

# THE ART OF LIFE

RUNNING HEAD: Art of Life

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I discuss the value of art, specifically painting as a form of Active Imagination, drawing on my own personal experience. I discuss the nature of the symbol and the archetypal image and their potentially transformative effect on the psyche. I also discuss the nature of Active Imagination itself, including the ethical obligation to realise the meaning of the constellated archetype in one's conduct of life.

The images of the unconscious place a great responsibility upon a man. Failure to understand them, or a shirking of ethical responsibility, deprives him of his wholeness and imposes a painful fragmentariness on his life. C.G. Jung

Often people approach the unconscious with an inner utilitarian or power standpoint. They want to exploit the unconscious.... Such a person does not notice that he is deceiving himself. M. L. von Franz

Nothing in the human psyche is more destructive than unrealised, unconscious creative impulses. M. L von Franz

Symbols are shaped energies, determining ideas whose effective power is just as great as their spiritual value. C. G. Jung

If consciousness is the central secret, life is the outward indication, the effective power of being in matter. Sri Aurobindo

Knowledge and force or will -- for all conscious force is will -- are the twin sides of the action of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo

It is not I who create myself rather I happen to myself. C.G. Jung

Mankind was freed from these fears [of the primitive mind] by a continual process of symbol formation that leads to culture. C.G. Jung

Only one who is confronted with an insoluble conflict knows something about the Self, and how the Self operates. Only in a situation where you are absolutely in need of a creative solution will you experience the source within yourself. Therefore any true analysis will lead you into a completely impossible situation where there is no answer, there is only a way to be created and you yourself cannot create it, but you depend upon the function of the creative sources within. C.G. Jung

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### Introduction

Without a relationship to the Self, life is meaningless and without valid purpose.

Meaningfulness, however, can be restored through a living connection to the symbol.

As Jung observes, "Only the symbolic life can express the need of the soul -- the daily need of the soul, mind you (quoted in Edinger, 1972, p. 169)." Indeed, the individuation

process takes place by way of a conscious and personal relationship to the Self through the symbolic image. A life of conscious individuation is a symbolic life.

### The Symbol

What then is a symbol? To begin with, a symbol is the best possible representation of something that, in itself, is essentially unknowable and “an unsurpassed container of meaning” (Jung, 1971, p. 237). In comparison, a sign represents a known entity, for instance in the way a company logo stands for a company. A sign is a conscious fabrication, whereas a symbol is a spontaneous product of the archetypal psyche, which comes laden with objective meaning (Edinger, 1972, p. 109, 110). Should any given image, which may have been meaningful in the past, become depleted of its living meaning for either the individual or the collective body, it loses its subjective validity as a symbol.

Symbols are creations of consciousness-force and are not only the source of ideas but they also come with effective power of transformation. In other words, a symbol is a transformer of psychic energy par excellence, which can divert energy away from its natural flow to a higher purpose. As Jung (1968, p. 47) observes, a symbol is a “means of utilising the mere instinctual flow of energy for effective work”. A personal and conscious relationship with the symbol is gained not only by contemplation of activated archetypal images but also by allowing for their transformative effect in one’s life. Without access to archetypal symbols, the libido stagnates in a pool of defused energy,

while archaic fantasies such as the lust for power and sexual and other wishfulfillments become stimulated.

### Art and Active Imagination

Becoming aware of and understanding the message of one's dreams and acting accordingly can be a significant help in relating to the symbol. But Jung regards a process he calls Active Imagination to be an even more direct road to the symbol forming aspect of the psyche (Johnson, 1986). Essentially, Active Imagination is a meditative process, which involves an active dialogue between the conscious ego and symbolic products from the unconscious. It differs from dreams in that the conscious ego participates in the fantasy process, whereas in dreams it does not.

Von Franz (as quoted in Johnson, 1986) indicates that there are four essential steps to Active Imagination. They are:

1. "Emptying the mind, by pulling back from the natural flow of personal thoughts and images.
2. Allowing images, thoughts and feelings from the collective unconscious to flow in.
3. Actively taking ethical decisions in relationship to these images, thoughts and feelings, and
4. Integrating the meaning contained in these symbolic products along with ethical considerations into the conduct of one's life (p. 161)."

To some degree, many contemporary artists go through the first two steps of this process. But the lack of an ethical dimension and desire to integrate the symbolic material into daily life differentiates their efforts from Active Imagination. It is simply a question of attitude and desire. There is no reason why painting, music, poetry and dance cannot be a genuine form of Active Imagination. Indeed Sri Aurobindo's epic poem Savitri is a supreme example of poetry that is at the same time a subjective meditation. His approach to poetry, surely, points the way towards the future.

The level of Active Imagination that individuals become involved in depends upon their disposition and level of awareness. At one level, one can enter into a dialogue with different figures of the unconscious, which can take the form of "dreaming the dream onward". At another level there may be a dialogue with archetypal symbols or of those directly representing the Self. In either case, the amount of assimilation that is possible is relative to the individual's degree of consciousness and power of concentration.

The level of expression of the Self in Active Imagination is also dependent on the nature of the individual's consciousness. Sri Aurobindo's Savitri, for example, comes laden with the power of the word and is an expression of exceptionally high and integrated states of consciousness. Of course, it is not important to reach Sri Aurobindo's or anybody else's level or form of conscious expression. What is personally important, rather, is that one eventually finds one's own way to carry out this dialogue with the unconscious at one's own level of awareness.

The form of Active Imagination that I generally engage in is painting, which is an approach that is not without precedent. Perhaps the most highly developed use of painting for psycho-spiritual purposes can be found amongst the Tantric artist from India and Tibet, although some North American Indians also engage in similar practices. There are also certain similarities in attitude and approach to be found amongst Zen artists, and the icon painters of the Orthodox Church.

The one significant departure in my approach to painting from some of the traditions I have just mentioned, at least as they are often understood today, is that for me, following Jung, there is generally no conscious dogma or preconceived form or colour that defines the image. Indeed, any preconceived aesthetic, spiritual, religious or intellectual idea can get in the way of representing the symbolic nature of the psyche, which is my intent. From a psychological perspective, allowing the natural symbols to speak for themselves gives insight into one's life and its underlying patterns. This is not possible when meditating on images that are dogmatic, or somehow imposed from the outside, no matter how elevated or sublime.

As the psyche is not only objective but purposive and intelligent, the individual is enjoined to let it speak for itself. At the level of the cultural and collective unconscious, the psyche produces natural symbols, images of archetypes that are found throughout the world. Despite the underlying similarity of the archetypes themselves, archetypal representations are culturally and historically relative. Moreover each individual's perception of them is somewhat unique, given that person's particular subjective

predisposition. In my own paintings, the reader will find some examples of these symbols, expressed in a manner that is appropriate to my cultural background, historical context and individual uniqueness.

There are several different ways in which I engage in artistic Active Imagination. The most prevalent one is that I take a partially or completely finished picture or painting that I see in a dream and carefully reproduce it. I am always amazed at what the unconscious throws up and recognise that I could not possibly come up with such a synthesis through mental fabrication. This process is decidedly introverted, which may explain, at least in part, the static nature of many of the images.

A second way is that I allow the emotion and image to explode outwardly in a more extroverted fashion. I have found that I have felt the need to use this approach in only a relatively few cases. In a somewhat similar, although more introverted fashion, I allow line and colour to flow without any preconceived notion, gradually building an image or series of images, sometimes even doodle-like. This is a third approach.

A fourth way is to take a painting or picture and basically copy it, modifying it to taste. I do not normally recommend this method, as it can easily become an external imposition on the psyche and superficial. I have only done this once. In fact, it was a challenge presented to me by someone and I reluctantly agreed that I would do it. Interestingly enough, the picture of the painting appeared in a dream a couple of years later, suggesting that there was still the need to assimilate the meaning behind it. In other

words, the painting was, for me, symbolic and therefore a genuine act of creative meditation, despite the fact that it was essentially a copy.

There is no verbal dialogue in this form of Active Imagination, although I do become aware of certain thoughts passing through my mind. The dialogue is essentially between the ego, representative archetypal images and the Self. During the artistic act I am intensely involved in the shape, form and colour of the image and allow it to permeate my being. Concentration on the archetypal image in such a way is what is referred to in yoga as tapas, the concentration of energy-force, which unquestionably has the effect of stimulating the unconscious and comes along with a potentially transformative effect. Moreover, during the course of painting or drawing a meditative stillness often takes over, indicating that some link is being formed to the Self. Sometimes this stillness overtakes me in completing the painting or even as I complete painting for the session in question. In addition to my intense involvement with the image during the act of painting itself, I hold it in my consciousness at other times during the day. This eventually allows me to come to some understanding of the symbolic meaning of the image for my life.

The third and fourth stages in this process consist of taking ethical decisions based on the insights derived from becoming conscious of the symbolic tendencies in the psyche and integrating them into life. The archetype, which is a blueprint for action, contains both an apprehending spiritual pole and a dynamic pole. The ethical decision is related to consciously aligning one's dynamic life in the direction being urged by the

Self, a process, which requires a dialogue between the constellated archetypal image, circumstances of one's life and the ego. In practical terms this involves containing the opposites and appealing to what Jung (1975, pp. 67-91) refers to as the Transcendent function, a third position, which reconciles consciousness with the unconscious. This approach not only leads to a symbolic life, but also results in both a transformation and purification of the ego and the spiritualization of one's nature.

### Amplification

When I complete a painting I amplify or "vary freely" on its meaning. As I implied above this, in itself, is only indicative of the symbolic value behind the images. But I hope, nonetheless, that the amplifications [in this document] will be suggestive enough to give the reader some idea of the process involved and the significance of such an exercise.

The images found in my paintings are symbolic representations of different archetypes. They are not archetypes-in-themselves, which are essentially unknowable, but representations or imprinted images of the archetypes. The unconscious speaks a primordial language, which can be understood through the study of mythology, fairy tales, religion, anthropology, psychology, spirituality, alchemy and even contemporary science, and so on. There, one can relate to symbolic expressions of the archetypes and, in some cases, meanings people have attributed to the archetype in the past. Such amplifications can help understand the significance of the archetype that has been activated in one's life.

In order to gain understanding, therefore, I amplify i.e. "vary freely" on the meaning inherent in the archetypal image by drawing on the source material indicated above that is similar to the image that has been reproduced and/or that seems to be related to it. As Jung (quoted in Mattoon, 1984, pp. 69, 70) argues, in addition to its value for the individual practitioner, one is also contributing towards the development of a comparative anatomy of the psyche, which he sees as objective. Amplification is essentially an intellectual and intuitive approach that brings the mind and intuition to the assistance of the individuation process. It also tends to work the intuition *per se*. Moreover it helps to make one more aware of the link between personal experiences, the objective psyche and a universal design

Although important, amplification is relatively speaking, a secondary process. What I find most helpful is to hold the image itself in consciousness while carefully scrutinising both my dreams and the events in my life. Eventually, the meaning reveals itself, and I can perceive the direction that the psyche is seeking to flow.

Active Imagination allows one to become aware of the ever-emerging intelligence and instinctive pattern of the individuating psyche. Becoming conscious of these underlying patterns and values from the unconscious gives one the moral task of consciously participating in eventually living them out in daily life and making ethical decisions based on one's growing awareness. As Jung (1970, p. 363) so movingly writes: "only the living presence of the eternal images can lend the human psyche a dignity which makes it morally possible for a man to stand by his own soul and be convinced that it is

worthwhile to persevere with it.” Artistically rendering inner archetypal images, concentrating on them, amplifying their meaning and allowing the underlying archetypal pattern to direct one’s daily life makes this a living reality.

Art originally had a religious, ritualistic and therapeutic significance throughout the world and was an expression of wholeness. After the Renaissance in the West, art became fully severed from its true roots. This split began in classical Greece when the mythological worldview gave way to philosophic speculation. There subsequently developed increasing concern for a decorative and externally derived aesthetics. Although this development is not entirely misdirected, it can encourage a relatively superficial approach to art. Indeed, art has a relationship to a deeper aesthetics and wholeness which, at times, may even seem to contravene the canons of established good taste.

We now live in a subjective age, no longer driven by the intellect and intellectual reason. It is an age when individuals are once again turning within, albeit often for the sake of a glorified ego. This has been dramatically reflected in art for about a century now. Artists have turned away from outer rules and seek images, form and colour from within. To date, however, there is little evidence of their drawing any ethical conclusions for the conduct of their daily life from the messages contained in their art, or of an ethical dialogue stimulated by their creation. Perhaps because of the perception that ethical standards and judgements get in the way of the aesthetic experience, artists generally still shy away from this kind of introspection. But future

artists will, without doubt, recognise the need for adding the religious and ethical dimension to their artistic activities, restoring art to its rightful place.

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At this point in time, the required ritual is for the individual pursuit of consciousness. In the process, artists will discover new creative forms for the age-old collective rituals as well. Meanwhile, when one does art as Active Imagination, one is participating in a magic ritual, a ritual for self-transformation and the widening of consciousness. One is then being an artist in the primordial sense of the word. By reflecting back on the numinous both within and without, one is also being religious in the original sense of the word. Individuals with this attitude are religious in the context of the presently evolving spirit of the times, the deeper demands for which are the development of an integral consciousness. This means the development of consciousness that is not at the expense of life but for life, not repressed life but life fully lived. Such artists are co-creators with the Self, while participating in the unfolding of consciousness-life.

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