



Circle and Cross: Icons of Life and Death

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The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second; and throughout nature this primary figure is repeated without end. It is the highest emblem in the cipher of the world.¹

--Ralph Waldo Emerson

The top of the cross points in the direction of the northwind--the most cold and powerful--associated with the head, the seat of intelligence. The left arm, pointing to the eastwind is associated with the heart. The foot of the cross points towards the burning southwind, and is the seat of ardent passion. The right arm, in the direction of the friendly westwind, relates to the breath [that] ultimately escapes softly into the unknown night. The center of the cross, the point of intersection, locates the earth, where man is cast into the battle raging between the gods and the winds.²

—traditional Lakota Native American wisdom

When I began research on my book *The Secret Language of Form: Visual Meaning in Art and Nature*³ and took up a study of the circle and cross theme, among many other forms, I felt it necessary to engage myself artistically with these two elemental forms. I therefore completely changed my style of painting and drawing at the time and entered into a dialog with these two architypal principles.

The circle together with the cross expresses the very inception and genesis of form. Circle and cross are the binary code of form, the yin and the yang of gestures, the polar opposite characters that work together to create a unified picture of the universe.



Circle and Cross #17, (left) watercolor on paper. *Circle and Cross #7*, (right) watercolor on paper.

The circle on its own is a perfect form, conceived with one closed, continuous curved line that has no straightness, no angles, no beginning, and no end. The circle is traditionally considered to be feminine in character, a picture of the life-giving, “All-Motherly Womb of Worlds,” a representation of the Goddess, and the Eternal Feminine. Primal peoples recognized the circle as a powerful image of wholeness, a picture of the universe in its all-encompassing gesture, the unity of the Great Spirit, God, nature, and life itself. Other associations include: the sun, cosmos, earth, heaven, all, nothing, fertility, fullness, emptiness, perfection, navel, vulva, wheel, stomach, breast, head, eye, protection—and the list goes on. Plato and Pythagoras declared the circle to be the most beautiful of all forms, while Marja Gimbutas stated: “Circles, dot-in-circles, suns, and cupmarks are often found on surfaces hidden in the ground or at the bottom of orthostats [stone slabs lining temple walls]. These carvings were not made for human view, but as ritual actions for

communication with the divine, an evocation of the Goddess's regenerative powers hidden in stone. These are the symbols of the center, the source or focal point where life begins and flows out, increasing in concentric circles and arcs. If it were possible to count all cupmarks (artificial and natural), circles (concentric and open), and dot-in-circle motifs, it would become clear that these symbols are the most numerous of all, and therefore germinal.”⁴



Circle and Cross #17, (left) oil pastel on paper. *Circle and Cross #15*, (center) oil pastel on paper. *Circle and Cross #16*, (right) oil pastel on paper. The three primary/lustre colors relate to thinking, feeling, and willing, as well as to spirit, soul, and body.

Every circle is the same, except for its size, and concentric circles, rhythmically expanding and contracting around a point have long been used as indicators of cosmic/earthly activity. Megalithic cultures sometimes represented the change of seasons by increasing and decreasing arrangements of concentric circles. Such forms were revered images that appear even today as ritual symbols in aboriginal art and as devotional mandala iconography in Asian religious art. The mandala aids meditation, helping to center the self as a point within the great circle of the universe. In fact, the Sanskrit word *mandala*, simply translated as “circle” actually means “essence container.” The mandala form is used by almost every religious tradition throughout the world as a microcosmic picture of macrocosmic forces, a diagram of the universe or a picture of the self within that universe. In Zen practice the circle stands for enlightenment and the perfected human being.

Carl Jung, one of the founders of analytic psychiatry, worked with mandalas in his own life and in his medical practice. He said: “Very ancient magical effects lie hidden in this symbol . . . the magic of which has been preserved in countless folk customs.”⁵ Its use as a seal or emblem of authority

and power demonstrates the circle's remarkable cross-cultural influence.

Controlled studies in advertising show that consumers will purchase a product with a circle on it 40% more often than one marked with any other shape. Advertisers use this knowledge to their advantage in designing logos and other media images. Manhole covers are round because they won't fall into their own hole and they have no corners to break off. Structurally, they are stronger than any other form. In order to form a psychological profile of potential employees, Microsoft asks on their company application forms why manhole covers are round.

In any given circle the circumference and the radius can never both be measured in whole numbers, whatever the unit of measure. If the circumference or radius can be measured in whole, rational numbers, then the other will be an endless, irrational decimal, because of the relationship between them, a value known as *pi* (3.1415926...).

The circle is the most practical shape for many purposes, but it also touches something much deeper within us. The circle speaks to both our cellular level and to our individuality, our self-contained spiritual identity, self or *I*-principle. "Looking at a circle is like looking into a mirror," says Michael Schneider. "We create and respond irresistibly to circles... because we recognize ourselves in them. The message of the shape bypasses our conscious mental circuitry and speaks directly to the quiet intelligence of our deepest being. The circle is a reflection of the world's—and our own—deep perfection, unity, design excellence, wholeness, and divine nature."⁶

Following the initial scribble drawings of young children around the age of one and a half or two years the circle and the simple cross or star form appears. They first appear separately and then are brought together. Later, the human stick figure will grow out of these drawings.

There is a surprising number of cruciform images painted on late sixth millennium BCE ceramics, found throughout the Middle East. The cross at this time was usually rendered in connection with the circle, whether through the form of the object it was painted on, as in a bowl or basket, or by way of the graphic image that surrounded it. This was often the case with the cross form, even into the early Christian era when the cross of humanity and space still acknowledged the circle of nature

and time (eternity). It is in this way that what was seen as the powerful masculine value of the cross was held and contained by the all-embracing, life-sustaining feminine gesture of the circle.



Circle and Cross #3, watercolor in ultramarine blue, prussian blue and white on paper.

The vertical straight line is the antithesis of the circle. It is separate, upright and alone. As we have seen, the circle is a single, continually curving line that has no beginning and no end, with its circumference equidistant from its center point, forming a perfectly angle-less, geometric form. It is enclosed, at rest, and complete in itself. In contrast, the vertical line is separated off from this wholeness; it declares itself independent where it penetrates the depths and rises to the heights. It is thoughtful, alert, and active in its directional striving. It is active, with a decisive character. It forever goes in opposite directions and is never fulfilled or at rest. The horizontal line stretches out into its surroundings and ranges within the widths of space having a dream-like, feeling character. Just as the vertical has to do with timely growth forces—as in the plant kingdom—the horizontal is associated with movement through space and is related more to the animal. The plant is rooted to one spot and waxes and wanes over the course of time, while the animal is free to roam through space. The animal's spine grows in the horizontal; even its jaw projects in this plane.

When the vertical and horizontal are combined, the cross of humanity is formed. This intersection of the directional streams--up and down, left and right--creates a focusing of energy into a crossing point. Time and space meet. What is more, the point that is created by this meeting is the center of an invisible circle. However, the cross in itself is only straight lines and right angles. The intersecting elements of the cross create a form in which wakened consciousness is present. Awareness, but also pain and death are implicit in the cross. Broken and fragmented, it divides and conquers space at the same time that it acknowledges space.

To the Egyptians, the hieroglyphic symbol of the cross meant destruction and vengeance. Yet, it is also a symbol for the human being with outstretched arms taking a stand within the four directions of space and within the course of time. Verstockt says: "The point in the cross where the horizontal and vertical lines intersect is important--the I (center of the cosmos), where the heavenly and earthly meet; the Godhead and divinity; the union of opposites: masculine and feminine, positive and negative, life and death, the active and passive principles."⁷ It is at this center point of the cross that birth and individuation are implied but also where consciousness, pain, and death find their point of departure.



Circle and Cross # 27, acrylic burnt sienna, burnt umber, white and gold on canvas.

As the symbol of order in nature, the cosmos, and the human being, the cross in various times and places represented the four directions of the compass, the four times of day, the four phases of the moon, the four seasons of the year, the four elements and four kingdoms of nature, the four stages of life, the four cardinal or fixed points of the zodiac. In all these cases, order and direction are presented in the form of the cross. Mandalas are often divided into four for this reason. Many Native American sand paintings are divided into four quadrants in order to call upon specific directional powers. Black Elk, a Lakota Native American medicine man, said of these directions: “The east gave peace and light, the south gave warmth, the west gave rain, and the north with its cold and mighty wind gave endurance and strength.”⁸ Each direction of the cross has a qualitative reality.



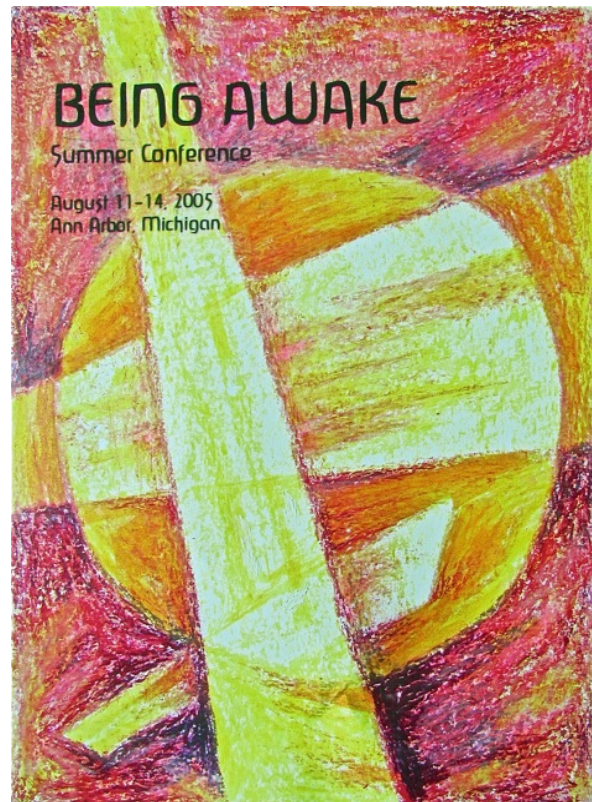
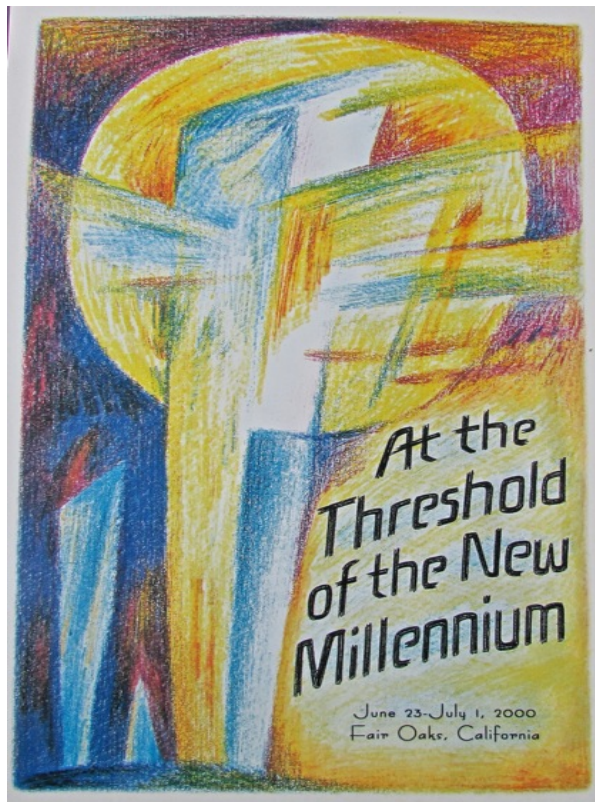
Circle and Cross #21, (left) oil pastel on paper. *Circle and Cross #23*, (center) oil pastel on paper. *Circle and Cross #26*, (right) oil pastel on paper.

The diagonal, Saint Andrew's cross or saltire, emphasizes the chevrons (one pointing down, one pointing up) meeting at their angle points. The Saint Anthony's or Tau Cross has no upper vertical portion and is a Masonic symbol which according to legend could be used by Hiram-Abiff to call together the free workers, the skilled craftspeople who worked on the temple when the authority of Solomon could not. Steiner says of this cross: "The Tau sign symbolizes a totally new power, based on freedom, and consisting in the awakening of a new natural force."⁹ The Latin cross has an extended lower vertical. Unfortunately, the Latin cross was forced upon many parts of the world in such a way that the Egyptian meaning of destruction and vengeance is what indigenous peoples often experienced. Like the swastika form of the East, a benevolent form of positive energy, the cross cast a dark shadow side when used in the wrong hands.

In Hindu tradition, Brahma, the creator god, rotated on his thousand-petal lotus flower (circle) and acknowledged the four directions (cross) before creating the universe. In this gesture of mythic proportions the supreme god of Indian cosmology acknowledged the circle of creation and manifested within it the cross of the world. Everywhere in the primal past the cross is found as an archetypal image of great power particularly when brought together with its sister form the circle.¹⁰

This powerful, masculine form of the cross is united with the feminine principle of the circle in the

images of many primal and prehistoric cultures throughout the world. It reappears in the Christian era as the Celtic high cross or the Irish sun cross. Here the circle-and-cross form is more than a convenient symbol for Celtic Christianity, as it speaks in the living language of archetypal imagery for the unity of matter and spirit within the four kingdoms of nature. It depicts the microcosmic incarnation (point) and the sacrifice of the macrocosmic being of the universe or Logos (circle) upon the cross of the world. The circle and cross aptly embody the Christian theme. Plato describes in the *Timeaus* how the World Soul will be crucified on the World Body. Graphically related to the Egyptian *ankh*, the symbol of incarnate life, the sun cross is for the Celtic Christian a picture of the Sun Being, Christ, incarnating into earthly substance and physical form for the redemption of matter—the cosmic “Word [or creative principle in the universe] made flesh.” (John 1:14)



Two graphic designs utilized the theme of “Circle and Cross” for conference posters.

Because they are forms, shapes, the circle and cross are essentially themes for drawing. They are thoughtforms best represented in linear gestures. So this aspect could not be ignored in working with them. An important question was how to go beyond the contoured two dimensional aspect of

these shapes and move toward the musicality of their inner gesture. Color became a major ingredient but always in parallel, so to speak, with the form. The paintings in watercolor and acrylic, and the oil pastel drawings that arose from this study were often not planned-out but evolved spontaneously. The struggle between color and form considerations played a big part in the image-making process. Graphic designs were also attempted using this theme. It became quite clear that color expands the circle and cross theme in an infinite number of unique and remarkable possibilities. However, my conclusion was that I hardly even scratched the surface of the circle and cross motif as a theme for painting.



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