

MYSTICISM INTERPRETATION CENTER

ÁVILA-SPAIN



Excmo. Ayuntamiento de Ávila
Espacio Ávila Mística
Pº del Rastro s/n 05001 Ávila (España)
Tel. 34 920 212165

avilamistica@ayuntavila.com / www.avilamistica.es/interpretacion



Introduction

Avila's Mysticism Interpretation Center houses a compendium of universal mystical concepts and is itself a work of art inspired in the mystic tradition. It is a unique metaphor of the mystical manifestations of all cultures through the ages, and hence indivisible. Architecture, painting, sculpture, object art, design, music, lights and shadows, sounds, materials, words and poetry work together in this daring project: to bring mysticism to the men and women of our modern world as a useful possibility that is fully current.

This communication, the purpose of the Center, is only triggered with the presence of the visitor as he travels through the work, an explorer in the search of something that is also looking for the self.

First moment

The Building

The visit of the Mysticism Interpretation Center has been staged in ten steps or moments in the manner of the ten degrees of the secret ladder of Saint John of the Cross. Ten moments characterized by having a different essence and intensity that together form the structure and composition of the indivisible whole.

The first moment is the experience of the building itself. Located outside the city walls, on the boundary line between the old Christian town and the old Jewish quarter, the Center is a symbolic bridge between both cultures. It is shaped as an elongated rectangle that follows the shape of the Wall, as if engaging it in dialogue, a symbol of the spiritual continuity between the past and the present.

The universal nature of mysticism is somehow already reflected in the construction and the location themselves: contemplating the wide expanse of the Amblés Valley below without quite disengaging from the close embrace of the massive city wall behind it, stark in its pure and sober lines. An austerity of design that continues in the materials used inside, basic and primal: cement, wood, hemp, lime, iron, water...



Second moment

The Garden

A symbolic labyrinthine forest made of closely set together estelae of white limestone surging from a white gravel ground. Reddish clay roses dot it with a hint of color. "A fragment of humanized Nature" is how Yolanda Tabanera, the creator, sees it: overlapping stylized stone trees that are also gates, suggesting the presence of the mysteric and inviting further exploration.



*A word dead when it is said,
some say.*

*I say it just begins to live that day.
(Emily Dickinson)*

Third moment

The Entrance Hall

The second door leads to the building's entrance hall. A preliminary space covered with panels that display a broad synthesis of mystical thought, prepare us for the visit. We are in, welcomed by the poetry of Saint John of the Cross:

«And I came in I know not where...»

Three words from Meister Eckhart:

«Love, knowledge, action»

And the succinct definition of mysticism advocated by the Center:

«Mysticism is a way of life and a path of knowledge that is reached and is made manifest through inner search and transformation».

Zen philosophy says there are 84000 paths to enlightenment, each one of them as keenly personal and unique as each of the mystic themselves. With this in mind we are ready to explore the Center and initiate our inner journey.

We set forth from the hall into the four rooms ahead.

Room One is dedicated to the Mystic Tradition and its basic historical aspects. The next three Rooms are ordered according to the well known classification of Saint Catherine of Siena: «One room to be with your Self, one room to be with God, one room to be with the World». Saint John of the Cross' Room is a reflection on the Dark Night of the Soul, and a space devoted to knowledge of the Self. The Room for Mystical Union. Room conveying the sense of a world of action.

Fourth moment

The Elevator

We step inside the elevator. A clear symbol of having - literally- embarked in our own journey to the inner realms of the Self. While the elevator takes us down we begin to realize we are descending to the deepest recesses of our own hearts for, who would be so bold as to ascend before having been lowered to the appropriate starting point below? The Earth, where we all begin. A place to humbly recognize our origins. This is a brief moment, silent and full of expectation. No one speaks. We know we will find something: perhaps our Self.

Fifth Moment

Room one: Tradition

This space, edged with volcanic earth to signify the geologic core, reminds us that mysticism, in any of its manifestations, has been a constant throughout the history of human societies, from ancient times to now.

The wall hangings contain information about the three great mystics of Avila: the Cabbalist Jew Moises de León, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

From the most ancient form of mysticism, embodied by the tribal shaman, the mystic experience surfaces in all religions, sometimes in conflict with their institutional structure, and in all expression of the sacred. Taoism, Buddhism, Cabbala, Eleusinian mysteries, Sufism, Christianity, lay and heterodox movements are elements of a diverse and unique universe of experience where mysticism has manifested.



The symbology of mysticism covers the walls of this room.

On the right side we see four wall niches, the first two created by the painter Jesús Peñamil and the last two created by the painter Almudena Mora.



Wall Niche 1. **Mystic Experience.**

A house, built on an old manuscript communicates with a cloud-map through a ladder. The intimate, experiential, link between the physical and the spiritual. The timeless pulse of mysticism offers human beings the chance to have an experience that transcends from the personal to the universal.

Wall Niche 2. **Word and Silence.**

The book, the container par excellence of words, the intellectual process, from which leafs and letters fly away on their way to, perhaps, silence. Words illuminate obscure subjects. Silence is the ultimate destination of the mystic word. Silence is the death of words, and the place where words are born.

Wall Niche 3. **Symbols.**

Uppermost in the language of symbology is the Tree, essence of all mystic traditions, the key, the instrument to unlock the gates to other consciousness, the task ahead. The mystic expression is embodied in symbols. Material or verbal symbols that go beyond what words can express. The voice of the ineffable.

Wall Niche 4. **Mystic Tradition and Respect.**

Mirrors: the variability of time and being, the imagination that reproduces and integrates itself in the world, the linked hands of the mystical marriage...
Mystical traditions are respectful of one another, they seek the same essence and transcend worldly interests.

The mystic Ibn'Arabi, born in Murcia wrote:

«My heart encompasses all forms...»

A commentary on the absence of dogmatism and a generosity of heart - curiously appropriate and current-continuing to open new possibilities for mysticism in the modern world.

Across from the wall niches; on the left side of the room the symbols rise up to Room 2 in the upper floor where they become lost

First we find the Veil, also made by Yolanda Tabanera: a net-like piece woven with hemp and raffia that cascades down from the upper level.

The open texture of the Veil serves a dual purpose, to hide and show in the same measure. Its various overlapping layers allude to one of the universal mystical themes: appearances hide the true essence of things under layers of deception.

Next we see the Tree of Life and Immortality, The Axis Mundi Tree that is the direct link between Heaven and Earth. The Tree that digs his roots in the all-nourishing mother earth below and lifts his branches towards the infinity of the sky above, echoing the words of Moisés de Leon: «The Tree of Life stretches downward from above and the sun sheds light over all of it».

In the Christian tradition, the Cross would be made of the Axis Mundi Tree known in The Bible as the Tree of Knowledge found in Paradise and on Mount Golgotha.

Fray Luis de Granada said: «The fruits of the Cross tree... all the spiritual goods, all the remedies and succor... all come from this glorious Tree».

During the XX century many authors, mystics and scholars manifested a renewed interest in the Tree as symbol. Examples of these modern reflections are displayed in the panels that frame the downward facing branches of the tree and in the mural painting behind it.

At the far end of the room, facing the visitor-explorer we see and hear a cascading wall of water and a rope. The music of the waterfall reminds us of the murmur of a mountain stream, that comes also from far above. «Oh crystalline fountain» -says Saint John of the Cross- returning often to the image: «Well I know the streaming fountainhead, even `ere is night».

The rope ascends vertically, a moving vanishing point, slightly frayed, as if marking the discontinuity in its presence. The ascent is not easy, and contrary to appearances, nor straight either.

We continue our exploration. Ahead a rough wooden stairway invites us to climb up to the next moment...



Sixth moment

Romm two: The knowledge of Self

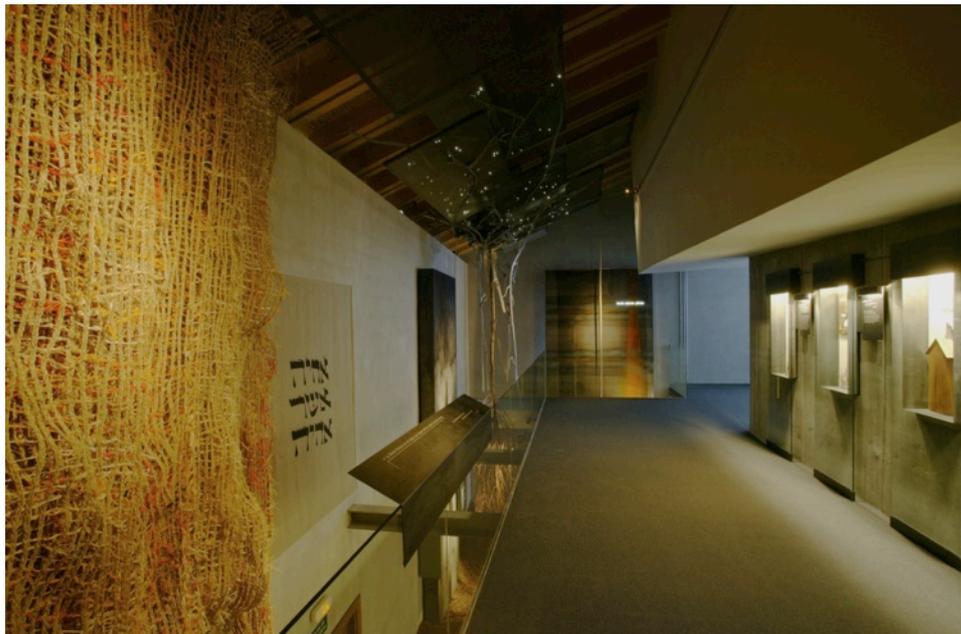
Saint John's Dark Night of the Soul, the lonely bird room.

Midway through our exploration, we have reached the heart of our journey.

The dark night is a journey whose far off destination is our inner being.

We begin the exploration of this room from the left side, where the final end of the Veil is lost upward in infinity. Taking a few steps forward we look up to see how the roots of the Tree extend in a vast organic tangle. The names of some renowned mystics can be seen in the many rhizomes of the roots. Names of mystics from all cultures, beliefs and historical times offered as testimonial of the universality and ubiquity of mysticism.

In the words of Plotinus: «God fills everything» «Iovis omnia plena»



Looking to the right we found four wall niches made by Jesus Peñamil.

Wall Niche 1. **Saint John of the Cross.**

A smelting tower, fire, smoke as synthesis of the manufacturing process. A metaphor for the busy work of transformation in progress. A process St. John of the Cross named «the tenth degrees of the mystic ladder of divine love.

Wall Niche 2. **The Conditions of the Lonely Bird.**

The winged house evokes the forces that drive the mystic, symbolized as a lonely bird, finding his inner strength and drawing strength from the surrounding Nature. The accompanying text recounts the conditions the contemplative soul, the lonely bird, must fulfill.

Wall Niche 3. **The meaning of Virtue.**

A triangle over gold leaf and cruel acacia spines. The delights and torments of the mystic's road. Approaching divinity through a path of thorns.

A life of virtuous practice liberates the soul and lets the will dominate the body.

Love, humility, poetry, silence and solitude strengthen the will towards the rule of the spirit and mastery of the senses. The initiation on this path of virtue, going through the thorny path prepare the mystic for spiritual and corporal transformation. In the words of Saint John, «his palate bathed in glory and love, abundant in delight, feeling rivers of the water of life flow wildly in his gut...the soul ascends...»

Wall Niche 4. **The Secret Ladder, the Inner Search.**

Ladder and cloud: simplicity, depth. Arising from the crucible of pain to the softness of cloud: «Spiritual boons are of two forms: nurturing or painful», reminds us again, St. John of the Cross. Next to the wall we see the rungs of the secret ladder of love.

Already seasoned explorers plunging the depths of the Center, and perhaps our own soul's in the warm penumbra of the room, we now turn slightly to the right. Before us a great projection covers the walls. A barely audible sound of wind and moving branches: trees swaying ecstatically in the softest of breezes.



Secret ladder, path of perfection. Eight cubes of different sizes lighted from within. The first eight degrees identified by one word each: Emptiness, Search, Action, Strength, God-hunger, Lightness, Daring, Encounter.

The cubes are the work of Esther Pizarro. Each one holds an image taken from Nature, stones, grass, water, clouds...all linked by a neural network that contrives a topographic map, a metaphor for that ideal treasure hunt map we generate in our own search for knowledge.

Next to the wall there is a wooden bench. This is the best time to sit down. Time has been left behind. There is silence, meditation. The leisure to empty our inner selves, annulling the self as a step of transformation into the source. Soon there will be fulfillment. We acknowledge our true selves... in humbleness.

Rested and comforted we resume our itinerary taking the hall ahead. At the back of the room a wooden column and a glass of water: elemental and transparency. Vanishing points of perspective that sweep us to the knowledge of moving live waters: creeks, oceans, life...



Seventh moment

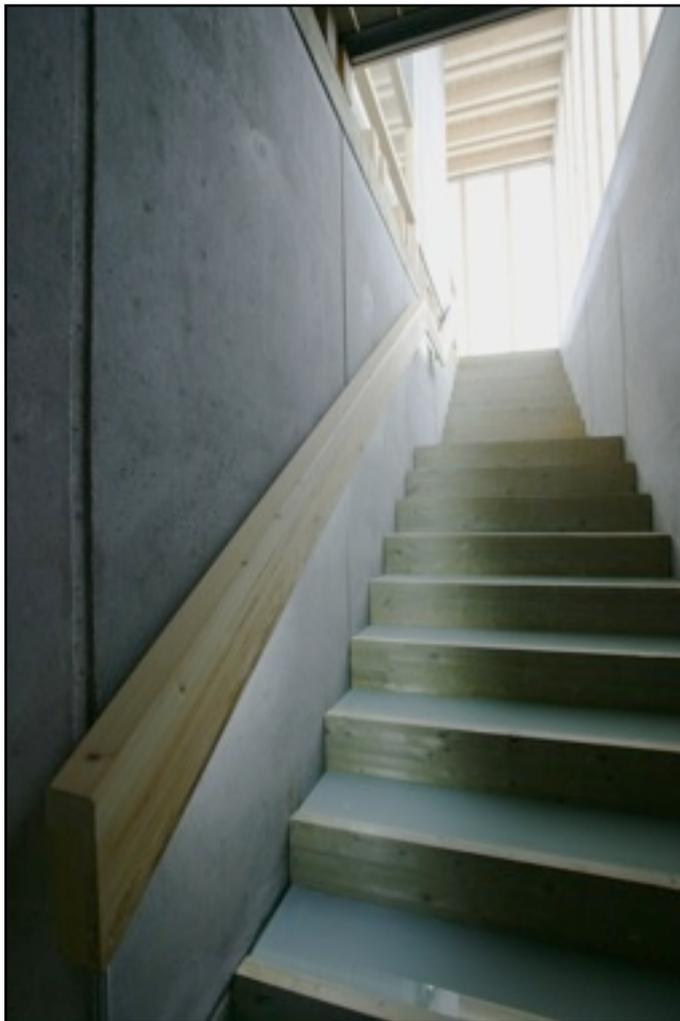
The stairway

We have completed a circle and find ourselves back at the stairs. While still in the shadows, we begin to perceive a suffused light, an opaque luminosity, enveloping us like a see-through silk fabric. The passage from darkness to light.

Again St. John's voice is echoed in the steps of the journey: «Faith is the dark night of the soul and in this manner, while it obscures it, it illuminates the darkness; the more it darkens it the more light gives off itself».

The stairway has two sections, the second, more illuminated opens on to Room

3, the Room of Union. In between sections a narrow, empty passage punctured by four equally empty wall niches. Only from the absolute void can Unity be achieved.



Eighth moment

Romm three: Enlightenment

We have arrived at the luminous space of degrees ninth and tenth of the secret ladder: Mystical union and Transformation. The explorer, having lost himself in the objective of the search is one with it. They are both one and the same.

Light invades the space as a living entity passing through walls made into windows. One-way windows that leave out any outside sight to be only filters of light: the white vision, the pure vision so beloved by St. John of the Cross.«We speak of the highest degree of perfection that we can achieve in this lifetime, transformation into the godhead -says St. John- God's intention is to make us of the divine by participation while he is divine by nature, in the same manner fire makes all things into fire».



Next, we find two crystal cubes.

The first is filled by the cement walls of the elevator's cage. Both surfaces are criss-crossed by lines. There are no interpretations, no explanations offered. This is the poetic word, the mystic word that surrounds silence, like the light and space that envelop us, needing no known content to give it meaning.

The second glass cube is placed in the center of the room. Inside it, a cable attached to the top holds a rock suspended over a mound of sand, hovering above it, without touching it. We can see clear across the empty space that fills the cube, in stark contrast to the fullness of the previous cube.

This installation symbolizes the everlasting tension between the One -the stone- permanent and eternal and mortal man, finite like the sand: mortal dust and ashes.

The glass sides of the cube are covered with texts placed in such a manner that they create the illusion of being inside the cube, each face can only be read from the opposite one. Sentences suspended in the transparency of the glass, playing with the eye of the beholder that jumps from one to the next, in a pursuit of reading that is like the pursuing of a mystery. Saint John of the Cross, Juan Ramón Jiménez, William Blake, Masur al-Hallaj, José Angel Valente, María Zambrano, Shogaku, Michel de Certeau, Octavio Paz, Allen Ginsberg, Saint Teresa...their poignant, penetrating words warm our hearts.

At the end of the room, on the right side, three estelae -created by Luis Gonzalez Adalid- stand imposing and paradoxical, their presence empty of any sign or signal. Metaphors for nothingness, metaphysical vanishing points. After thoughtful perambulation through this space of light, the highest point of the itinerary through the Center, the explorer faces descent. The world waits for us below. We are reminded that Action, not Transformation is the ultimate end of mysticism. Transformation is the penultimate requirement step that enables us to transcend our experience into works.

Ninth moment

Room four: World of Action

«A noble man traveled to a far away land to acquire a kingdom and he came back» (Eckhart).

The return to the world. For the mystic, action in the world cannot be conceived without first having achieved inner transformation. Meister Eckhart taught that:«To be naked and be poor, not owning anything, be empty, that is what transforms our nature»

As we climb down the stairs to Room 4 we leave behind the realm of transformation to enter the realm of doing. Things well done, work well done, action, always action.

On our right are four wall niches created by the painter Almudena Mora. We take time to contemplate each of them as transition to the works ahead.



Wall Niche 1. The action of the mystic becomes function.

A hand writing, a wheel rolling... action, donation, labor; the process of the passage of time, the cyclic nature of time.

Having found a way back to the essence of Nature the mystic regains in his being the being of Nature. Now, there is no separation between the two.

For the mystic, thought, word and action are one same thing.

Wall Niche 2. Mystical Life.

Book, triangle, the world, wisdom, ascending trinity, knowledge...

The first act of the mystic is the practice of mysticism as such. From this practice arises the knowledge of the world, wisdom, the word and the method. Finding that he set out to find when he took to the path of journeying.

Wall Niche 3. Daily Work.

Window, writing, gold. The idea of the possible; again, the word; light, divine wisdom. All that we pursue and the possibility of achieving it.

The daily work is another aspect of the mystic's endeavors. Work well done becomes the motto.

This intimate relationship between the mystic experience and the mystical practice expressed as work was directly expressed by Santa Teresa: «This is the fruit conceived in this spiritual marriage: to give birth to works, always works».

Wall Niche 4. Projection and Relevance.

A face, written words, a cup as symbol of the heart, triangles falling like water. The abundance of being. Expansion.

The mystic's actions gain particular relevance when they are projected onto the others.

The willingness to achieve self-transformation is what enables the mystic to transform the outward environment.

We savor our last moments in Room 4 before the imminent return. The lava floor opens a path to follow. Our feet recover the contact with the earth. The street scene suddenly revealed through the large panoramic window brings us back to the reality of our world, now.

On the lava, an iron piece made by Daniel Canogar, vaguely resembling a thorn branch is the last vanishing point of perspective we encounter on our way to the world and its difficulties.

Our journey of exploration has been completed. The memory of the encounters and reflections we have experienced here will accompany us out in the world. City, traffic, other people walking the streets, daily work, mundane concerns await us. We pause for a few minutes looking out through the window, thinking in the return, in coming back...that's where we came from and that's where we must return...perhaps with the intention of being as our innermost spirit begs us to be.

Tenth moment

Exit to the World

Amazingly brief. It only takes one step and we are out. Out in one breath, no less!

We leave aware that in a few seconds we will be one more passing face in the crowd. We will be on the other side of the window, back from a world we have never really left, taking with us one last reflection from Miguel de Molinos:

*«Not everything has been said or written, we must then
write on till the end of the world»*



E S P A C I O

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