

# Magical Vision and Occult Text in Georg Bocskay's and Joris Hoefnagel's *Mira calligraphiae monumenta*

Matthew D. Lincoln

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

(**SLIDE 2**) This stunning illuminated page comes from one of the most enchanting objects to survive from the collections of the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II: the *Mira calligraphiae monumenta* (or *MCM*), now in the J. Paul Getty Museum.<sup>2</sup> This curious artwork was made by two separate artists who never met each other: Georg Bocskay, who created a small *wunderkammer* of historical alphabets and calligraphic displays in 1561-62; and Joris Hoefnagel, who added floral and insect illuminations to the codex between 1591-1596, uniting the *artificialia* of man-made calligraphy with a host of *naturalia* precisely depicted in enticing gem tones.

The *MCM* is a fascinating component of the long history of Northern European manuscript illumination. It is also a beautiful example late sixteenth-century courtly interest in collecting wondrous man-made and natural artifacts. These

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<sup>1</sup>This talk was developed from a 2012 seminar on Renaissance magic taught by Meredith Gill, and it is deeply indebted to her thoughtful and detailed guidance. I have also benefited from the thoughtful suggestions of Aneta Georgievska-Shine and Steven Mansbach. My participation in the 2013 Sixteenth Century Society Conference is generously supported by the University of Maryland Department of Art History's Arthur K. Wheelock fellowship.

<sup>2</sup>Hendrix and Vignau-Wilberg, “*Mira calligraphiae monumenta*”, vii

stories have been brilliantly told by scholars like Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Lee Hendrix, and Thea Vignau-Wilberg, among many others. Today I seek to shed just a little more light on one corner of the *MCM* story: its intersection with Rudolf's study of magic and the occult.<sup>3</sup> To be clear, the purpose of the *MCM* was not explicitly magical. That said, I argue that its unique presentation of text and nature cannot be fully understood without reference to contemporary theories of magic. The *MCM*'s visual juxtapositions reverberate with early modern occult theories according to which inscribed signs were endowed with the ability transcend their status as symbolic marks, becoming magically powerful sigils with real effect in the physical universe. The *MCM* alludes to these occult ideas so consistently that I will argue Rudolf and other courtly viewers must have understood the codex – at least partly – in magical terms.

## Describing the *Mira calligraphiae monumenta*

**(SLIDE 3)** Bocskay created the writing model book while serving as court secretary for Ferdinand I, the Holy Roman Emperor from 1556-64. The work remained in the imperial collections in Vienna until 1591, when Ferdinand's grandson Rudolf II commissioned Hoefnagel to illuminate the codex.<sup>4</sup> By engaging Hoefnagel to enhance Ferdinand's artwork, Rudolf was surely mindful of the dynastic significance of adding his own mark on one of his grandfather's artworks. He was at once signaling both dynastic continuity as well as his unique personal identity – considerations that informed everything from his coronation celebrations to his moving the imperial seat to Prague from Vienna.

Bocskay's calligraphy is a wonder to behold. The hands are partly elaborate historical scripts, and partly novel inventions.<sup>5</sup> Page after page bears Bocskay's virtuosic calligraphy: letters with ascending and descending serifs so long that they interweave into their own decorative patterns, or encrusted ornaments that all but obscure the letters they ostensibly decorate. **(SLIDE 4)** This is not an educational handbook, but a true display piece of extreme virtuosity.<sup>6</sup> On some pages Bocskay even wrote in reverse, likely a particular challenge when penning Gothic blackletter.

Hoefnagel, for his part, ingeniously responded to the form and composition of Bocskay's pre-existing scripts, stunning the viewer with a diversity of delicate, masterfully-modeled flora and fauna. On page after page he adds a blend of fruits, vegetables and vines, flowers in varying points of bloom, insects, spiders, and even the occasional small mouse or frog. With these additions, the *MCM* becomes an exceptional hybrid of virtuosic writing and painting, perfectly fit for

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<sup>3</sup>The need for closer study of the connections between Rudolfine art and occult study has recently been noted by Kaufmann in "Vistas for Rudolfine Research," 249

<sup>4</sup>Fučíková, "The Fate of Rudolf II's Collections," 177–179

<sup>5</sup>Hendrix and Vignau-Wilberg, "*Mira calligraphiae monumenta*", 2

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 34

the Prague *wunderkammer* in which Rudolf aimed to collect a representation of both the natural and man-made world through its most spectacular and wondrous products.<sup>7</sup>

Our first instinct as art historians is to identify symbolic, iconographic connections between Bocskay's and Hoefnagel's contributions to this codex. And yet we will find that the *MCM* pointedly resists this path of inquiry. Lee Hendrix and Thea Vignau-Wilberg have both noted that the particular species of flora and fauna Hoefnagel added to the codex have no systematic connection to the texts Bocskay used to demonstrate his calligraphy, which range from Biblical excerpts, prayers, and hymns, to passages of courtly correspondence.<sup>8</sup> In fact, a great deal of the *naturalia* are imaginary, with no real-world counterparts.<sup>9</sup> Let us remember that someone favored enough to be allowed access to this codex would have been thoroughly trained in the traditional Renaissance humanist language of iconography that privileged symbolic relationships. In the face of this convention, the notable absence of symbolic relationships is itself a sign that some other signifying scheme is afoot.

**(SLIDE 5)** Further perusal suggests our focus ought to lie not so much in symbolic relationships, but visual ones. In one of the more delightful additions, Hoefnagel paints the stem of a flower piercing the page as if it were a real bloom tucked away for safekeeping.<sup>10</sup> Like any of the other semblances of physical volume that Hoefnagel creates, the illusion reveals itself as soon as the viewer reaches out to touch the flower, to find only the material of the page below. Yet the ersatz cut in the paper entices the viewer to visually test what they have already confirmed through touch: because this is not a real slice, the back of the page must surely be blank and unmarred. **(SLIDE 6)** Not so! Hoefnagel wittily continues the illusion on the verso of this folio page, giving us a painted glimpse of the flower stem running through the perforated sheet. This second illusion greets our attempted confirmation of the first, reminding us precisely how much we had come to disbelieve our own senses on account of Hoefnagel's displays of visual wit.

**(SLIDE 7)** In these additions to the *MCM*, Hoefnagel draws on the tradition of devotional manuscript illumination, in which artists negotiated increasingly volumetric and complex images onto the "flat" text-bearing surface of the page.<sup>11</sup> For example, in this late fifteenth-century book of hours, the illuminator depicted pilgrimage badges seemingly pinned to the vellum of the page, alluding to the real practices of well-to-do pilgrims who would collect in these devotional books badges, or even flowers, obtained from a holy site.<sup>12</sup> Yet here any relationship to the semantic content of the text (already overwhelmed by Bocskay's florid

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<sup>7</sup>Kaufmann, "Remarks on the Collections of Rudolf II," 25; Kaufmann, *The Mastery of Nature*, 126–127

<sup>8</sup>Hendrix and Vignau-Wilberg, "*Mira calligraphiae monumenta*", 34, 48

<sup>9</sup>Neri, "From Insect to Icon," 42

<sup>10</sup>Hendrix and Vignau-Wilberg, "*Mira calligraphiae monumenta*", 49

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>12</sup>Kaufmann and Kaufmann, "The Sanctification of Nature," 54–56

scripts) is abandoned.

**(SLIDE 8)** This visual interweaving suggests that Hoefnagel constructed his illuminations to induce sustained *visual* comparison with the forms of Bocskay's calligraphy. However, a careful examination of the *MCM* suggests no clear victor in this artistic *paragone*. A painted flower stem seeming to pierce the page does, on the one hand, highlight the primacy of illustrations that can simulate three-dimensionality.<sup>13</sup> Yet this reading co-exists with its mutually exclusive complement: the flower may flatten the script, yet Hoefnagel paints the stem of the flower passing through the page at precisely the point where one of Bocskay's dramatic flourishes plunges into the empty page. It is as if Hoefnagel is deliberately avoiding one of Bocskay's inviolate characters.<sup>14</sup>

At several points in the codex Hoefnagel similarly re-routes his illuminations so as if to avoid the extant lettering. At other times, his illuminations seem to interact with the letters as if they were physically present forms: **(SLIDE 9)** a spider spins a web that is anchored at several points of the text; an imaginary insect perches on the side of a character; **(SLIDE 10)** another spider hangs off the end of a word; a white butterfly alights on an illustrated capital; **(SLIDE 11)** a rather vicious-looking stinging insect sits on the ink border framing a block of text, nicely echoing a particularly spiny flower at left; and in one notable instance, Hoefnagel even invests Bocskay's scripts with architectonic power, adding his own frame to make a volumetric receding ceiling out of the wedge of text. Rather than subverting Bocskay's scripts, Hoefnagel invests the written forms with apparent influence on his illuminated *naturalia*.

## Rudolf II and Courtly Magic

**(SLIDE 12)** How would Rudolf and his court have situated this hybrid artwork in their intellectual universe? Looking to contemporary occult study in Prague suggests an intriguing avenue. Like many European rulers of the 16th century, Rudolf devoted no small amount of resources to occult study. Patronage of occult sciences, much like patronage of the visual arts, was very much an exercise in self-fashioning. Astrologers, alchemists, and engineers granted patrons a dual social boon: the appearance of both wisdom as well as power, genuine social currency for the early modern ruler who was expected to possess *sapientia* and *potentia* as crucial elements of princely *virtù*. William Eamon has suggested that magical study was an ideal courtly practice, as magic promised rare and wondrous feats accomplished through mysterious forces not obvious to the viewer. This seeming effortless attraction drew princes eager to pursue Castiglione's image of the ideal courtier.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Hendrix and Vignau-Wilberg, "*Mira calligraphiae monumenta*", 48

<sup>14</sup>This has also been pointed out in Xerri, "Script and Image," 18

<sup>15</sup>Eamon, *Science and the Secrets of Nature*, 221–229

Rudolf's sponsorship of occult study was uniquely wide-ranging among the European courts, genuinely promoting the formulation of correspondences across disciplines and between schools of occult thought, much like the associations he promoted between wondrous objects filling the Prague *kunstkammer*. This collection of wonders both natural and man-made modeled the structure of Creation through its most exceptional constituents.<sup>16</sup> A vibrant program of occult study aimed at discerning the hidden structures of the world naturally dovetailed with the mission of the *kunstkammer* in both representing and effecting Rudolf's control over the world.

Over the years of his rule, many researchers of the Paracelsian bent of Hermeticism worked in his court, such as Michael Maier, Heinrich Kunrath, and Oswald Croll.<sup>17</sup> Paracelsian occultism rejected scholastic canonical authorities as a source of hidden truth, saying that secret knowledge of the world cannot come from reading human books (i.e. secondary sources) but only from reading directly from the greatest primary source of all: the "Book of Nature".<sup>18</sup> Lee Hendrix has argued that the *MCM* visualizes Paracelsian philosophy by making literal the idea that nature transcended mere written words. Hoefnagel's illuminations, she asserts, "confront the viewer" with the remoteness of text compared to the rich immediacy of nature.<sup>19</sup>

**(SLIDE 13)** However the Cabbalist tradition also had a strong presence at the court. We know Rudolf had his horoscope not only cast, but illustrated by Hoefnagel himself. Rudolf studied Hebrew extensively, and was associated with Rabbi Judah Loew, the Supreme Chief Rabbi of Bohemia and a figure of legend down to today for animating the Golem of Prague from lifeless mud using a parchment talisman inscribed with Hebrew and inserted in the creature's mouth.<sup>20</sup> Rudolf's own chancellors owned copies of Pico della Mirandola's *Cabalistarum dogmata*, and Rudolf's private confessor, Johannes Pistorius, was himself a Christian Cabbalist.<sup>21</sup> As part of this occult project, Rudolf also had printed the quasi-cabbalist manuscripts by Johannes Trithemius that had gone unpublished for almost a century. The early sixteenth-century occult works of Trithemius' protégé Cornelius Agrippa also circulated, and it is his occult theories in particular that may have provided a magical lens through which Rudolf and others may have viewed *MCM*.

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<sup>16</sup>Kaufmann, "Remarks on the Collections of Rudolf II," 25; Gouk, "Natural Philosophy and Natural Magic," 236

<sup>17</sup>Marshall, *The Magic Circle of Rudolf II*, 128–137

<sup>18</sup>This is not to be confused with the Cartesian scientific revolution that would come in the mid-seventeenth century; Ebeling, *The Secret History of Hermes Trismegistus*, 101–108

<sup>19</sup>Hendrix and Vignau-Wilberg, "*Mira calligraphiae monumenta*", 53

<sup>20</sup>Marshall, *The Magic Circle of Rudolf II*, 93–95

<sup>21</sup>Evans, *Rudolf II and His World*, 236–242

## Text and Nature

(SLIDE 14) Agrippa wrote *De occulta philosophia* in 1533. Despite its initial controversial reception, copies of the book existed in Rudolf's library in the late sixteenth-century.<sup>22</sup> In this book Agrippa presented methods for constructing powerful sigils. You can see some of the process on the page to the right: starting from a grid of select Hebrew characters, converted by *gematria* into a table of numbers, the occultist may then follow a set of calculations to trace lines between a series of numbers, lines that produce a character mathematically embedded, or occluded, within a significant Hebrew word. Inscribed on the proper materials and deployed in the correct manner, these sigils could effect changes in the weather, in animals, and even influence the thoughts and behavior of humans.<sup>23</sup>

Most interesting for our understanding of the *MCM* is Agrippa's underlying theory of signification (and here I borrow extensively from Christopher Leirich's recent close reading of *De Occulta Philosophia* through our modern-day semiotic triad of *symbolic*, *iconic*, and *indexical* signs). Agrippa's sigils were powerful because precisely they were *not* simply arbitrary *symbolic* representations of objects. Being systematically constructed from Hebrew – a divinely-inspired language unlike man's modern, arbitrary tongues – these sigils had an *indexical* relationship to Creation, their form being a functional result of a mathematical process. Moreover, in Agrippa's view, these sigils had an *iconic* relationship to nature as well: they visually reflected the geometries of the heavenly spheres that had powerful influence over earthly creation. Perhaps most importantly, these sigils' power was transitive, not only reflecting creation but potentially able to affect it as well. The original sign, the *logos* of God, had this power: God spoke, *therefore* the cosmos was created. Because Agrippa's sigils were constructed from Hebrew, they were close enough to the *logos* to have real influence on the natural elements that both signified and were signified by these sigils.<sup>24</sup> Yet theoretically, even the distant children of Hebrew still had a tenuous connection to this divine originating power. For Agrippa and related theorists, language need not be a pale, arbitrary representation of the natural world, but could rather be inextricably embedded within it. Magical characters were not powerful because of their syllogistic relationships to objects or concepts; they were powerful because they were, in essence, images.<sup>25</sup>

(SLIDE 15) When first considering the *MCM*, we struggled to locate systematic symbolic relationships between the text and the illuminations. While Hoefnagel subverted any such iconographic relationships, he reliably mimicked the calligraphic shapes of Bocskay's script, creating pleasing visual correspondences of forms: interweaving flourishes echo the crisscrossing spines of a love-in-a-mist plant; the round peas within bulbous pods evoke the decorative baubles sur-

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 126

<sup>23</sup>Leirich, *The Language of Demons and Angels*, 104–110

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 135, 141, 161

<sup>25</sup>For more on contemporary investigation of the image-like quality of language, see Szőnyi, "The Powerful Image," pt. 258

rounding the text they accompany; **(SLIDE 16)** sinuous curves run along the page not unlike the curvaceous slug sitting in the lower margin; the curlicues of a flourish suggest the whizzing, spiraling motion of the bee pictured in flight beneath them. **(SLIDE 17)** Even in the instances where Hoefnagel defies the very integrity of the parchment page with his *trompe l'oeil* effects, the plants deliberately avoid marring the text, as if mysteriously repelled from the earlier path of Bocskay's pen. Rather than subverting the preexisting script, Hoefnagel bonds it to his *naturalia* ever more strongly, constructing visual worlds on each page dominated by iconic relationships so cohesive that Bocskay's texts cease to be knowledge-conveying language as such, becoming images like Hoefnagel's flora and fauna.

The *MCM*'s "message" is thus not an iconographic one, but a formal one. It invites the viewer to contemplate the complex relationships of text and nature on the page, and it does so in a way analogous to the semiotic relationships explored by Cornelius Agrippa and other Cabbalists. Hoefnagel drives the viewer to be self-aware of their own assumptions about vision and meaning, frequently confounding our understanding of the pictorial surface. At times the page is a perspectival window one peers through as if into a space to see insects climbing up the sides of words or the edges of the page. At other times the pictorial surface is coincident with the page itself, so that the viewer feels as if they are looking down onto actual snails creeping along a very solid page. Pages like this one require the viewer to switch back and forth between both these modes. Like Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia*, the *MCM* demanded a semiotically intelligent reader intrigued by the idea that text and nature could have a contingent relationship.

**(SLIDE 18)** Notably, one of the few pages of Bocskay's calligraphy book that Hoefnagel left unillustrated is this one. Bocskay inscribed the Hebrew alphabet here in its entirety, copying the letters as well as the banner motif wholesale from Giambattista Palatino's 1541 *Libro Nuovo*.<sup>26</sup> Only the most virtuosically-inscribed passages of Latin, German, and Italian have the potency in the *MCM* to nudge small insects or errant leaves to one side or the other. By contrast, in its simplicity and totality, the Hebrew alphabet stands utterly apart from the encrusting illuminations in the in the *MCM*, privileged by Bocskay and Hoefnagel much as it was by Agrippa and other Cabbalists for being the only human language directly originating from god.

## Conclusion

**(SLIDE 19)** At the start of this paper I proposed that the *MCM* was not explicitly magical. It is not itself a potent talisman or amulet. It does not contain diagrams of magical theories or procedures. It does not even depict

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<sup>26</sup>Hendrix and Vignau-Wilberg, "*Mira calligraphiae monumenta*", 36; Bocskay probably did not know Hebrew himself, as there are several minor orthographic errors in his lettering (noted by Matthew Colvin, Cornell University).

the alchemist, astrologer, or magician in the midst of occult practice. Yet all the same I argue that it is enmeshed in the magical universe of Rudolfine Prague, for its unique visual idioms mirror so well the theories of signification offered by Agrippa, and other occult theorists read by the court. However by acknowledging the resonances between its visual explorations and the full spectrum of contemporary occult theory, we can better fit the *MCM* into our understanding of magical and artistic culture in Prague. In doing so, I hope this may spur the investigation of the intersection of Rudolfine art and Rudolfine magic with renewed purpose. (**SLIDE 20**)



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