



Figure 1. Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn (1875-1961) in front of Casa Eranos (built in 1928) in 1929.
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Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn (1881–1962):

A Woman's Individuation Process through Images

at the Origins of the Eranos Conferences

Riccardo Bernardini (Eranos Foundation, Scientific

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More than eighty-five years have passed since the founding of the Eranos Conferences (*Eranos Tagungen*) in 1933. This pioneering endeavor of interdisciplinary gatherings, which has been properly recognized as “one of the most creative cultural experiences in the modern Western world” and “one of the richest centers of intellectual and spiritual interchange known to our century,” was promoted in Ascona (Switzerland) by Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn (1881–1962)¹.

In the case of Carl Gustav Jung (1875–1961), who was among the main inspirers of Eranos since the early '30s, the publication of *The Red Book* helped to realize all the more the strict connection between his personal and his intellectual paths. Up to now, several of Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn's allusions have sounded much more hermetic. For example, she stated, “The deepest things in human life ... can only be expressed in images.” Or: “I beg your pardon if I am speaking through images! This is the way my mind works.” These are words that become much clearer now in the light of her artworks, which can be conceptually and temporally situated in two periods: a first series of “Meditation Plates,” created between 1926 and 1934, and in particular during the period of her collaboration with esotericist and theosophist Alice Ann Bailey (1880–1949); and a second series of “Visions”: an outstanding collection of over three-hundred paintings that were realized – with the Jungian technique of the active imagination – between 1934 and 1938. These were the crucial years of the

¹ For a panoramic view of Eranos, cf. H.T. Hakl, *Eranos. An Alternative Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013). On the involvement of Carl Gustav Jung, cf. more specifically R. Bernardini, *Jung a Eranos. Il progetto della psicologia complessa* (Milan: FrancoAngeli, 2011), which also includes a detailed biography of Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn and the most documented history of the Eranos Archive for Research in Symbolism. For a list of Eranos Foundation publications over the years, cf. N. Cater and R. Bernardini (eds.), “Eranos: Its Magical Past and Alluring Future: The Spirit of a Wondrous Place,” *Spring: A Journal of Archetype and Culture* 92 (2015). For a list of the *Yearbooks*, speakers, and papers at Eranos 1933–2018, cf. F. Merlini and R. Bernardini (eds.), *Eranos in the Mirror: Views on a Moving Legacy* (Ascona: Aragno*Eranos Ascona, 2019). On the status of the studies dedicated to the subject, cf. R. Bernardini, “The Historiography of Eranos. An Homage to Hans Thomas Hakl,” in: H.T. Hakl (ed.), *Octagon – The Quest For Wholeness Mirrored in a Library Dedicated to Religious Studies, Philosophy, and Esotericism in Particular*, Vol. II (Gaggenau: scientia nova, 2016), pp. 207–23. Two lessons given by Jung at Eranos, hitherto unpublished, have only recently been released: C.G. Jung, *The Solar Myths and Opicinus de Canistris. Notes of the Seminar given at Eranos in 1943*, eds. R. Bernardini, G.P. Quaglino, and A. Romano (Einsiedeln: Daimon, 2015); and C.G. Jung, *Rebirth. Text and Notes of the Lecture held at Eranos in 1939*, “Eranos Classics”, Vol. I, eds. F. Merlini and R. Bernardini (Ascona: Aragno*Eranos Ascona, 2020).

beginning of Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn's cultural enterprise, her longstanding relationship with Jung, and her research into iconographic material entrusted to her by Jung, which led to the creation of the Eranos Archive for Research in Symbolism.

Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn was born in London of Dutch parents, from a culturally rich background, on October 19, 1881. Her father, Albertus Philippus Kapteyn (or Kapteijn, 1848–1927), was director and later vice-president of the Westinghouse Brake & Signal Company in London. Her mother, Geertruida (Truus) Agneta Kapteyn-Muysken (1855–1920), was involved in women's emancipation and social renewal movements. Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn was the eldest of three children. Her interest in art can be traced back to the fascination she experienced in her childhood, when her father, a passionate photographer, in their home in London, developed photographic films in the darkroom under the curious eyes of his little daughter.

In 1900, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn moved to Zurich with her father. There she attended the "School of Applied Arts," excelling in tailoring, embroidery, and jewelry. From 1906 to 1909, she continued this education in art history at the University of Zurich. In 1909, she married the orchestra conductor, Iwan Fröbe (1880–1915), with whom she lived in Munich, Berlin, Gersau am Vierwaldstättersee, and then, from December 1914, in Zurich again. In Berlin, she had attended a sewing club, "The Needle," founded by art historian André Jolles (1874–1946); her silk blouse with colored embroidery was exhibited in 1916 as part of a textile exhibition at the Museum of Applied Arts in Zurich.

Widowed in September 1915, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn ran her own cultural club in Zurich. In 1919–1920, she moved to the South of Switzerland, to take advantage of some natural treatments at the famous Sanatorium Monte Verità in Ascona. In those years, in Europe, many movements of "reform of life" inspired by the East were born, among which Monte Verità ("Mountain of Truth") was one of the most striking and

fortunate examples. It is in this context that the psychoanalyst, anarchist, and revolutionary Otto Gross (1877–1920) between 1905 and 1911, had planned to create the prototype of an ideal matriarchal society. In love with the beauty of the place, in 1920, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn settled down in the charming Casa Gabriella in Ascona-Moscia, on the shores of Lake Maggiore. It was there that during a long period of solitary “concentration discipline” (*Konzentrationsdisziplin*), which lasted seven years, she familiarized herself with oriental philosophies, esotericism, and meditation.

In that period, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn received an important stimulus in her journey into the world of symbols from her meeting with Ludwig Derleth (1870–1948). A poet and mystic, Derleth was close to the Munich Kosmiker (“Cosmic Group”), the circle led by Alfred Schuler (1865–1923), which sought salvation from the corruption of contemporary civilization through the awakening of a pagan-style religiosity. From the second half of the 1920s onwards, it was also possible for Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn to invite to Casa Gabriella those Dutch, English, and French artists, writers, musicians, and mystics, with whom – despite her scepticism towards the Ascona bohemians of the 1920s and 1930s – she felt a certain spiritual affinity.

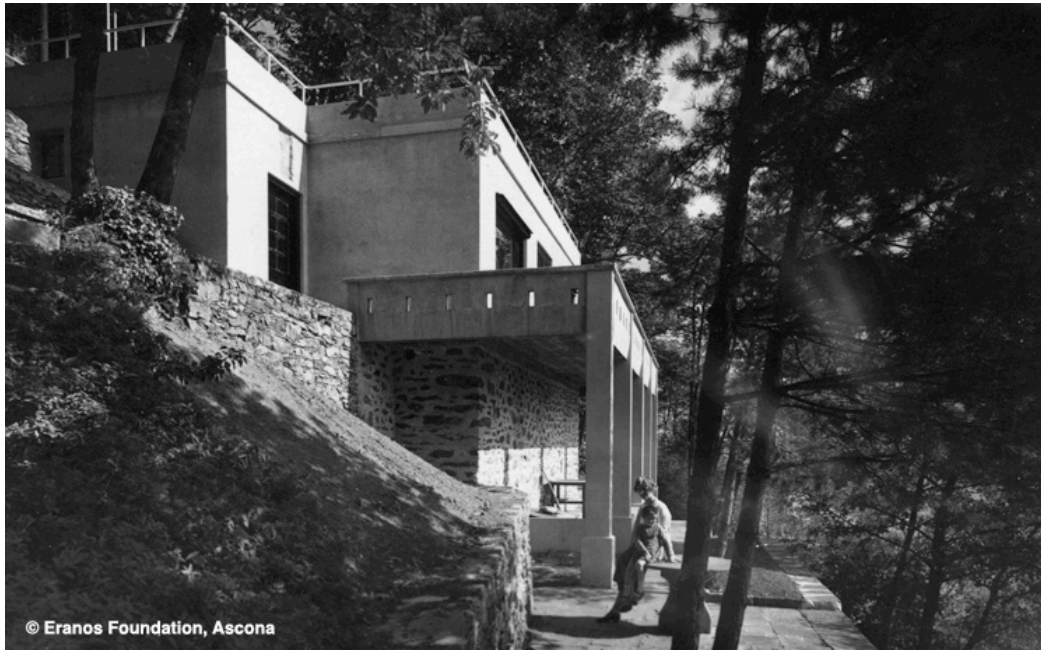


Figure 1 Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn (1875-1961) in front of Casa Eranos (built in 1928) in 1929. (Photographer unknown. © Eranos Foundation, Ascona. All rights reserved)

In 1928, following a “vision” (*Einfall*) she experienced in 1927 (the “map of a temple”), Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn built a lecture hall near her Casa Gabriella, still without knowing its purpose. It was called, Casa Eranos [Figure 1], and was then used as “a place of encounter and experience,” where Eastern and Western philosophies could meet. The name, “Eranos,” was suggested to her by Rudolf Otto (1869–1937). He was an eminent historian of religion and author of several important studies of the phenomenological analysis of the religious experience, such as *The Holy* (1917) and *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (1926). Otto led Eranos toward an encounter with a human-centered conception of religiosity. Sinologist Richard Wilhelm (1873–1930), who presented his translation of the ancient oracular Chinese text, the *I Ching*, in 1923, was another important influence on Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn. His work marked a turning point in the academic interpretation of the religious testimonies of extra-European cultures: no longer merely ethnological material, but expressions of subjectivity endowed with their own existential and spiritual reality. Of course, the role by Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav

Jung was decisive. Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn met Jung for the first time at the Schule der Weisheit (“School of Wisdom”), run in Darmstadt by Count Hermann Keyserling (1880–1946), where she found a group of researchers devoted to finding the “common root of all religions” and encountered Wilhelm’s edition of *I Ching* for the first time. Thanks to Jung, the Eranos Conferences provided considerable insights into the study of archetypes. Since then, Eranos has always had a particular interest in those central features of the psychic life, whose “archaic” and “primitive” aspects retain their features despite the evolutionary processes that have taken place.

Before the start of the actual Eranos project in 1933, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn made a first attempt at a congressional experience, with a more markedly esoteric imprint. In the late 1920s, while visiting her brother living in Long Island, United States, she got to know the works of the theosophist Alice Ann Bailey (1880–1949) and her Arcane School, which arose from a split of the Theosophical Society. During her stay in the United States, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn proposed to Alice Bailey a collaboration in the creation, in Ascona, of a “nondenominational spiritual center open to all scholars of esotericism of any geographical origin and religious faith.” The enterprise of the International Center for Spiritual Research lasted three years, from 1930 to 1932, a period that we generally refer to as the “Shadow” (*Schatten*) of Eranos, its “roots” (*Wurzeln*) or rather – as Jung used to call it – its “dark spirit” (*dunkler Geist*). In August 1930, the two women lectured on symbolism using eighty paintings belonging to the series of “Meditation Plates,” which Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn had begun to paint in a meditative state. Philosopher of religions Alfons Rosenberg (1902–1985) remembered those drawings as “rich in effect,” but also emanating a “frightening coldness.” Many of the images revolved around the theme of the Grail [Figure 2]. These images express themselves through a geometrical rigor, which flees from any naturalism of form and by a choice of predominantly cold colors, where a basic

dialectic between black (shadow, negative, death) and gold (light, positive, life) is present. The result is abstraction, in which is staged a spirituality purified of all corporality.

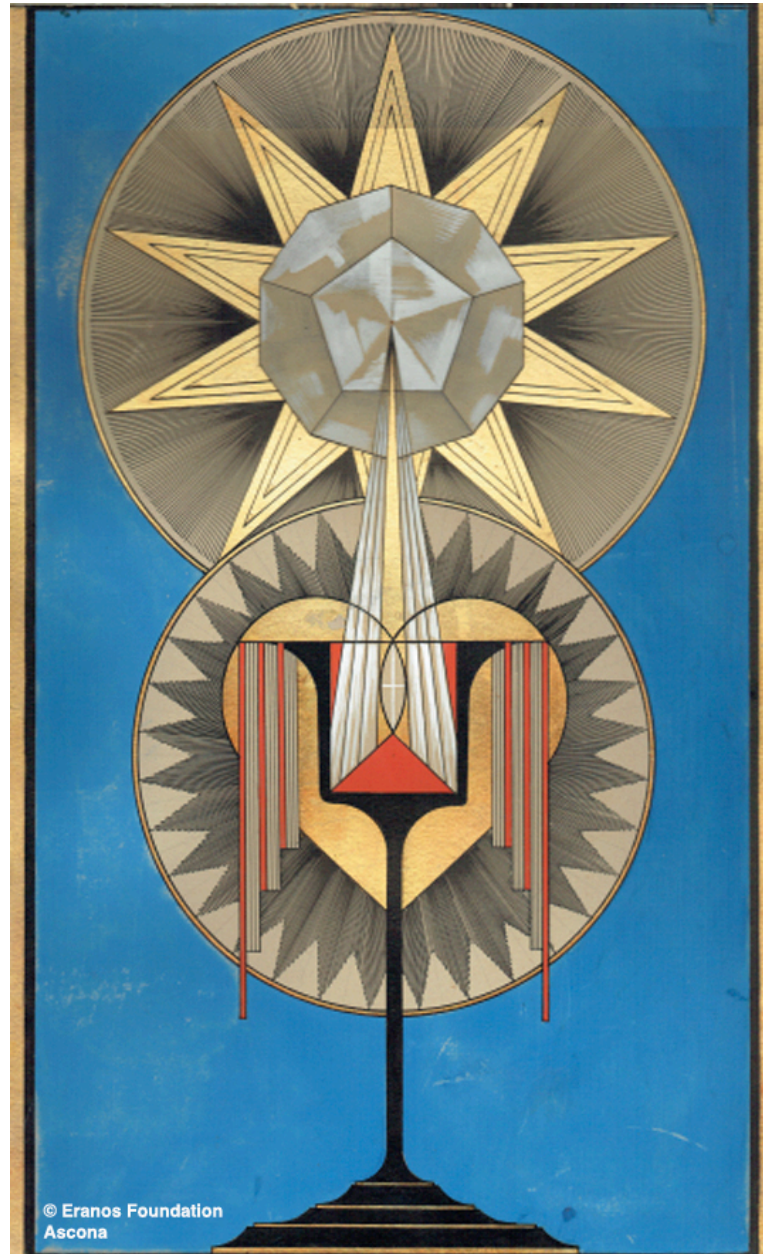


Figure 2 Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn. Unknown title, painting belonging to the “Meditation Plates” series, c. 1926–1934. The painting still hangs in the Florentine studio of Italian psychologist Roberto Assagioli (1888–1974), to whom the painting was (probably) personally donated by Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn herself. (© Eranos Foundation, Ascona. All rights reserved)

In telling Rosenberg how Jung had helped to remove her from the influence of theosophy, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn admitted that she had been very shaken, and that she had made a real breakthrough in her researches, when Jung – on the occasion of his

first visit to Eranos, in August 1933 – criticized these early paintings harshly, when he saw them arranged on the walls of the Lecture Hall [Figure 3]. The members of Jung’s Zurich circle who were with him were particularly shocked to have recognized, among the eighty images, the symbol of the “curse”: at the sight of this image, Jung himself had exclaimed: “This is the devil!” It was precisely the image – Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn would have noted – with which she had always identified herself.



Figure 3 Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn with a guest in the Lecture Hall of Casa Eranos in 1929. In the background, a selection of her paintings belonging to the “Meditation Plates” series, c. 1926–1934. (Photographer unknown. Courteously by private owner. © Eranos Foundation, Ascona. All rights reserved)

But not everyone, after all, was of Jung's opinion. In 1933, the historian of religions Friedrich Heiler (1892–1967), for example, appreciated these images both for their symbolic meaning and for their particular color rendering. By sending him some reproductions, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn had specified that the figures were born entirely from her meditative practice. Heiler replied: "Dear Mrs. Fröbe [...], I also thank you very much for the photographs, which are of great value to me, both for myself and for introducing others to meditative symbolism. From the original specimens that I saw at Professor [Rudolf] Otto's house, I was strongly impressed by the chromatic effect. My wife also drew great joy from the Meditation Plates." In any case, as a result of the criticism expressed by Jung, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn removed the geometrical paintings from the lecture hall and showed them only rarely and to a few people, while continuing to work on them, almost in secret, for a few more years.

Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn's artistic practice gradually changed: the strongly geometrical and abstract aspect of the "Meditation Plates" took second place; as a result of the deepening of Analytical Psychology and her relationship with Jung, she moved more and more in the direction of a style that recalled active imagination, the Jungian practice to which can be traced the works of the second part of her artistic production, that of the "Visions." Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn sent some reproductions belonging to both series to esotericist Arthur Edward Waite (1857–1942), who, in 1935, wrote to her that he was interested in her symbolic drawings and noticed in fact how they had passed from a geometric stage to one of ritual scenes. In 1936, White wrote to her that he was especially interested in the "blossoming of the Grail" in her visions.

The first letters exchanged between Jung and Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn concerned these very images. In June 1932, for example, Jung highlighted the psychological correspondence of her "Meditation Plates" with the images produced by his patients.

Although her figures were made consciously, in his opinion they originated from an unconscious that was more collective than individual. They were also, according to him, subject to psychological criticism because, like the Tibetan *yantras*, they seemed to document a path of psychological development. In 1933, Jung noted the extreme technical perfection of these geometric images and asked Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn how she could bring the content of these figures back to a broader spiritual structure of things and how she interpreted them from an intellectual point of view. In April 1934, when he received the first images of “ritual scenes” belonging to the early series of “Visions” [Figure 4], Jung wrote to her that he had the impression that the figures were reminiscent of a sort of initiation into the kingdom of the “Great Mother” and therefore he wondered what, in general, an entrance into the cult of the Goddess consisted of. It was in fact a cult that really existed, he specified, in a parallel way to that of Mithra: in the latter, however, women were not allowed and for this reason they came to that of the Goddess.

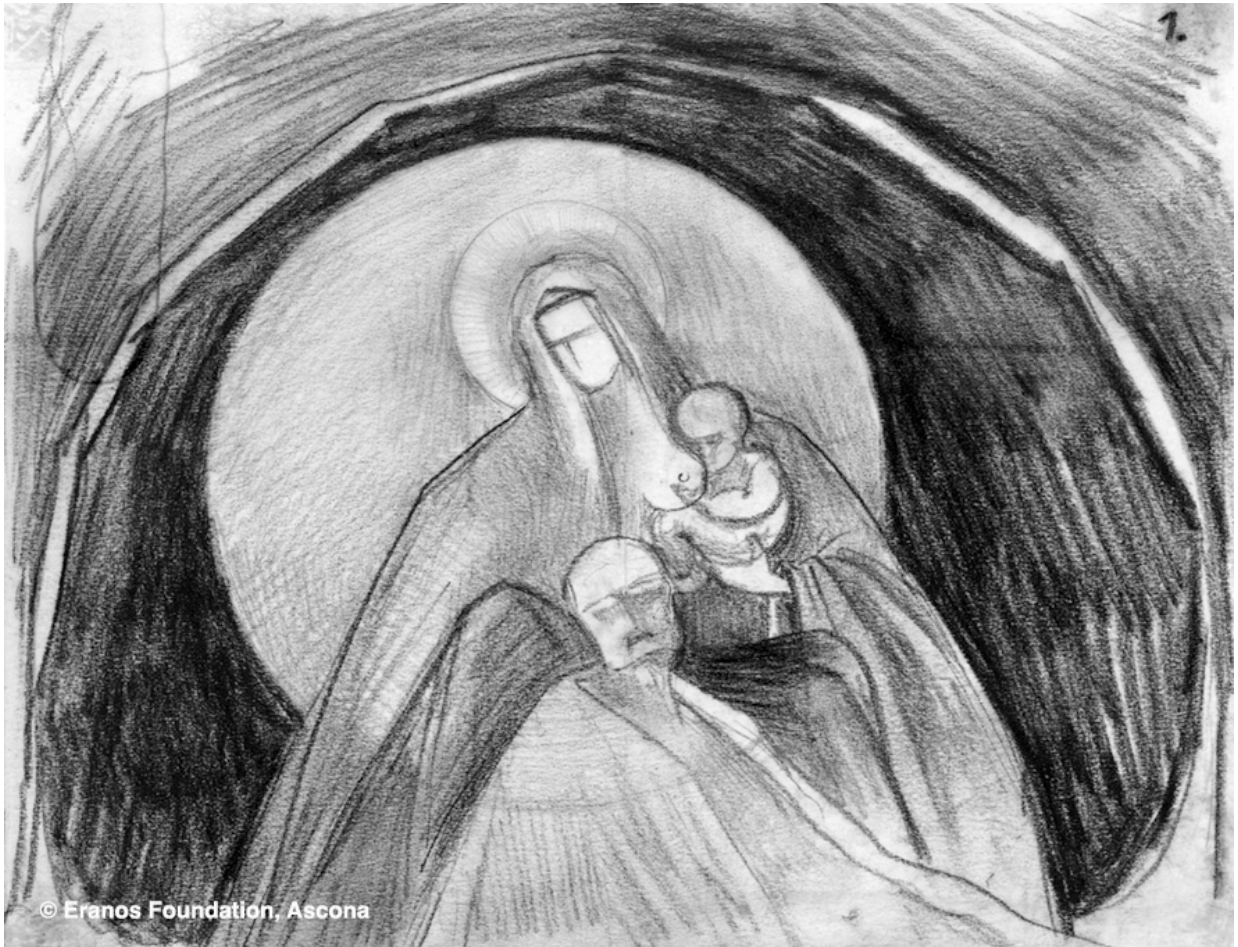


Figure 4 Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn. Untitled, the first drawing belonging to the “Visions” series, March 1934. (© Eranos Foundation, Ascona. All rights reserved)

In 1934, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn sent some reproductions of these “ritual” images also to the English occultist Dion Fortune (1890–1946), to whom she wrote that she was working intensively on the correspondences between psychoanalysis, the Kabbalah, and ancient cults. After eight years spent painting geometric symbols, it had become impossible for her to paint realistically; however, lately, during meditation, images of a different kind had begun to appear. In this state of mind, in some ways similar to a “lucid dream,” Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn had experiences of mythical images connected with the “Great Mother.” She believed that these scenes, which gave her the impression of leading her to an initiation into an ancient rite, were born “from what Jung calls the collective subconscious.”

Between Jung and Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn there was never an analytical relationship, in a strict sense. At least initially, perhaps, she may have wished this, but – apart from a few sessions held in the mid ‘30s – it did not take place. Even in the absence of a formal analytical contract, however, she continued to go to Jung, beyond matters linked to Eranos, to ask his advice on personal problems (as she did later with other analysts, such as Erich Neumann and Léopold Szondi.) Jung suggested that she write down her dreams and that she try to interpret them, offering to have a personal meeting when she did not know how to work with the material from her own unconscious.

The project of the International Centre for Spiritual Research came to an end after the third session, in 1932, when Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn and Alice Bailey definitively broke off their relationship, and the Eranos project was ready to start. Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn then dedicated all her life to her cultural enterprise: the Eranos Conferences, started in 1933, were becoming like a “ritual,” a “dance,” which started anew each year, but always with different “dancers,” and attracted some of the most influential scholars of the twentieth century. It has also long been the custom that each lecturer at Eranos donates the text of his or her talk in exchange for the hospitality that the Foundation provided. This has resulted in the collection of over seven hundred articles published in over seventy Eranos Yearbooks (*Eranos-Jahrbücher*). This provides evidence of exceptional research work in the most diverse fields of knowledge, and the custom continues to this day. Jung joined the first session, in 1933, and regularly attended almost all conferences until 1952. It was at Eranos, in the living room of Casa Gabriella, that the Bollingen Foundation was founded in the early 1940s. It was there that the contracts for the American, English, and German editions of Jung’s *Collected Works* were drawn up in 1947. It was there,

in 1956, that the project for Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1961) became a reality.

Parallel to organizing the Conferences, in 1934 Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn planned for the first time to create an Archive, in which “the phenomena of the Unconscious (the Collective Unconscious according to C. G. Jung), in its various forms of written descriptions, phantasies, or drawings, [could have been] be studied, compared, interpreted, ordered, or classified by competent workers in this fields of psychology.” In 1935, she undertook a picture research on Jung's request, who needed those materials for his studies on alchemy and the theory of archetypes [Figure 5]. From that moment, she thus began traveling – normally, during the winter season – to European and American libraries – in London, Paris, Rome, Munich, Zurich, Athens, Stuttgart, Oxford, Crete, Berlin, Bonn, Trier, and New York – in order to pick up “archetypal” images, as a complement to Jung's theoretical treatises on alchemy. Between 1935 and 1938, she did this research exclusively on behalf of Jung. The iconographical researches that she did between 1938 and 1941 were funded by Mary Elizabeth Conover Mellon (1904–1946) and Paul Mellon (1907–1999), who have been for more than twenty years, personally and later through the Bollingen Foundation (1947–1967), the main sponsors of Eranos. Together with the organizations of the Conferences, that iconographical research was Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn's main enterprise for about ten years. She was able to obtain a large amount of photographic reproductions of symbolical representations, derived from Eastern and Western iconographic traditions – alchemy, folklore, mythology, religions, as well as contemporary “archetypal” representations – and catalogued on the basis of their “archetypal” theme.

The Eranos Archive materials served as an indispensable iconographic base for important studies, such as Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy* (1944), Mircea Eliade's

The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structure of Alchemy (1956), and Erich Neumann's *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (1954) and above all *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (1955), which represents the first and only publication of the Eranos Archive. In 1949, the Bollingen Foundation acquired a duplicate of the Eranos Archive. A further copy of the approximately 6500 images was subsequently sent by Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn to Jung, who in turn, shortly before his death, transferred this material to the C.G. Jung-Institut in Zurich. The Bollingen Foundation also supported the project of cataloguing and expanding the Eranos Archive, beginning in 1959. The original Eranos collection was instead donated to the Warburg Institute (University of London) in 1954. The New York archive was renamed in 1960 Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism (ARAS): from then on, the history of the two archives continued along independent paths.



Figure 5 Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) sitting in the Lecture Hall of Casa Eranos on the occasion of the exhibition of the Eranos Conference dedicated to the topic, “The Hermetic Principle in Mythology, Gnosis and Alchemy.” On the walls of the Lecture Hall, some reproductions of symbolic images that Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn exhibited to illustrate the theme of the Conference. (Ph. Margarethe Fellerer. © Eranos Foundation, Ascona. All rights reserved)

The work of iconographic research represented itself for Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn an intense inner experience, which is also reflected in her practice of active imagination, from which the “Visions” originated [Figure 6], and she often had to look for Jung’s help. Analytical Psychology was the theoretical and practical background that enabled her to give order to her inner experiences, just as Jung, even within their conflictual relationship, was throughout her life, and especially in those crucial decades, a valuable confidant and support. Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn’s “Visions” testify to the intimate bond between inner reality and the outer world, as well as between psychological processes and the creative dimension. It is this bond that yields perhaps the full meaning of Eranos, which Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn herself alluded to: “The history of Eranos can be found in a book that has no writing, which I often go through, read, examine, and compare. I observe the images too, in that there are many in this book, and I look for the connections that form the whole in a meaningful and unifying way. The overall image, the model that has become visible, is so wound around and interwoven with the model of my life that it is really hard to separate them.”

Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn edited the first thirty *Eranos Yearbooks* (1933–1961) and dedicated all her life to nurturing her cultural enterprise. She passed away in Casa Gabriella on April 25, 1962.



Figure 6 Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn. “Die Grosse Mutter” [“The Great Mother”], one of the last paintings belonging to the “Visions” series, June 1937. (© Eranos Foundation, Ascona. All rights reserved)

In order to enhance Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn’s iconographic production, of importance both from an artistic point of view and for the history of Analytical Psychology, the Eranos Foundation chose to support the critical study of her artworks

and, gradually, their diffusion in a series of events. Thirteen “Meditation Plates” were firstly included in the exhibition “Monte Verità – The Breast of Truth,” curated by Harald Szeemann (Ascona, Zurich, Berlin, Vienna, Munich, and Ascona again, 1978–80) and are now permanently displayed at Casa Anatta, Ascona, which has functioned as the main venue for the museum exhibition on the history of Monte Verità since 1981 [Figure 7]. Twelve “Meditation Plates” were shown at the occasion of the exhibition entitled, “The Great Mother,” organized by the Trussardi Foundation and the City of Milan at the Royal Palace of Milan on August 25–November 15, 2015, in conjunction with the 2015 Universal Exhibition (Expo Milano 2015) on the theme, “Feeding the Planet. Energy for Life.” “The Great Mother” exhibition was directed by Massimiliano Gioni, assisted by Roberta Tenconi, who already curated the 55th Venice Biennale (2013), “The Encyclopedic Palace,” inspired by Jung’s *Red Book*. The same paintings were to be included in the exhibition entitled, “The Keeper,” set up at the New Museum of New York on July 9–October 2, 2016, still organized by Massimiliano Gioni. Six “Meditation Plates” are to be shown at the exhibition entitled, “Elles font l’abstraction. Une autre histoire de l’abstraction au 20^e siècle,” organized by the Centre Pompidou in Paris on May 5–August 23, 2021 and the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao on October 22, 2021–February 27, 2022, under the direction of Christine Macel, whose purpose is re-writing the history of abstract art, taking into consideration a number of female “outsider” artists. A monographic exhibition dedicated to Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn’s art is currently being prepared under the auspices of the Eranos Foundation.



Figure 7 Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn. 13 paintings belonging to the “Meditation Plates” series, permanently displayed at Casa Anatta, Ascona,

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Fabio Merlini, Regional Director of the Swiss Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (sfivet) in Lugano, Switzerland, serves since 2010 as the President of the Eranos Foundation. In 1998, he was nominated *privat-docent* at the Université de Lausanne, Switzerland, where he taught Philosophy of Culture. Subsequently, from 1999 to 2003, he taught Systemic Philosophy and was appointed Professor of Epistemology of the Human Sciences at the Université de Lausanne. In 2003, he was nominated adjunct Professor of Communication Ethics at the Università degli Studi dell'Insubria in Varese, Italy, where he taught until 2011. From 1996 to 2000, he co-directed the 'Groupe de Recherche sur l'Ontologie de l'Histoire' at the Hussler Archives of the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, whose seminar works, *Après la fin de l'histoire* (1998), *Historicité et spatialité* (2001), and *Une histoire de l'avenir* (2004), were published by J. Vrin. His publications include *L'efficienza insignificante. Saggio sul disorientamento* (2009, translated into French as *L'époque de la performance insignifiante. Réflexions sur la vie désorientée*, 2011), *Schizotopies : Essai sur l'espace de la mobilisation* (2013, translated into Italian as *Ubicumque. Saggio sul tempo e lo spazio della mobilitazione*, 2015), *L'architettura inefficiente* (with L. Snozzi, 2014, translated into French as *L'architecture inefficente*, 2016), *Catastrofi dell'immediatezza* (with S. Tagliagambe, 2016), and *Triste esthétique. Essais sur les catastrophes de l'immédiateté* (2018, published also in Italian as *L'estetica triste. Seduzione e ipocrisia dell'innovazione*, 2019). He recently co-edited Carl Gustav Jung's *Rebirth. Text and Notes of the Lecture held at Eranos in 1939* (with R. Bernardini, 2020).