

mahJ
musée d'art
et d'histoire
du Judaïsme

Golem!
Avatars
of a legend
of clay

8 March
— 16 July 2017



Avatars of a legend of clay

The Golem, an artificial creature magically animated by sacred letters, is one of the most famous Jewish legends. A major figure of fantastic literature, this manmade being, usually imagined as a clay giant with superhuman powers, has never ceased to fascinate us, taking on different meanings over the course of history.

As a prefiguration of the robot, the computer and more generally of a society increasingly invaded by technology, the Golem is also a precursor of superheroes, androids and digital avatars.

Few myths have prompted as much reflection on man's creative power and his ambivalent relationship with his inventions. This exhibition explores this myth's various dimensions, its present-day resonances and the widely varying ways in which artists have appropriated the legend in literature, cinema, painting, photography, sculpture, comics and video games.

Who is the Golem?

The term "golem" is first mentioned in the Bible in Psalm 139, when Adam, talking to God, refers to himself as an "unformed substance." In the Talmud there are several instances of artificial beings (men and calves) created by sages. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance this prompted fierce debates in Jewish and Christian Kabbalist circles. There was question of the procedures necessary to engender a golem and their philosophical, moral, theological, and practical implications. The Kabbalist wishing to bring a golem to life referred to the *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Creation), which describes God's creation of the world with the aid of alphabetic formulae.

The Golem of Prague

From the 15th century onwards, the Golem moved from the mystical domain into folklore. The most famous legend takes place in Prague in the 16th century, where, to defend the Jewish community, Rabbi Judah Loew, known as the "Maharal of Prague," made a golem and brought it to life with the Name of God. In most versions, the Golem escapes the control of its creator, becoming a threat that has to be destroyed. This legend spread in the late 19th century and was popularised by the novel by Gustav Meyrink (1915) and by the three movies dedicated to the story by Paul Wegener (1915-1920). These were some of the first popular images of the Golem.

A protective hero

One of the personas that the ambivalent figure of the Golem has often been given is that of the friendly, reassuring protector. Artists have frequently conveyed the Golem's ability to defend the Jewish community against its enemies by emphasizing his colossal size and superhuman powers. This has been the vein explored in American comics, for the most part created by Jewish authors and cartoonists familiar with the myth.

An uncontrollable monster

The Golem's non-human nature – a rudimentary, hybrid creature described as speechless and soulless – has prompted artists to focus on his monstrous aspect, depicting him as a disturbing, terrifying entity that escapes the control of its creator. As such, the Golem became one of the first film monsters, embodying a disturbing "otherness" and abnormality, as well as man's dark, fearsome side.

Theatrical variations

The Golem. Dramatic Poem in Eight Scenes by H. Leivick (1921) is one of the theatrical works devoted to the clay creature that have inspired the most varied and inventive images. This section features Max Weber's illustrations for the play's publication, Ignati Nivinsky's costume and character sketches and Boris Aronson's set designs.

A malleable myth

If the myth of the Golem has been constantly depicted since the 19th century, this is probably because its central theme, the animation of inert matter, asserts man's creative power. The cinema, in which the question of "animation" is central, became an ideal medium for portraying the Golem. The myth is also a story of a series of formal and material processes (modelling, kneading, experimentation). Artists have sometimes portrayed themselves as golems, using themselves as their own material. In doing so they have explored the possibility of ritually reinterpreting their birth, of remodelling their identity and questioning the status of their creation.

The Golem's descendants

Many present-day inventions can be considered in the light of the Golem, as Norbert Wiener, the originator of cybernetics, suggested in 1964 in *God & Golem, Inc.: A Comment on Certain Points Where Cybernetics Impinges on Religion*. The following year, the philosopher Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), a specialist in the Kabbalah, officially named one of the first Israeli computers "Golem I." Just as the clay creature is brought to life by combinations of letters, the computer and artificial intelligence obey the codes of informatics language. The other main descendants of the Golem, robots, have the same ambivalence.

Intended to improve our daily lives, they can arouse attachment and empathy but also mistrust and anxiety, notably due to their impact on society and to that recurrent fantasy, their potential emancipation.

The man-demiurge

The myth of the Golem has strong parallels in scientific, medical, technological, industrial, and economic developments such as cloning, the "augmented" body, genetic hybridisation, nanotechnologies, nuclear energy and digital technology.

We are extending our power to transform to the whole of Creation, intent on improving it and taking the place of God. Some artists are exploring this demiurgic dimension by modifying their own bodies to increase its possibilities or by making their life itself a material for art. When humans themselves become golems to be perfected, one abandons the original Golem, an incomplete, rudimentary clay being, for a transhuman or posthuman Golem with increased, enhanced capacities.

PERFORMANCE SCHOOL OF MOON

> Saturdays 29 April, 27 May and 10 June
14.00, 15.00 and 16.00

In his ballet *School of Moon* (2016), the choreographer Eric Minh Cuong Castaing (born 1979) brings together children and humanoid robots.

In the exhibition spaces, a young ballet dancer and a small robot engage in a process of mutual imitation and empathy that questions our perception of the human and the non-human. Next to the works on display, the duo creates tableaux vivants inspired by religious painting in a ritualised choreography including the familiar gestures that children now make on their tactile screens.

Inaugural lecture

Wednesday 8 March,
19.30
by Marc-Alain Ouaknin

Les dimanches du Golem

Sunday 19 March,
15.00

Film show Le Golem

Director: **Julien Duvivier**,
France, 1936, 100 min

Sunday 19 March,
17.00

Film-concert The Golem

Directors: **Paul Wegener** and
Carl Boese, Germany, 1920,
84 min
Accompanied musically
by NLF3

Sunday 14 May,
14.30

Film show Golem, golems

Director: **Pierre-Henry Salfati**,
France, 2002, 74 min

16.15

Panel discussion Du Golem, ancêtre du robot, à l'homme augmenté

With **Michel Faucheux**,
Serge Tisseron and
François Angelier

Sunday 11 June
11.00

Quand le cinéma anime le Golem

Lecture by **Ada Ackerman**
Followed by films

15.00

Littératures du Golem

Panel discussion and book
signing with **Éliette Abecassis**
and **Benjamin Lacombe**,
Pierre Assouline, **Laurent Gaudé**,
Xavier Josset and **Maurice**
Pommier, **Marie-Aude**, **Elvire**
and **Lorris Murail**

Performances

Wednesday 19 April
19.00 and 20.30

Metamorphosis # 2

by **Judith Deschamps**

Saturdays 29 April,
27 May and 10 June
14.00, 15.00 and 16.00

School of Moon

by **Eric Minh Cuong Castaing**

Families

Saturday 20 May

Nuit des musées

Guided visits

Sunday 21 May,
10.30

Visit-workshop Golems et autres créatures

Sunday 11 June
14.30

Visit with a storyteller Le Golem au fil des pages

Children

Guided tours-workshops

Thursday 6 April
Tuesday 11 July
14.00

Golem en ombres et lumière

4-7 years

4, 5, 6 April
14.00

Friday 7 April
10.30

Être Golem

with **Valérie Mréjen**
7-11 years

Tuesday 11 July
14.00

Un super-héros d'argile

8-12 years

Adults

Guided visits

Sunday 14 May
10.30

Donner vie au Golem Workshop exploring Jewish mystical texts

by **Emma Abate**

Catalogue

Golem. Avatars d'une légende d'argile

Copublished by **mahJ-Hazan**
184 pages, 32 €

This exhibition has been recognised as being in the national interest by the Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication/Direction générale des patrimoines/Service des musées de France, and as such has been granted exceptional financial support by the State. It has also received support from the Centre tchèque de Paris, the Direction régionale des Affaires culturelles d'Île-de-France-ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, the Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah, the Fondation Pro mahJ and the Unité mixte de recherche Théorie et histoire des arts et des littératures de la modernité (Thalim-CNRS).



MAIRIE DE PARIS



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