

The Making of *The Book of Symbols*

by Ami Ronnberg

On the morning of January, 2nd 2008, at 10 am, the phone rang as we returned from the New Years holidays to the ARAS office on 39th Street in New York City. It was Florian Kobler, an editor for Taschen Books calling from Germany, eagerly asking if we had signed a contract already for our book on symbols (which we hadn't). He told us that Benedikt Taschen, the owner of the world wide publishing company bearing his name had seen our proposal while visiting their Los Angeles office over the holidays and was interested in publishing the book. After months of negotiations a contract was signed. For the next three years we worked with Florian and his staff at Taschen who were all wonderfully supportive, attentive to every detail and set on the highest quality.

This was eleven years after another surprise call, this time from Sam Bercholz, the Editor-in-Chief of Shambhala Publications who had previously published two volumes of the *ARAS Encyclopedia of Archetypal Symbolism* with two more volumes planned. He had always wanted to do a book on symbols and felt that the time was right as we were moving towards the year 2000. He wanted to name the book *1000 symbols for the New Millennium*, to be published in time for the millennial shift. Initially, Thames & Hudson was to be co-publishing the book but for various reasons this was not to happen and a contract was never signed. By that time, board and staff had fallen in love with the project and we decided to continue with a great deal of faith and hope as well as much work. Perhaps a dream that one of the very first contributors told me early on may explain what gave us the courage. She dreamt that she was in a library and noticed a Jungian reference book. As she opened the book she found delicious fruits and nourishing beans falling off the pages for her to eat. In the same way we may eat the seeds of symbols and they will feed us.

During the years we were often asked why another book on symbols when there are so many and our answer was always the same: that there is no such book that includes images. Image is the language of the symbol. We are inundated by images as in no other time, and yet there seems to be a hunger for the deeper meaning, which is what makes them into symbols as they point to the mystery, to the unknown. Our editor Kathleen Martin, a Jungian analyst, brought her profound knowledge of the psyche to this project by adding a psychological understanding of the symbol, which is also something unique for a book on symbols. We were lucky to have three working artists as well as a singer/musician, adding their sensibility to the whole. They are Karen Arm, managing editor, Anne

Thulin and Kako Ueda, assistant editors, and Allison Langerak, online editor. The same wonderful team worked on this book for most of these years, which also explains the love that went into its preparation and hopefully can be felt in the result.

Much care, many lively discussions and at times even strong disagreements went into selecting the images, which became the one task we all shared and adored. On Tuesday mornings we would meet in the ARAS reading room to go through the images that we had gathered during the week - from the ARAS files of 17,000 images and our extensive collection of art books. Wherever we went during this time we looked for images - in bookstores, museums, art galleries, our friends' book collections as well as our own. We wanted to cover contemporary art as well as all kinds of media and cultures. For example, the entry on "snow" includes a quiet 19th century Japanese landscape by Hiroshige, snow flakes against a black door by Georgia O'Keeffe, a scientific photograph of a snow crystal and the ironic *The Blizzard Ball Sale* showing the artist David Hammons selling signed snow balls in New York City.

However, our very first task was to select the thousand symbols, which we did by asking each board member and staff to write down their hundred favorite symbols and combine them with lists of entries from all the many symbol dictionaries in the archive. Not too far into the project we realized that this vision of a thousand symbols for the new millennium had to be adjusted to reality. Even reducing the number of entries to about a third has resulted in a book of 807 pages. It was painful to let go of many essential symbols and in the end we had selected enough images to fit two more books.

In the history of the Archive and *The Book of Symbols* there is a long tradition of interest in images, which took root in a series of thematic conferences in Ascona, Switzerland named Eranos by its founder, Olga Froebe-Kapteyn. It was a delight to discover in her Preface to the printed lectures of the first conference a description that could also serve to introduce the writing in this book as well. She explains that the primary aim of the written texts was never a total treatment of the subject and writes “Their value is *evocative*. They touch upon unusual themes, facts, and analogies and in so doing evoke the great archetypal images.” Finding the right essay writers sometimes came from unexpected encounters and always meant much interaction while introducing them to this unusual writing where we asked them to evoke a symbol in a few hundred words, to include the facts as well as the wonder and to suggest a psychological understanding while combining text and image. Often we went back and forth, refining or rewriting some essential points. It turned out to be quite a challenge and required much hard work. For this we are deeply grateful to the contributors who include a range of professions from academics, poets, to Jungian analysts.

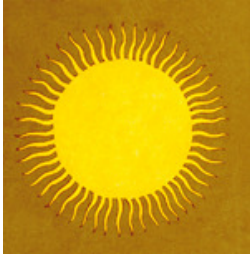
Anyone who has tried to obtain permission of images and poetry for publication knows how complex and time-consuming this is – and expensive. It is true detective work to track down the owners of the artwork, which may have changed hands more than once since the original source was published or was never known. Private collectors were equally challenging to locate. Imagine then finding the source for almost 800 images from countries across the globe - from a Japanese monastery, where our Japanese speaking colleague managed to work out an agreement with the monks using an intermediary from a Japanese image archive connected to the National Museum of Japan - to a museum in Mongolia

where we happened to locate a British citizen who paved the way for our request by first visiting the museum and also suggesting we offer a small financial contribution, which was customary in this culture before going on to ask for permissions. Only a tiny fraction of our requests were refused in the end.

In preparing the many details, there was always a sense of gathering and organizing a symbolic world, where every aspect had its own importance. At the very end, another contributor told me a dream that he had about the book. This writer had helped us to read through the entire text for fact checking - from art historical details, scientific information, to the spelling of foreign names - and when he woke up he had the sense that the dream reflected the organic structure of how this book had taken form. He dreamt that when he opened the book the first image had been replaced by the main image from the tree chapter, which is a painting by Georgia O'Keeffe. It shows the unusual perspective of looking up into the crown of the tree, its branches reaching into the starry sky. In the dream it seemed that each individual entry was like the branch of a tree that somehow grew from its heart, the core of the trunk of that Tree. This is the Tree of Life containing all the symbols and we hope it will continue to grow as this book is now published.



CAPTIONS FOR THE IMAGES IN THIS ARTICLE:



Jyoti (Light). Spirit and matter—the transparency of consciousness and the crystallization of light as form—coalesce in the golden disk of the sun. Tempura painting with gold, ca. 18th century, India.



In a cosmic feat of levitation, the goddess “She who annihilates” raises the orange-black globe of the sun above the worshipping horizons of the east and the west. Detail from a wall painting in the tomb of Ramses VI, ca. 1145-37 B.C.E., Valley of the Kings, Egypt.



The formidable and invigorating power of the feminine as mediator and image of the self is embodied by the figure of Luna standing in the curve of the crescent moon. From the wedding book *Le nozze di Constantio Sforza e Camilla d'Aragona*, 1480, Italy.



The Lawrence Tree by Georgia O’Keeffe seen in a dream by one of the contributors as the organic structure of *The Book of Symbols*.. Oil on canvas, 1919, United States.



The goddess Isis as a tree suckling the pharaoh, as if offering him fruits of a tree. Painting from the tomb of Pharaoh Thutmose III (ca. 1479-21 B.C.E.)



Alchemy's tree also resembles the dream where the structure of *The Book of Symbols* is seen as a tree that is organic, yet man-made. The sun, moon and stars as luminous gold and silver fruits are hanging from its branches. Engraving, ca. 1470.

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