



Figure 1 Mandala, Rubin Museum of Art

Mandala

The perfect circle

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Rubin Museum of Art in New York

Review by Bruce Parent

This current exhibit at the Rubin Museum of Art in New York presents a quietly stunning collection of Tibetan mandalas. Martin Brauen's scholarship and understanding of mandalas allows this essay to focus on a parallel consideration of these "visual tools" that were designed to aid an individual's spiritual journey in Tibetan Buddhism. It is a parallel course that begins with the formal qualities of these images and considers them in light of Jung's discovery of the mandala as a "refuge" at a point of deep spiritual crisis in his life.

The Tibetan mandala is a sacred contemplative tool rendered as an architectural "plan view" of a temple, which represents a richly decorative view of deity's palace as if seen from above. Rendered forms of both natural and supernatural forces are arranged in compositional patterns and abstractions that skillfully create tensions among formal elements such as color, order and rhythm. Space references both compositional order and cardinal directions, including the center as a locus of orientation and meaning. The complexity and intensity of the imagery, as well as the disciplined techniques combine to create a series of Tibetan mandalas that echo the Buddha Vairocana's hand gesture, which the Exhibit notes as meaning: "the Union of the perfection of wisdom and skillful means". Thus it is as if the rigorous discipline and creative imaginal work that crafted the mandalas is the visual metaphor for the spiritual path of contemplation that the mandala represents and guides.

After the fevered writing of the "Septem Sermones", Jung came to a "fallow period" (1961, p. 193). It was 1916. At a loss for direction, he began arranging line, color and shape within a bounded area and arrived at creating

mandala images. Jung created a number of mandalas during the next two years, and reports that in 1918-19 he “sketched every morning in a notebook a small circular drawing, a mandala...” (ibid, p. 195). Unexpectedly, his mandala work was the way he “acquired a living conception of the self. The self, I thought was like the monad which I am, and which is my world. The mandala represents this monad, and corresponds to the microcosmic nature of the psyche” (ibid, p. 196). He wrote of this experience in “Memories, Dreams, Reflections” and elaborated: “My mandalas were cryptograms concerning the state of the self which were presented to me anew each day. In them I saw the self – that is, my whole being-actively at work” (ibid, p. 196). The Jungian analyst Elie Humbert wrote that German has two words for “representation”: one means image; the second is the action, or “re-presentation” of the image” (Humbert 1984, pp. 62-63). Thus just as Tibetan mandalas are fixed images; they are also images of contemplation and imaginative journeys of great discipline. This idea is embedded in a two-dimensional plan view of the temple being realized as a three-dimensional structure through an active process of imagination and transit. The transit into the Tibetan mandala composition is not linear but circular. Jung would also use this concept to describe the relational dynamics of symbols: they must be circumambulated.

Jung described his awareness that the process of making the mandala was a key to the meaning of the mandala: “Only gradually did I realize what the mandala really is: ‘Formation, Transformation, Eternal Mind’s eternal recreation’ and that is the self, the wholeness of the personality ...” (1961, p. 196)

Later he would clarify this point even more succinctly: “The centering process is, in my experience, the never-to-be-surpassed climax of the whole development, and is characterized as such by the fact that it brings with it the greatest possible therapeutic effect” (1981, para. 401). Thus the mandala contains both German meanings of “representation”: it is both an image that depicts a form and it is an activity re-presented in a process. In Jung’s work, mandalas were keys because “These structures not only express order, they also create it” (ibid, para. 870). During those two years of creating mandalas, Jung’s experience of mandala as image and activity informed his formulations of the terms “Self” and “symbol”, as well as the “mandala”: “The relationship...is the new thing—the third term; it takes the form of a symbol, a gradient of energy, a new point of view”; thus “the symbol is...an experience...a living entity” (Humbert 1984, pp. 37-38).

Jung’s mandala work went quiet after 1918. He seemed to have regained a sense of direction and returned to other work, notably on writings that would be known as his work on “Typology”. Ostensibly motivated by his need to comprehend the dynamics that were so divisive in his relations with both Freud and Adler, “Typology” echoes the image of four cardinal directions in the Tibetan mandala. Years later when Jung wrote “Mysterium Coniunctionis” he would return to the image of the mandala as a parallel to the four directions in the Alchemical image of “Adam”. Jung references these four elements or processes and noted that to the alchemist Vigeneres they were: “circular in their arrangement”; and elaborated: “Psychologically the four are the four orienting functions of consciousness, two of them perceptive (irrational) and two were

discriminative (rational). We could say that all mythological figures who are marked by a quaternity have ultimately to do with the structure of consciousness” (1981, para. 389). This image, the fourfold nature of consciousness, links Jung’s Alchemical studies to a 1927 dream that was the subject of his penultimate mandala.



Figure 1 “*Window on eternity*” by CG Jung 1927

Jung’s reported that a dream in 1927 was the inspiration for a mandala entitled “Window on eternity” that represents his experience that: “at the center of the unconscious was an ordering principle”. This mandala led to a second mandala a year later featuring a golden castle at the center.

Jung completed this image days before

Wilhelm’s “Secret of the Golden Flower” arrived to receive Jung’s introduction. Wilhelm’s book with its “thousand-year-old Chinese text on the yellow castle, the germ of the immortal body” (1961, p. 197) as a central alchemical image echoed years of Jung’s psychological experiences, which were reflected in his mandala drawings, as well as his dream of 1927 that has led to the creation of the Golden castle mandala days before the book arrived. It was for Jung a synchronicity that



Figure 2 *Golden Castle Mandala* by CG Jung, 1928

linked his living inner experience to a living outer experience that gave him the

“undreamed-of confirmation of my ideas about the mandala and the circumambulation of the center” (ibid, p. 197). The image of a golden center was a symbol that bridged what had been an intimation of order in mandalas to Alchemy. Each was a “representation”: a fixed image and a process representing psyche’s wholeness. It was as if years of drawing mandalas prepared the way for Jung. Some of these mandalas were saved in a “Red Book” but this would be the last mandala he painted. It was a symbol of a new “relationship”, a new point of view, and a new direction in his work.

References

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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serving on the Board of ARAS and the Kristine Mann Library. Prior to his Analytic training, Bruce received a degree in Art Therapy at NYU in 1995, and an MFA in Painting at the School of Visual Arts in 1989. The image as representation and psychological process is a recurring theme in his work, from an MFA thesis entitled “...the burnt end of the stick”, to his art therapy work with pediatric patients in oncology and psychiatry; and in his more recent writings on the image of the “Sphinx”, which as a liminal figure in psyche, is considered in the work of Sophocles, Freud, Jung and our life and times.