

Athanasius Kircher's Theatre of the World: The Life and Work of the Last Man to Search for Universal Knowledge

Joscelyn Godwin

Inner Traditions (September 2009)

Hardcover \$60.00 (320pp)

978-1-59477-329-7

Almost any modern work on archaeology, geology, science, medicine or even Egyptian or Chinese history will present some intriguing fact (be it the germ theory of disease, the operation of volcanoes, the interpretation of hieroglyphs or other esoterica) with a footnote referencing a work by Athanasius Kircher (1601-1680). The work of the polymath Jesuit richly rewards pursuit, and Joscelyn Godwin, a distinguished translator and professor of music at Colgate University, is the ideal guide.

Not least of Godwin's services is placing Kircher in his intellectual context. Unlike Descartes and other leading lights (a half-century older but "younger" in being sons of the Age of Reason and writing in the vernacular), Kircher wrote in Latin and, despite an analytical mind, was a little too prone to see the hand of God behind the phenomena of the visible world. What makes Kircher endlessly fascinating, as Godwin amply demonstrates, is the sheer breadth, depth, and expansiveness of his ever-curious mind.

But Kircher's investigations and findings, whether accurate or marked by the pioneer's errors or tinged with eccentric explanations, are only part of the reward. Kircher's forty or so lavishly published works are an unchallenged triumph of spectacular illustration; copperplate engravings of great virtuosity and unrivalled interest, always intriguing and often skillfully didactic, always abound.

Godwin skillfully navigates the world of Kircher's mind, mapping it into continents: Antiquity (presented as Misread, Preserved, or Imagined); Natural Phenomena; Music; Machines Past and Present; Machines Magnetic and Optical; Maps and Plans; Exotica; Images of the Gods; and Didactic Images. In each section Godwin presents the state of knowledge in the field and Kircher's explorations and advances, offering the splendid frontispieces and gripping illustrations of his lavish books. Lack of Latin no longer prevents us from exploring the marvels of Antiquity, Nature in all her variety, the history of music, contagious diseases, linguistics, obelisks, or such great volumes as *China Illustrata*—and a cornucopia of other riches. Though it is easy to be diverted by the esoteric and exotic, Godwin presents Kircher for what he was: a serious scientist with the world as his laboratory.

Kircher, who lived and worked in Rome, enjoyed the patronage of popes and emperors, and drew upon a vast range of field correspondents, was the intellectual miracle of his age. As with all pioneer scholars, his work became superseded; newer superstructures rose on his foundations.

Godwin and Inner Traditions deserve congratulations for a superb book (11.25 x 10 inches), complete with bibliographies of Kircher's works and works about him. Let us hope for an equally magisterial work on the neglected Engelbert Kaempfer (1651-1715), scholar, traveler, writer on the Orient. (October) *Peter Skinner* (November / December 2009)

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