

Interview: Ami Ronnberg – curator of ARAS and editor-in- chief of Taschen’s Book of Symbols

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Housed in a building in midtown Manhattan is a most unusual library that traffics in dreams and images accompanied by texts. Here you’ll find books about myths and a card catalog that has drawers full of symbolic themes instead of the usual Dewey Decimal reference numbers. [ARAS](#), or the [Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism](#), is a repository of symbols: a space both in the physical world and online, where one can study archetypal imagery, based on psychoanalyst Carl Jung’s theory that images are the universal language of the collective unconscious.

Why do swans keep showing up in your mind as you sleep? Are you writing a story about a battle, or working on a campaign with a jester as its main character? A visit to ARAS can help you meditate on these images and more, teaching you about the occurrence of these archetypes throughout world culture over time, and inspiring you to mull over their meanings.

Getty Images’ Visual Trends Director, Pam Grossman, chats with Ami Ronnberg, curator of ARAS and editor-in-chief of [The Book of Symbols](#) about how archetypal imagery influences human creativity in art and commerce.

PG: Can you talk a little bit about what archetypes are and why archetypes matter?

AR: Archetypes can be described as the structure of the psyche and they are also what makes each one of us unique. Archetypes can never be known directly – we only know of them through symbols or archetypal images. They are universal expressions of human experience and reach back to the dawn of mankind.



A 30,000 year-old sculpture made of mammoth ivory. Hohle Fels, Ach River Valley, Germany

At the core of all creativity and all human expression we find an image or a symbol. Symbol (or archetypal image) is defined as the only way to know what cannot be known. It is interesting that the ancient artist chose a bird (see image above), in one of the oldest sculptures ever made. The bird has always been a symbol for transcendence or the soul as messenger between the known and unknown. It also makes me think of metaphor, which can be described as an image in words. What I find intriguing is that neuroscience uses metaphor to suggest what made our earliest ancestors human. It was the great many connections in the brain of our earliest ancestors that made them different from other mammals, allowing for associations, a kind “cross-talk” between the various senses of the cortex that resembles metaphor. The Greek word for metaphor means ‘to move from one place to another’, which is a lovely image to describe this shift from concrete to symbolic thinking. This allows us the freedom to choose, no longer having to act out, for example, our rage by killing our enemy. The symbol makes space for reflection, allowing us to explore whether something is meant to be expressed “out there” or just to be known within. And just as with the ancient carver the symbol inspires us to create.

PG: Like most members of the creative department here at Getty Images, I have one foot in the fine art world, and one foot in the world of commerce – and many of our customers embody that dichotomy as well. I’m fascinated by the spaces where the two overlap – after all, both arenas use imagery to express something, to connect with the greater world. I’m curious as to how you see archetypes bubble up in the commercial space (advertising, pop-culture, films, etc.)

AR: I love to see the archetypal patterns continuously showing up in all popular cultures. What better way is there to demonstrate the existence “the eternal images”, which is another name for archetypal images. Or in the famous words of Joseph Campbell: “The latest incarnation of Oedipus, the continued romance of Beauty and the Beast, stand this afternoon on the corner of 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue, waiting for the traffic light to change.”

It is also in the world of advertising that we find true image masters of images. We understand the message instinctively without any further need for reflection. Current generations are becoming tremendously gifted at shaping and manipulating images but often unaware of how to contact an image’s symbolic resonance and meaning. At the same time as images are everywhere, there seems to be a hunger for meaning. We sometimes say that ARAS is the other side of advertisement by offering that depth of meaning, through image and word.

PG: We’re currently exploring the idea of “visual storytelling,” and figuring out how we can better use the power of pictures to bring deeper, more immediate engagement with others. So many of the ways in which we’re communicating now, especially online, are image-reliant. What do you make of this digital world, incessantly image-sharing world, and how do you think archetypes are relevant to it?

AR: I remember many years ago when I worked as a children’s librarian with Turkish immigrant children who had grown up in an oral story-telling culture. They could sit for hours on end and listen to a story. The contemporary children’s books all had delightful images and children used to them would not listen to me reading a story without images. The stories were shorter and the children’s span of attention shorter. The digital image world is just another step in this direction.

I think the visual storytelling you are talking about are just as archetypal in the digital and image-sharing world because as I mentioned, they all resonate, echo, repeat the ancient stories or the archetypal themes of human existence – love and love lost, jealousy, betrayal, heroes, tests and treasures, of loosing your home and finding it, of weapons, and jewels, beauty and loneliness... we can go on forever. What is happening though, and I don’t know how that affects the brain physically, but image is faster while words take longer time and also uses another part of the brain, making everything happen so much faster.

PG: As part of our research on content marketing and visual trends, we’ve been focusing a lot on character archetypes (“The Explorer” “The Lovers” “The Rebel”) and how they manifest in brands and advertising. But it strikes me that archetypes aren’t always people – they’re universal images that may change costume but whose meaning stays the same. I’m remember reading Joseph Campbell as a teenager, and my eyes being opened to the fact that concepts like “The

Flood” or “The Resurrection” are archetypal as well. That they exist in stories throughout history, no matter the culture. What are some archetypes that have particular resonance for you right now, whether personally or on a global scale?

AR: I think what I am seeing are archetypes of ‘change’ in all kinds of media – which as all ancient myth and religious traditions begin with the breakdown of the old and the chaos that follows– all eternal archetypal themes. Looking at the front page of New York Times every morning or any news channel on TV they all tell of wars, rebellions, abductions, rapes, and all kinds of horrors taking place all over our world. There is no way that we can’t be affected by this.

But at the same time there are stories of modern heroes and heroines, wise men and wise women, innovators, teachers and leaders of all kinds following their amazing creative visions – as if (like in the myth) prompted by the breakdown to create something new. In other words, there is also so much joy and hope in the world as I see it – and in that way the duality of the archetype are always present as both a creative or positive and a destructive or negative side (although not necessarily noticeable at the same time).

Key takeaways:

- Archetypes are universal expressions of human experience.
- Symbols inspire us to create, and symbolic thinking helps us tap into powerful, timeless emotions as well as reflect on what they represent
- Visual storytelling in the digital and image-sharing world resonates because it echoes and reinvents the ancient stories and archetypal themes of human existence.