

Carl Jung's Approach to Symbolism: with special reference to Visual Art

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Abstract: The concept of symbolism from the perspective of a psychologist Carl Jung gives a new insight and dimension on symbolism apart from other disciplines. Jung believes that man produce symbols consciously as well as unconsciously in a form of dreams which are a great aspect of psychological importance. He stresses on how the psychic content of a symbol can be of vital importance for a man and his life. A symbol plays an integral part in the life of many cultures and there is a re-creative meaning in these symbols. The symbolic ideas take place within the unconscious mind of a modern man as it takes place in the rituals of ancient societies. Jungian analysis is based on the unconscious of human mind and shows how a symbolic interpretation can become a method for analysis of an individual's mental functioning and social behavior. Jungian perspective towards the interpretation of visual art presents fascinating insights concerning Jung's understanding of the universal Transcendent Function in art. By developing the theory of symbolism he contributes to a great extent in the field of Visual arts. It becomes a prominent place in the interpretive analysis and symbolism. His theory of dreams has a symbolic significance and this symbolization of dreams becomes a tool to analysis and appreciates the artworks of an artist. This paper will be an attempt to explore Carl Jung's approach to symbolism and its importance in analysing art with special reference to Visual Art.

Keywords: visual Art, art history, symbolism, Jung, approach, art analysis, methodology, meaning, art-objects

Introduction

The discipline of Psychology attempts to understand the role of mental functions and social behaviour in an individual. Psychologists also consider the unconscious mind and at times rely upon symbolic interpretation and other inductive techniques apart from other methods. Jung is one among the best known contemporary contributors to dream analysis and symbolization. A symbol, Jung explains, is a word, picture, photograph, statue that always signifies something much larger than what we immediately know and therefore points to the unconscious.

Best known for the studies of the human psyche, Carl Jung was born on 26th July 1875 in Kesswil, Switzerland. He was the only surviving child, among the four children of his parents. As a boy he used to do some ceremonial acts, practices associated with similar to totems which gave him inner peace and security. Later he discovers a similarity between his personal experience and the indigenous cultures of the world. His study of symbols, psychological archetype, and the collective unconscious were an inspiration of the intuitive ceremonial act, an act of unconscious rituals.

Initially Spirituality fascinates him but he later decided to study medicine to further understand the human mind through dreams, myth, art and philosophy. During this period of intense self analysis, Jung became interested in dreams and the symbols, and this became the basis for his theories of psychology. His understanding of the symbolism found in dreams and in other creative processes which formed the basis of his clinical approach, in practicing the Analytical Psychology.

The Dream theory of Carl Jung that studies the unconscious as its main object plays a central role in Jungian analysis and some of the analyses are based almost entirely on working with dream material. According to Jung, dreams are the direct, natural expression of the current condition of the dreamer's mental world. Jung believes that the nature of dreams is to present "a spontaneous self portrayal, in symbolic form, of the actual situation in the unconscious." [1] This brief quote summarizes Jung's view of dreaming. Jung held dreams to be of the highest importance in portraying messages from the unconscious to consciousness. He [2] claims that dreams speak in a

distinctive language of symbols, images, and metaphors, a natural language of the unconscious mind's means of expression. Jung says understanding dreams becomes difficult because the symbolic language is so different from the language of a waking consciousness. Symbolic language has to be deciphered as it is represented in codes.

One of the most distinctive features of Jung's theory of dreams is his claim that dreams express not just 'personal contents, but also collective or universal contents. Jung believes that dreams frequently contain archetypes [3], universal psychic images that underlie all human thought. According to him the world's religious and mythological traditions contain a wealth of archetypal images, and he refers to these traditions in describing the nature and function of dreams.

Jung [4] believed that beyond a 'personal unconscious' as described by Sigmund Freud, 'there exists a deeper layer of 'collective unconscious', which does not derive from personal experience and is not a personal acquisition but is inborn'[5]. He stated: 'This deeper layer I call the collective unconscious. I have chosen the term "collective" because this part of the unconscious is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals... The contents of the collective unconscious... are known as archetypes'[6]. Jung [7] states that through the analysis and interpretation of symbols that are evident in dreams, fantasies, visions, myths and art that Archetypes can be analysed

The concept of Symbolism according to Jung

To quote from his book *Man and his Symbol* "a word or an image is symbolic when it implies something more than its obvious and immediate meaning." [8] It has a wider unconscious aspect, which is never precisely defined or fully explained. As the mind explores the symbol, it leads to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason. There are innumerable things beyond the range of human understanding and therefore the use of symbolic terms become obvious to represent concepts, that cannot be defined or fully comprehend.

Hindu philosophy became an important element in his understanding of the role of symbolism and the life of the unconscious. His expeditions to study different cultures and trying to learn primitive psychology with overseas travelled to England, USA, East Africa and India. Carl Jung also studies Astrology which he believes is related to mythology. In *Psychology and Alchemy* [9] 1944 he argues that the symbolism of alchemy is directly related to the psychoanalytical process. For him, alchemy was not the search for a way to transform material lead into gold. It was transformation of the human soul on its path to

perfection. Lead is just a symbol for the impure soul and gold is a symbol for the perfect soul. Jung's private collection of rare alchemic books was one of the finest in the world. Dr. C. George Boeree [10] also observes that Carl Jung with an apparently inexhaustible knowledge of mythology, religion, and philosophy explored the "inner space". He was especially knowledgeable in the symbolism of complex mystical traditions such as Gnosticism, Alchemy, Kabala, and similar traditions in Hinduism and Buddhism. If anyone could make sense of the unconscious and its habit of revealing itself only in symbolic form, it would be Carl Jung.

Jung [11] states that man produce symbols consciously as well as unconsciously in a form of dreams which are a great aspect of psychological importance. In Jung's [12] opinion to effectively explore the meaning of symbols one must acquire a wider knowledge of their origin and significance. For the analogies between ancient myths and the stories that appear in the dreams of modern man are neither trivial nor accidental. They exist because the unconscious minds preserve the symbol-making capacity that once found expression in the beliefs and rituals of the primitive. Jung says that we are dependent on the messages that are carried by such symbols and both our attitudes and behaviour are profoundly influenced by them.

Stating from the history of symbolism Jung [13] says the role that symbols have played in the life of many cultures, one understands that there is also a re-creative meaning in these symbols. Some symbols relate to childhood and the transition to adolescence, others to maturity, and others again to the experience of old age, such progression of symbolic ideas may take place, therefore, within the unconscious mind of modern man just as it took place in the rituals of ancient societies.

Coming back to discussing mythology in symbolism, Jung[14] from the *Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious* states that all the mythologized processes of nature such as summer and winter, the phases of the moon, rainy seasons and so forth are in no sense allegories [15] of these objective occurrences rather they are symbolic expressions of inner, unconscious drama of the psyche which becomes accessible to man's consciousness by way of projection i.e. mirrored in the events of nature.

Theory of symbolism in the visual arts

Apart from his contribution to the field of Psychology, he has contributed to a great extent in the field of Visual Arts by developing the theory of symbolism. And this theory has given the concept of symbolism a prominent place in interpretive analysis in the art historical studies. His understanding of the

symbolism found in dreams and in other creative processes, formed the basis of his clinical approach, which he called analytical psychology. His book *Man and His Symbols* 1964 contains many examples and interpretations of *mandalas* and other symbols. His opinions are meaningful towards the interpretations of artworks of the genre, where he explains his enormously influential theory of symbolism as revealed in dreams.

Jungian[16] perspective towards the interpretation of visual art presents fascinating insights concerning Jung's understanding of the universal Transcendent Function in art. Jung's scholarship teaches that 'archetypes' are patterns of ideas within the 'collective unconscious' that are inherent in the psyche and thus common to all peoples and all cultures. Therefore, varying themes found within art are understood as originating from this universally common source of the collective unconscious. Cross-cultural symbols for transcendence, found in art, are often manifestations of universal archetypes such as the coalesced anima and animus.

The Archetypal image in art forms was explored since pre-historic times as is found in ancient artworks throughout the world starting from the cave paintings and is still prevalent among numerous tribes. Jung believed so deeply in the representation of Archetypal symbolism in visual art that he adopted art-therapy as part of his psychoanalysis stratagem and exploration of the collective unconscious [17]

Many artist painters were treated by Jungian method of psychotherapy among them, the visionary Swiss painter Peter Birkhuser was treated by a student of Jung, Marie-Louise von Franz, and corresponded with Jung regarding the translation of dream symbolism into works of art. American Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock underwent Jungian psychotherapy in 1939 with Dr Joseph Henderson. His therapist made the decision to engage him through his art, and had Pollock make drawings, which led to the appearance of many Jungian concepts in his paintings.

According to the study of Jung,[18] the history of symbolism says that the whole cosmos is a potential symbol; everything can assume symbolic significance from natural objects to man-made things and even to the abstract forms like numbers, square or circle. These have highly symbolic meaning for ancient and primitive societies, used in primitive cultures, objects of religious veneration and also as form in artworks.

In the medieval age, religious feeling, mysticism, irrationalism plays a great part and evolves the geometric shapes like circle, triangle and *mandalas* also called *yantras* acted as strong symbols in the Christian and non-Christian paintings as well as

architecture. For example the *mandalas* represent the cosmos in its relation to divine powers in Tibetan Lamaism. There is a common *yantra* motif is formed by two interpenetrating triangles, one point-upwards and the other points downwards, this symbolizes the union of *Shiva* and *Shakti*, which appears in countless variations in the sculptures of Indian visual arts. In terms of psychological symbolism it expresses the union of opposites.

Logic in man's thought[19] changes his conception of the world with the dawning of the Renaissance. And art became more realistic and sensuous. Gothic art once were a true symbol of the spirit of the age, there were more circular ground plans. The circle replaced the Latin cross, this change in form however is the important point for the history of symbolism which must be attributed to aesthetic and not to religious causes.

Fascinated with earth and nature Renaissance goes deep enough and determines the development of visual art for the next five centuries can be seen with the 19th century impressionists. In the development of the imaginative style art, the alchemists invents a thousand names and symbols for example the *quadratura circuli* which is no more than true *mandala*. The 15th century Flemish painter Hieronymus Bosch may be regarded as the most important representative of this kind of imaginative art. Even today the geometrical or abstract symbol of the circle plays an important role in the paintings, but the circle may or may not take a dominant position in the works. They may be represented as a group of circles, or the plane of the circle is asymmetrical. For example, *Limits of Understanding* by Paul Klee a 20th century painting in which the symbol of the circle retains a dominant position.

Jung[20] calls modern art as a symbol, as an artist is the spokesman of the spirit of his age, the works may not be fully understood in terms of his personal psychology. An abstract painting reveals an unexpected background, a hidden sense. It shows a similarity with the molecular structure of organic and inorganic elements of nature, an exact image of nature. Hence pure abstraction has become an image of concrete nature and so there forms a bridge to the unknown, the hidden sense.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one notes that the reading of symbolism in the dreams, taps the unconscious. Jung in his analysis of dreams goes deeper in search of symbolic elements/content and enters in the world of unconscious, the unknown. In the same way he illustrates the symbolic content in the visual arts, of India and far-east and also the Christian world. "What lies behind the symbol is something hidden and can

thus be a question of psychoanalysis whether the interest is in the history of a work of that of the artist.”[21] He points out the influences that created symbolic thinking or content emerged and generated in an artist can be understood. Mason Cowell[22] in the abstract of his thesis is critical in his writing about Jung’s approach to visual art, says that New Art History is relatively recent and may accept his analysis but the major direction within the art history discipline will not embrace the Jungian’s understanding of the visual arts and its analysis.

While exploring Jungian[23] psychology and the aesthetic domain, to quote Van Den Berk’s conclusion, that proposing the core concept of the ‘symbol’ Jung constructs a theory of the imagination that overcomes disciplinary, mythic and individual boundaries. By take apart the notion of psyche as bound to an individual person, he suggests that the symbol transforms the dialogue of Jung, Jungians and art.

The psychoanalytic approach has done a service to the understanding of art. In a work of art every element, whether it pertain to perceptual form or to subject matter, is symbolic, that is, it represents something beyond its particular self. By understanding Jung’s in-depth study and approach to symbolism, an analysis in visual arts is possible through the psychological approach by studying the usage of symbolism undertaken by the artist in the earlier as well as in the contemporary practice of art.

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