

ROSE CROIX

JOURNAL



VOLUME 20

The cover image for Volume 20 of the *Rose+Croix Journal* is *Priestess of Delphi*, painted by English artist John Collier in 1891. It was chosen because one of the papers in this year's volume by Grand Master Julie Scott is titled "Just Beneath the Surface: A Report on the Transdisciplinary Research at the Temple of Apollo at Delphi," and it is an exploration of the Oracles of Delphi and the potential explanations for their altered states of consciousness.

This painting was created at the height of late-Victorian fascination with classical religion, mysticism, and esoteric symbolism. The painting depicts a Pythia, an ancient prophetic priestess of Apollo, seated on a tripod above the sacred chasm in the Temple of Apollo at Delphi while delivering an oracle. The term *Pythia* (Πυθία) comes from the ancient Greek name for Delphi,

Pytho (Πυθώ). In Greek mythology, the deity Apollo slew a serpent named Python who guarded the Oracles of Delphi, leaving its body to “rot” (derived from the Greek verb *puthein*, πύθειν). The priestesses of Apollo at Delphi later became known as Pythias because they were the “priestesses of the Pythian Apollo.”

The painter John Collier was part of the Pre-Raphaelite artistic movement and the aesthetic tradition that flourished in England in the late nineteenth century. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was a group of nineteenth-century English painters and poets who rejected the mechanistic approach of Mannerist artists succeeding Raphael in favor of a return to abundant detail, intense colors, and the complex compositions of Italian Quattrocento art.

Collier was born in London in 1850 into a distinguished family known for its intellectual and artistic pursuits. He studied art at the Munich Academy and later at the Slade School of Fine Art in London. Collier became well known as a portrait painter, but he also produced a number of works depicting scenes from mythology, literature, and classical history. Like *Priestess of Delphi*, many of his paintings often focus on a single figure captured at a moment of psychological or spiritual intensity. Similar to other Pre-Raphaelite artists, his work reflects careful attention to detail, dramatic lighting, and an interest in themes drawn from ancient mythology and the inner life of the human being.

Priestess of Delphi portrays the Pythia, the prophetic priestess of Apollo at the sanctuary of Delphi in ancient Greece. According to classical tradition, the priestess sat upon a tripod positioned above a fissure in the earth from which mysterious vapors arose. As Scott’s paper in this volume explains, these vapors were believed to induce a trance-like state through which the deity Apollo would deliver his oracles. In Collier’s painting, the priestess leans forward on the tripod as though seized by a sudden surge of inspiration, her posture conveying both tension and spiritual transport. Wisps of vapor rise from the opening beneath her, surrounding the base of the tripod and emphasizing the mysterious atmosphere of the temple chamber.

The priestess holds a branch of laurel, the sacred plant associated with Apollo. In ancient Greek culture, the laurel symbolized purification, victory, and divine inspiration. Poets, prophets, and victors in sacred competitions were often crowned with laurel as a sign that they had been touched by the favor of the deities. By placing the laurel branch in the hand of the priestess, Collier highlights her role as an intermediary between the human and divine realms. The Oracle does not speak merely from her own mind; rather, she becomes a vessel through which a higher wisdom is expressed.

The fissure beneath the tripod in the painting is significant for a few reasons. In ancient times, Delphi was regarded as the omphalos, or “navel of the world,” a place where communication between humanity and the Divine could occur. The rising vapor symbolizes inspiration emerging from the hidden depths of the earth and becoming articulated through the consciousness of the priestess. What begins as something unseen and mysterious gradually becomes transformed into words of guidance for those who seek insight. Additionally, as Scott’s paper explains, the vapors were reported by ancient sources to induce a trance-like state in the Pythia, during which they would produce their oracles.

Such symbolism invites reflection from a Rosicrucian perspective. In Rosicrucian philosophy, the human being is often viewed as a mediator between the material and spiritual dimensions of existence. Through inner attunement and the refinement of consciousness, it becomes possible to perceive the universal laws that guide our understanding of the world. The image of the priestess receiving inspiration from the depths of the earth may therefore be interpreted as a metaphor for the process through which intuitive wisdom emerges within the human mind.

The rising vapor and the red color of the robe in the painting may also remind students of esoteric traditions of certain symbolic processes described in alchemical literature. In these writings, the upward movement of subtle vapors often represents the transformation of matter into a more refined state. On a symbolic level, this process mirrors the elevation of human consciousness from ordinary perception toward a deeper awareness of universal truths that can be found within. As for the red robe, red (*rubedo*) represents the final stage of the alchemical Great Work, symbolic of the perfection of the soul and the blood of life.

The priestess of Delphi thus represents more than a historical figure from ancient Greece. She may also be seen as an archetype of the mystic—one who quiets the distractions of the outer world in order to receive insights from the deeper currents of existence. Her posture, poised between concentration and revelation, suggests the delicate moment when intuition emerges into conscious awareness.

In contemplating this image, we are invited to reflect upon the role of intuition in the search for wisdom. Just as the priestess becomes receptive to the voice of Apollo, the mystic learns to listen inwardly for subtle impressions that illuminate the path toward greater understanding. In this sense, *Priestess of Delphi* encourages us to recognize that the pursuit of knowledge involves not only the intellect but also the awakening of the intuitive and spiritual dimensions of our being.

Seen from this perspective, the *Priestess of Delphi* can also be understood as a symbolic representation of the human being standing at the meeting point between the visible and invisible worlds. Rosicrucian teachings often express this idea through the symbol of the Rose Cross, in which the cross represents the material world while the rose signifies the unfolding of spiritual consciousness. At the center of the cross, where the rose blossoms, the material and spiritual aspects of existence meet and harmonize.

Priestess of Delphi encourages us to contemplate the quiet and receptive state through which deeper insight may arise. Just as the ancient Oracle listened for the voice of Apollo, the mystic learns to listen inwardly for the subtle guidance of the Divine. In doing so, the image reminds us that wisdom often emerges when we cultivate stillness, openness, and harmony within ourselves.

Thus, beyond its historical and mythological setting, the painting invites us to reflect upon the timeless quest for illumination—a journey that lies at the heart of many mystical traditions, including the Rosicrucian path.