BOOK REVIEW

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THE BOOK OF SYMBOLS:
REFLECTIONS ON ARCHETYPAL IMAGES

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The New York Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism is named as the author of this book about archetypal symbols, but in fact it is a group effort of dozens of contributors who wrote essays for the 700 or so images that were selected for publication. The project of creating this book took more than 13 years to complete. A committee of dedicated individuals met regularly and reviewed and discussed the texts that were to accompany the images chosen. During that process 1500 images did not make it into the book.

The book is organized around five major themes. They are as follows: Creation and Cosmos, Plant World, Animal World, Human World, and Spirit World. Each of them open into smaller categories, for example the Creation and Cosmos section contains subcategories that consider several symbols of creation among them are egg, breath, star, sun, and moon. That subcategory also branches into chapters on water, air, wind, fire and so on. However, this book is not yet another “lexicon of symbols,” with definitions and etymologies. It is rather a collection of soul images the human psyche produced and made visible through works of artists, some of them named and some unknown. The earliest of them are from the Chauvet caves
from some 30,000 years ago, the more recent ones are images created by contemporary artists. One of my favorites is on teeth. The two accompanying images are the teeth of the demon Humbaba from Mesopotamia associated with the Gilgamesh myth and the other one is a small 18th century pair of carved teeth from France illustrating the myth of a noxious tooth worm causing hellish toothache for “moral” decay. The accompanying essay informs us that, “Symbolically, teeth represent a kind of individual psychic mill where what’s to rough to take in directly can be ground up by conscious consideration, digested and metabolized” (2010, p.370).

There are two of chief collaborators of the publication. Ami Ronnberg, director of ARAS and Kathleen Martin, a Jungian analyst. Kathleen Martin in her introduction suggests how to make use of the book. She says that, “together, image and text open up a symbol, telling something about what its intrinsic qualities evoke” (2010, p.8). Ami Ronnberg, in her preface refers to poetry often present in the essays; poetry “like symbols expresses that which cannot be said.” Indeed I found myself reading this book like I read a volume of poetry. I open it up, look at an image, read the accompanying essay and reflect on it, contemplate it. It is a collection to be read as poetry and inspiration. It gives us just enough, the way poet Olav H. Hauge calls for:

\[\text{Don’t come to me with the entire truth.} \\
\text{Don’t bring the ocean if I feel thirsty} \\
\text{nor heaven if I ask for light;} \\
\text{But bring a hint, some dew, a particle,} \\
\text{as birds carry only drops away from water,} \\
\text{and the wind a grain of salt.} \]

From the poem: Don’t Come to Me with the Entire Truth
However, there are times when I use the book to consult for a particular dream or sandplay image because the essays in the book do give sufficient information for those thirsty for knowledge and orientation from natural history, historical and cultural context and mythologies. There is a wealth of collective knowledge one can draw from these essays, yet the power is primarily in the images compiled. Those of us who work with images either in depth analysis or sandplay therapy know that the image is there to orient us to psyche’s truth. We know not to pin it down by definitions or translate it into a “specific” meaning, but allow it to open up and allow it to speak for itself.

Images are powerful carriers of energy, they reveal as Yoram Kaufmann in his book The Way of the Image suggests: “One can look at an image (or a dream or a fantasy) from any number of layers: psychic, psychological, religious, spiritual or soul layers. One can view it through an infinite number of orients: musical, botanical, sociological, historical and so on. One is limited by one’s own imagination” (Kaufman, 2009, p.32). The Book of Symbols is able to feed our imagination by contemplating what others have expressed previously. Because the artwork selected in the book comes from all areas of the world spatially and chronologically, it is a beautiful expression of the anima mundi. Anthropologist Stanley Diamond wrote that indigenous peoples and artists “focus on the singularity of the object to such a degree that everything seems at once marvelous, strange, familiar and unexpected…the phenomenon becomes incandescent” (Diamond, 1974, p.196).

The Book of Symbols allows us an encounter with such incandescence and luminosity. It is a volume well worth investing in and celebrating the vitality of the objective psyche as it reveals itself. These images are archetypal and we are likely to encounter its energies and expressions in sandtrays, dreams and other fantasy products. It is our job and responsibility to recognize the communication from such encounters as we take responsibility for and honor Psyche. This book can aid us and enrich our weltanschung. I highly recommend it to all servants of the psyche.
REFERENCES


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