract art, which in the post-war period assumed

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See Thomas Marks, "Luigi Pericle in England," in *Luigi Pericle: A Rediscovery*, ed. Andrea Biasca-Caroni et al. (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2022). Exhibition catalog, Estorick Collection, London, from September 14 to December 18, 2022.

10

Marks, "Luigi Pericle in England," 52–53.

11

Herbert Read, introduction to *Luigi Pericle*, catalogue of the touring exhibition held in the City Art Gallery (York), Laing Art Gallery (Newcastle), Ferens Art Gallery (Hull), City Art Gallery (Bristol), National Museum of Wales (Cardiff), and Museum and Art Gallery (Leicester), March 29–September 5, 1965, Ben Johnson & Co. (York, UK), February 2–20, 1965.

the form of *art informel*. Therefore, it proved challenging for critics and audiences to distinguish stylistically between Pericle's transcendently-minded abstractions and the gestural painting of the Abstract Expressionist artists. Hess and Read made efforts to guide the interpretation of Pericle's paintings. The artist's imagination, according to Hess, was keen to discover pictorial forms related to forms of thought, by which Pericle could be compared to Paul Klee and *similar artists of formal imagination*, such as Kandinsky and the protagonists of the Blue Rider.¹²

A further link ties Read and the New York Art Foundation of Rome.¹³ Both seemed to be ideally closer to those currents of abstract painting that developed between the 1940s and 1950s on the West Coast of the United States. This dovetails with my comments about Kandinsky above (and with what I presented in my 2017 exhibition at Fondazione Palazzo Magnani, concerning John Cage).

This milieu, largely inspired by theosophical and spiritual ideas, paved the way to the continental modernism of the avant-gardes in Great Britain, mixing it up with Nietzsche's philosophy and more or less radical projects of social reform. It is therefore not by chance that, in the years following World War II, Read was still perceived as a kindred spirit by those who considered themselves the heirs of the spiritual modernism of the avant-gardes.

Pericle presents us with constellations of images that are broadly consistent and isomorphic in their structures, relating to "arrangements," "signs," and "archetypes" that function as organizing nuclei. Similar to the alchemical symbol, not to be considered an archetype but pointing towards other arrangements, these works initiate a process—an unstoppable energy, opening a gateway to the imagination and the subconscious. In the art criticism of Pericle's time, as has been described by Maurizio Calvesi, there was a prevailing tendency to trace the entirety of the artistic process to the subconscious, or, rather, to characterize the symbol as something utterly indefinite and fleeting, tangible only in its effects, placing it in fraught contrast with allegory.¹⁴ In the view of a critic such as Read, the subconscious had a defining role, but it also shows that in Pericle's poetics the mythical and imaginative moment of the conscious and the logical-rational impulse meet, albeit dialectically, continuously communicating with and disrupting one another. Pericle's polyvalent symbols contain various messages, concentrated in an organic and unitary system: "Art is associated with knowledge," Pericle affirms, and it remains "preparation for contemplating supreme beauty . . ." So alchemical thought intertwines with speculative thought, realizing it by turning it into fable. But how and to what degree does Pericle present cultural assumptions, or perennial archetypes, while overcoming the voluntary or deliberate symbol, and making it emerge from itself, uncontrolled? This article does not seek words to explain how the logos, the creative archetype quintessentially immune to material contact, "collides" with the matter expressed to its greatest extent in Pericle's most "secret" and poetic works.

Today's visitors of Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn's house can admire two large works by Pericle, displayed centrally in the drawing room (Fig. 5).

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Marks, "Luigi Pericle in England."

13

See Marco Pasi, "The Art of Luigi Pericle: From Spiritual Vision to Posthumousness," in *Luigi Pericle: A Rediscovery*, ed. Andrea Biasca-Caroni et al., 75–79.

14

See Maurizio Calvesi, *Un'estetica del simbolo tra arte e alchimia: Duchamp invisibile* (Bologna: Marietti Editore, 2016).



Fig. 5. A view of the living room of Casa Gabriella, which was the home of Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, founder of Eranos. On the walls are two ink paintings by Luigi Pericle, donated by Greta and Andrea Biasca-Caroni to the Eranos Foundation in 2019 and 2021. Photo by Foto Garbani. Eranos Foundation Archives, Ascona.

A few words about Martina Mazzotta

Martina Mazzotta is a Venetian-Milanese art historian, author, and curator with a background in modern German philosophy. From 2003 until 2017, she was involved in her family's publishing house and art foundation Mazzotta (both of which have become historical archives), while lecturing in art history at the Università Cattolica di Milano. Martina's work is particularly focused on philosophy and its relationship with the visual arts, music, magic and science. She has curated exhibitions in various international museums, foundations and biennials (Santa Fe and Venice). Her recent publications and exhibition projects have extended and renewed the research on classic modern artists: *Kandinsky-Cage. Music and the Spiritual in Art* and *Jean Dubuffet. Art in play* (Fondazione Magnani, 2017 and 2018), *The spirit of the valley never dies* (Saatchi Gallery, 2019), *Max Ernst* (retrospective at Palazzo Reale, Milan 2022), *Max Ernst. Mondes magique, mondes libérés* (Hotel de Caumont, Aix en Provence 2023), *Max Ernst. Surrealism, Art and Cinema* (Circulo de Bellas Artes, Madrid 2024-'25). She has explored themes between art and science, like in *Wunderkammer. Art, science and marvel yesterday and today* (Museo Poldi Pezzoli and Gallerie d'Italia, Milan 2013) and *Skin. Identity and beauty between Art and Science* (Triennale Museum, Milan 2012). She is currently an Associate Fellow at the Warburg Institute in London, where she has co-curated *Tarot. Origins & Afterlives* (2025); she is *Domenica -Il Sole 24 Ore* arts correspondent in the UK. She has collaborated with the Archivio Pericle in Ascona for the exhibition *Luigi Pericle. A rediscovery* (Estorick Collection, London 2022).

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