

# MANDALAS

## Pictures of One's Self and the World

*The mandala and its symbols are the windows through which we can view the essential nature of our being.*

—Ngakpa Chögyam

**Van James**

**W**hen we think of mandalas, we usually think of the Eastern tradition of Hindu and Buddhist ritual iconography. The Tibetan Buddhist practice of constructing

intricate sand mandalas is now fairly well known in the West due to regular demonstrations and exhibitions at art museums, civic centers, and churches throughout America.

However, the mandala, which means circle or essence container (*manda* = cream, best part, highest point; *la* = signpost, indication, completion) in Sanskrit, is just as much a Western tradition as it is an Eastern one. In fact, the mandala, or circle, is one of the oldest and most widespread archetypal images in art. Primal peoples have always seen the circle (mandala) as an image of wholeness, completeness, perfection, unity, nature, goddess, or god.

### Commonalities of Mandalas

Mandalas are fundamental to Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religious art, and are crucial to modern design, especially commercial art. Consumer studies show that shoppers have a preference for items that incorporate the circle; in fact, we purchase items with circles on them 40% more often than those with any other form. Consider the large number of consumer products and corporate logos that incorporate the circle in their design: Coke, Pepsi, Burger King, Tide, Quaker Oats, 76, Circle K, and Mercedes Benz, to mention just a few.




Mandala design and construction can include the study of traditional crafts and art history, comparative religion, anthropology, architecture, and various mathematics and sciences, if one looks hard enough. But in the art studio, work with symmetry, pattern, metamorphosis, sign, and symbol, as well as color, and dream imagery can bring forth astonishing creativity from students of any age. Working with the various divisions of the circle and freehand geometry is most helpful in this regard, and it encourages one's innate sense of shape to become more conscious of the wondrous language of form.

### The Mandala in the Classroom

Traditionally, mandalas were created to portray universal values, insights, and inner truths, as well as for telling spiritual, religious, and mythological stories. Their creation was an ordering of elements and a shaping of awareness toward the end of creating a sacred space, a consecrated place

**The mandala, or circle, is one of the oldest and most widespread archetypal images in art.**

in which the self could experience itself as an image in the world and the world could live in a picture of one's self. In the classroom, the art of the mandala can be a rich medium for the self-expression of the individual, and the deepening awareness of one's self in the world. 

*Van James teaches drawing and painting at the Honolulu Waldorf School, in Hawaii, and is the author of *The Secret Language of Form: Visual Meaning in Art and Nature*. [vanjames@hawaiiantel.net](mailto:vanjames@hawaiiantel.net)*

#### NATIONAL STANDARD

*Students select and use the qualities of structures and functions of art to improve communication of their ideas.*

#### WEB LINK

[www.vanjames.smugmug.com](http://www.vanjames.smugmug.com)



*Eleventh-grade students from the Honolulu Waldorf School do symmetry mandalas and themes dealing with the struggle between light and darkness, as well as themes about seasonal festivals in Hawaii.*

#### Exercise

1. Draw a freehand circle in wax crayon, soft pastel, or oil pastel as large as possible on a piece of large paper. Keep going around the circle to perfect it as you draw.
2. Mark the center and divide the circle in half with a straight line, creating a vertical diameter.
3. On the left side of the circle create a unique line with curve, straight, loop and angle.
4. Draw the mirror image of the line as precisely as possible on the right side of the circle. (Lefties may do the opposite procedure.)
5. Repeat the process with a different colored, overlapping line.
6. Color areas to bring out the forms.

