

# ROSE CROIX

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The cover image for Volume 17 of the *Rose+Croix Journal* is *The Soul of the Rose* by John William Waterhouse, painted in 1908.

Waterhouse was born in Rome in 1849 to English parents who were both painters. He grew up in London, and enrolled in the Royal Academy of Art, later becoming famous for his depictions of Greek mythology and Arthurian legend. He was a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of painters in England, a group that sought a return to the fifteenth-century Italian style of intricate compositions, profuse details, and strong colors. *The Soul of the Rose* exhibits all of that, with contrasting blues and reds and greens, an expression of calm delight on the face of the woman turned to the side, and enough detail around the edges to know we are seeing one part of a larger housing compound that has flowers along the walls and Spanish tile.

Like many of his later paintings, Waterhouse focuses his art on a lone woman with what can be described as a serene expression. The unnamed woman with red hair carefully cups the bottom of a rosebud on a branch with one hand to pull it directly to her nose, while the other hand rests lightly on the wall to keep her at a distance from the thorns. With the way her head is leaning, it is easy to imagine her in the middle of inhaling the unmistakable, soothing perfume of the rose. She is at once feeling the delicate rose petals on her face while also enjoying the aroma with her eyes closed, perhaps having already taken in enough of its visual beauty to seek a different understanding of the rose, a flower of profound symbolism and importance to Rosicrucians.

The very name of the Rosicrucian Order comes from the Rose Cross. As explained in a Rosicrucian manuscript: “Its vertical branch represents spirituality, while its horizontal branch represents materiality. Their point of meeting, where the rose blossoms, represents the expansion of Being in Its fullness.”

The rose itself can simultaneously symbolize looking inwardly and outwardly, with its closed bud in the center holding together an unfolding of numerous layers opening toward the outer world. Mystics undertake an inward journey to better understand the world around them. A Rosicrucian manuscript states:

The interior journey can be symbolized by the blooming of the Rose on the Cross. That is why the Rose is regarded as one of the symbols of this process of change, of this alchemical transmutation.... We can say that an experience of awakening – such as a mystical vision – is not the Awakening. It is simply an encouragement along the way or one new starting point for evolution. The Rose, as it blooms with its various petals, can thus represent this desire, showing that new tasks are to be achieved.

There are many ways to imagine what the soul of the rose might be, and one of the papers for this year’s *Journal* invites readers to aim for a deeper understanding of the soul itself, by exploring the many ways it is conceived of by various groups of people and in various ages. Lee Irwin in his “Cartographies of the Soul: Challenges to Esotericism,” argues for the importance of esoteric studies like the path of the Rosicrucian Order, because of

...the fact that a human being is a highly complex entity irreducible to simply physical processes. The very idea of the soul, and its cartographies, expresses this complexity in relation to altered states of mind, empathic sympathy, moral concern for the well-being of others, aesthetic perceptions and artful expression, as well as a wide range of emotional, cognitive, and psychic capacities.

In other words, science itself can only take our understanding of people so far, so it is important to look at the whole of a being, including its soul, as the mystic does.

As for what the soul itself looks like, Irwin shows in his paper that it is possible to conceive of it in many ways. Rosicrucians believe that the soul is immaterial, as described in a Rosicrucian manuscript: “The Soul is a cosmic energy independent of the material world, which possesses functions and attributes not found in nonliving matter.... [It is] unlimited and eternal.”

According to the Rosicrucian Order's teachings, the soul of a person attaches to the physical body at the first breath and leaves at the last, and is a link to the Divine. A Rosicrucian manuscript states:

The soul of each human being is an individualization of the Universal Soul and, thus, an emanation of Divinity itself. Therefore, it possesses all of the latter's attributes and characteristics. In other words, the soul is immaterial, immortal, and perfect. In fact, we may consider it to be the expression of the Divine in each human being. The soul is thus the reflection of Divinity's Omnipotence, Omnipresence, and Omniscience. This concept is found in all esoteric traditions and in most religions.

If plants also have souls, the soul of the rose would be one of a journey of unfolding, from seed to a flower that expresses the journey of the mystic, with a concentration towards the interior world leading to an unfolding into the exterior world. It is a symbol of harmony. A Rosicrucian manuscript states:

The opening of the heart – that is, the blossoming of the Rose, which awakens little by little within us – instructs us on interior beauty. This blossoming, by the fact that it is filled with love, is well beyond a simple intellectual process. It contributes to a major evolution of our being and brings to us a spiritual desire of interior communion. Finally, it leads us to become conscious of the feeling of Universality and Oneness. It should not be surprising that, despite all their knowledge, certain scientists miss this essential point: they are only working with their intellects. In any event, the Rose, through its symbolism, proposes to us that we keep intact as much as possible the qualities of the heart, even during difficult experiences.

Thus, *The Soul of the Rose* prompts us to consider more than the feminine beauty that it depicts. Like many other Pre-Raphaelite paintings and poems of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this image invites us to contemplate the mystic symbolism of the Divine as revealed in nature and in ourselves.