

Cover story AJC Decatur Book Festival



Susanne Fincher works on a mandala in her studio at the back of her Decatur home. Devastated by the death of her child and a divorce, Fincher began the simple therapy of drawing circles in 1976. Today she is an international expert. Photos by Bob Andres bandres@ajc.com

A life in full circle

For artist, author and therapist Susanne Fincher, finding and embracing an ancient symbol led to a brand new path. Now others beat a path to her door.

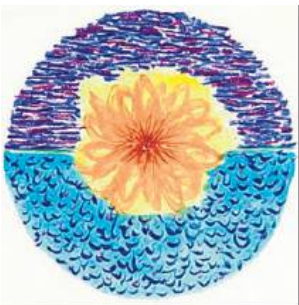
Works by Susanne Fincher



Untitled



"Moving in the World"



By **Michelle Hiskey** For the AJC

Susanne Fincher imagined her circle of pregnancy in 1972 ending with her daughter's birth, a joyful crowning into the world.

Instead, the baby was stillborn, leaving Fincher bereft, the circle broken.

Or was it?

From sorrow deepened by her subsequent divorce, Fincher literally drew herself out of misery. Now 68, she inhabits an ever-renewing circle of wholeness.

On Saturday, Fincher, now a best-selling author and international expert in the circular symbols known as mandalas, will be a featured speaker at the AJC Decatur Book Festival. The sacred circles can be seen in labyrinths and crop circles, prayer wheels and sand paintings of ancient societies. A living cell, a lucky pen-

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‘Nothing is wasted in life’

Reinvented

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ny, even the Target logo are modern mandalas familiar to many.

People from around the world travel to Fincher’s Japanese garden in Decatur to journey within themselves by drawing, coloring and interpreting mandalas.

“She guided all of us into an important inner trip to discover and touch our soul, our spirit and our heart to feel better,” said Annalisa Ippolito, an art history teacher who trekked from Bologna, Italy, to study with Fincher.

Circles as solace

For Fincher, the death of her daughter was like a millstone thrown into a pond. The ripples now are bigger, wider and reach further than she ever imagined.

In the wake of that tragedy, Fincher found no solace in work, which had included stints as a librarian, teacher, census worker and an Underground Atlanta retail clerk. She returned to a childhood love of arts and crafts to “try to make it through another 24 hours,” she said in her usual quiet, matter-of-fact manner.

She told her sister, Marilyn Clark, that her pain subsided and she felt safe when she drew a circle. Clark, a psychotherapist in Baltimore who specializes in guided imagery and music, connected her with mandala devotees who welcomed Fincher into their ring.

Fincher studied under Baltimore art therapist Joan Kellogg, who was using the mandala as a way of connecting a person’s



Susanne Fincher works in her studio, built by her husband, at the back of her home. Photos by Bob Andras bandres@ajc.com

drawn images, patterns and shapes to his or her psychological well being. Fincher read “Mandala,” a 1972 book by José Argüelles, a painter whose round artworks grew out of experiments with hallucinogens.

Around the same time, Fincher’s mother invited her to a “Journey into Wholeness” conference at St. Simons Island. One focus there was psychoanalyst Carl Jung’s research into shared symbols across cultures, especially in dreams. One recurring symbol was the mandala, a Sanskrit word meaning center, circumference or magic circle.

Jung had reinvented himself from a restless academic to student of his inner life. Each morning he felt compelled to sketch circular drawings, and noticed they changed with his state of mind.

Forcing an inner conflict out on paper “often represents very bold attempts to see and put together apparently irreconcilable opposites and bridge over apparently hopeless splits,” Jung wrote in 1973. “Even the mere attempt in this direction usually has a heal-



Some of Susanne Fincher’s drawing tools. Through the art of mandalas, Fincher healed: She remarried, had another child and raised stepchildren.

ing effect.”

‘The Great Round’

To explore mandalas further, Fincher dove into the fairly new field of art therapy, and formed the Atlanta Art Therapy Institute in 1979. She gave workshops and used mandalas in treating psychiatric patients. As their minds healed, their artwork became more ordered.

She, too, continued to heal. She married, had another daughter and raised stepchildren. She began to see life itself as a mandala, an image that Kellogg called “The Great Round.”

Twelve equally spaced dots on the circumfer-

ence of this life circle correspond to events such as birth, goal-setting, achievement, loss and death.

“That really informed her ability to move through hard times and come through the other side,” her sister said.

“I realized that nothing is wasted in life,” Fincher said. “I did not see that [death of my child] as a necessary step, but the way it is with life experience, there are no dead or blind alleys. Experience is a circle of beginnings that inform our experience, and we can use that to be more of who we should be, more courageous and fearless.”

Fincher saw the need, and the market, for a simple but deep personal guide to sacred circles. The project itself turned into a mandala, its design taking shape as she wrote.

“I never thought of myself as a writer,” she said. “At the end of a chapter, the way would open to what the next [chapter] should be.”

In 1991, Shambhala Publications released “Creating Mandalas: For Insight, Healing and Self-Expression.” Soon came a workbook, and Fincher’s fourth coloring book of mandalas is due out in 2012.

“Creating Mandalas” has sold more than 70,000 copies and been translated into four languages. The 2010 edition includes a new chapter on group mandalas.

To write that, Fincher assembled friends and students who represent her work rippling out into the world.

es inside her and helped her learn to trust her instincts.

“I learned to not block what was coming out,” said Gregory, now head of Kennesaw State’s art education department. “Mandalas reinforced my ability to be more creative.”

Decatur artist and teacher Patty O’Keefe Hutton, 58, called mandalas a portal into a deeper knowledge of herself and away from a culture with a relentless work ethic.

“I have five circles in view of my sofa at work, and [mandala group work] made me appreciate why it’s my favorite shape and why I keep coming back to it.”

Athens licensed psychologist and yoga therapist Debra Alvis said mandala work with Fincher helped her overcome writing blocks and finish her dissertation. In her mind-body program at the University of Georgia’s counseling center, Dr. Alvis sees the mandala as a search engine for a higher consciousness.

“I see it as a deep form of concentration,” she said. “We only use a very small part of our brain, and these kind of approaches help us tap into the part of our brains and awareness that are not accessible otherwise.”

A few months ago Fincher helped her father, 94, draw a mandala. His dementia challenges her, and their circle had a thick border “because I need support to be with him now,” she said.

That circle joined her first mandala, drawn with markers in a severe rainbow, showing how tightly she held herself in her grief over her lost child, Glynis. Still other mandalas have soothed her as her children moved away and she went through menopause.

“When you are looking for wholeness,” Fincher said, “a mandala will come to you.”

Fincher has an impact

Diana Gregory, 61, made a daily mandala for five years after reading Fincher during college at Florida State. The patterns of color, shapes and concepts revealed chang-