

Mandala History



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Mandalas are found among the most ancient art forms created by human beings. Rock carvings found all over the world incorporate the circular form and its variations such as spirals, crosses, concentric circles. It is thought that they express worshipful awe of nature's cycles and the mysteries of life and death. The alternation of day and night, the ever-changing moon, and the rhythms of the seasons are aptly expressed by circular designs. These natural occurrences became the foundation for a worldview based on circles. This point of view is eloquently expressed by Black Elk, the Dakota elder:

“Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves” (cited in Neihardt, 1961:32-33).

The attempt to orient oneself in the world probably gave rise to the early mandalas that consist of a cross inside a circle. We can imagine how this might have come about. As our ancestors took to the high ground for a clear view, they saw that the horizon line appears to be a circle with themselves at the center. In order to move safely about in large land areas, they would have devised ways to orient themselves within this vast circle. It would have been natural to use the center of the circle—one's own body—as the point of beginning for a system of directions. The body offers a consistent focal point for organizing the space within the circle of the earth's horizon.

The bilateral arrangement of the limbs and organs of the body creates a right and left side. With arms outstretched in opposite directions away from the body, one might imagine lines extending beyond the outstretched arms to the horizon. This establishes two opposite directions in the circle. The placement of the eyes in front of the head naturally suggests the line of sight as another direction, and implies its opposite as a continuation of this line extending behind. Thus we can imagine the classic mandala pattern consisting of the horizon line (circle) and four lines radiating outward from the body in the center.

This scheme for dividing up space was utilized by Etruscan soothsayers. They interpreted events according to where within this imaginary mandala design the happenings took place. The use of the body to establish directions is also suggested by the Native American custom of including the center point of the self as another

direction in their system of orientation. Native Americans also add the directions up and down, suggested by the vertical stance of the body, giving a total of seven directions.



Circling dervish

Similar developments took place in the traditions of African thought. Egyptian mythology describes the cosmos as a seamless round before time began. Within this circle Nut, goddess of the sky, and Geb, god of earth, were tightly bound to one another. With the loosening of this circle, the world parents separated and set in motion time, creativity, and consciousness—the power to count and measure. Creation myths based on the idea of the circle as the beginning of knowledge are found in the traditions of the South Pacific and India as well. Clearly the motif resonates with deeply felt human intuitions.

Such thoughts influenced philosophy and artistic creations for thousands of years. The layout of pyramids, castles, monasteries, towns, and cathedrals was governed by sacred mathematical equations that allowed builders to transpose celestial perfection to the earthly plane. Mathematical operations for dividing the area within a circle, for calculating a right angle, or for finding the sides of a triangle were originally performed with a sacred intent. Gradually, the sense of sacredness was lost though the usefulness of the ideas was retained. Now students learn these math equations as part of their basic education.

The circle has been useful in efforts to explain how things began, to find one's bearings in the world, and to symbolize the wonders of nature. It is not surprising that the circle has also been used in rituals that attempt to induce, channel, or contain experiences of the sacred. Many religious rituals begin with the establishment of a sacred circle. Voodoo priestesses, for example, trace a circle on the ground to issue an invitation to the gods.

Some ceremonies use circular movement to create an ecstatic state of mind. Eskimos incise a circle in stone with repetitive, rhythmic movements for long periods of time in order to bring about a trance. Dervishes spin to participate in the sacredness of the circle as a manifestation of celestial harmonies. The dramatic climax of the sun dance ceremony of the Plains Indians comes when participants swing suspended by ropes, revolving in a slow circle around a central pole.

The space within the ritual circle is changed from ordinary to sacred space. For peoples who perceive in the circle a reflection of the essence of life, creating a circle is a sacred action. It may also be an attempt to achieve resonance with the divine harmonies of the universe manifested in the circular paths of the sun and moon. By synchronizing one's actions with the divine plan, it is thought goodness will result. It is for this reason that contact with the sacred realities defined by the circle is thought to be healing in cultures such as that of the Navahos.



Blue Mosque, Istanbul

The Navaho peoples of the Southwest live a quiet life ruled by traditional ideas about nature, life, and health. Illness is thought to be the result of a disruption in natural harmonies. When a Navaho healer is asked to help a sick person, he goes through ritual activities that restore the natural balance. He smoothes a circular area on the ground and creates a mandala with colored sand. The sand painting is made in a traditional design selected by the healer to address the needs of the situation. Once completed, the patient is placed at the center of the sand painting. The sacred order in the mandala design is thought to restore harmony and invite helpful deities, therefore bringing about the restoration of health.

Places existing in nature can also take the form of the circle. Caves and mountains are notable examples. Ancient peoples often identified impressive natural places as sacred without the need for human rituals to make them so. Deep, dark caves were held in awe as places to contact the ancestors. Lofty mountains, where one could command a farseeing view, were felt to be closer to the spirit world of the sky. Rituals at holy sites sanctified them even more.

The celebrated Mount Fujiyama in Japan is an example of a natural sacred site. Mount Fujiyama is a volcano seventy miles southwest of Tokyo. It is the tallest mountain in Japan, rising to over 12,000 feet above a flat plain near sea level. Legend has it that the volcano formed in a single night in 285 B.C. It has been quiescent since the 1700's.

Fujiyama is an isolated peak that can be seen for miles. It is a favorite subject for artists and poets. As Japan's sacred mountain it is visited annually by thousands from all over the country. A spiraling pathway carries pilgrims from its base near the ocean to its snowcapped peak. They stop at numerous shrines and temples

located along the sloping climb for refreshment, meditation, and the pleasure of a fine view of the water and surrounding countryside.

People establishing civilization began building structures for ritual purposes with reference to sacred caves and mountains, perhaps hoping to incorporate something of the power of natural sites. The kivas of the Pueblo Indians are built like caves underground. They are round because “the sky where it meets the Earth is a circle” (Williamson, 1978:82) Perhaps aspiring to draw closer to the sky deities, people constructed forms that suggest the shape of a mountain. Some of the earliest known man-made sacred mountains were built in Mesopotamia more than five thousand years ago. These structures are called ziggurats.



Tibetan sand mandala

Ziggurats were built according to plans based on numbers and proportions gleaned from careful study of the moon, stars, and planets. Each consisted of a square, truncated pyramid ascended by a prescribed number of steps. The top of the ziggurat was considered most holy. A sacred tree was often planted there, and it served as a platform for astronomical observations. Climbing to the top of the ziggurat moved one to the center of the sacred precinct. As sacred space this point also symbolized the Center, the primal source of all creation. The ziggurat functioned as a model of the cosmos, and the story of creation was encoded in its structure.

The tradition of the ziggurat continues in sacred places of the East, such as Borobudur in Java, Indonesia, and Sanchi in India. Sanchi is revered as the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment. The structure consists of a massive dome fifty feet high in which resides a sacred relic of the Buddha. The dome is circled by a walkway. Outside the walkway four walls form a square entered through elaborately carved stone gates.

The Buddhist shrine at Sanchi is the setting for ritualized circular movements as well. Pilgrims enter the shrine through the east gate, mount the walkway, and circumambulate the shrine in a clockwise direction. As the devotee enters the gate and moves closer to the relic, he is caught up in a powerful psychological state (Craven, n.d.). Being in the presence of a relic of the Buddha is thought to have beneficent effects. The circular pilgrimage around the stupa serves to heighten the intensity of the experience. This site has been the focus of continuous devotions for over two thousand years.

If we imagine ourselves above the shrine at Sanchi looking down upon it, its three dimensions would appear to be reduced to a flat design of two dimensions. We would then find a close resemblance between the patterns of Sanchi and those of the intricate mandalas of Tibet. Tibetan mandalas incorporate the forms of the circle and square along with an array of other figures, symbols, and motifs. One can discern in the squares the basic structure of a walled fortress with four gates. The symbol of a deity is placed in the center circle. We can see how the Tibetan mandala reiterates the pattern of Sanchi with its circular dome and square-walled precinct.

There is another similarity. Devotees also circumambulate the mandalas. They do so not with their feet, however, but with their eyes. They trace the mandala design according to customary procedures. Each gate is guarded by a fierce deity that represents an aspect of self that must be confronted before moving nearer the center: attachment, greed, fear. The mandala serves as a map of inner reality that guides and supports the psychological development of those wishing to advance in spiritual awareness.

The mandala as a visual aid to attain desirable mental states is also known in Europe. There are wonderful examples in Gothic cathedrals, in the rose windows that invite the eye and dazzle the viewer into a sense of harmony, awe, and exultation. Medieval European churches often incorporate a circular labyrinth designed in floor tiles near the entrance. This mandala is a representation of the pilgrimage to the Holy City of Jerusalem. Pilgrims pray as they move on their knees from outside the labyrinth, slowly progressing inward toward the center and the New Jerusalem. Performing this symbolic journey, it is felt, helps the devout Christian move closer to the mythic Jerusalem, which is a metaphor for union with God.

The desire to share her experiences, to teach and guide others to the same realizations, inspired Hildegard of Bingen to share her visions of mandalas. A Christian nun living in Germany during the eleventh century, Hildegard sought to communicate an understanding of God she received. Hildegard described one of her visions of God as:

“a royal throne with a circle around it on which there was sitting a certain living person full of light of wondrous glory...And from this person so full of light sitting on the throne there extended out a great circle of gold color as from the rising sun. I could see no end to it.” (Cited in Fox, 1985:40)

In another vision she reported seeing a wheel centered like a womb in the chest of a towering figure. She writes: “Just as the wheel encloses within itself what lies hidden within it, so also does the Holy Godhead enclose everything within itself without limitation, and it exceeds everything” (Cited in Fox, 1985:40).

The mystical experiences of Hildegard compelled her to begin creative work in writing and preaching. Sharing her mandala visions was healing. It seems that this activity was for her a celebration of what she had seen, a way to provide a container for the numinous experiences, and an attempt to bring information to others in a form they could understand and find useful. The creation of mandalas was healing for Hildegard. She began her work much burdened by illness. When she expressed her creativity, her symptoms disappeared.

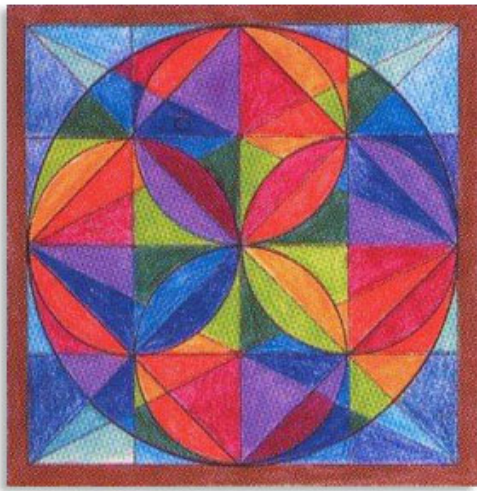
Another European mystic, Jakob Boehme, created mandalas symbolizing Christian cosmology. He envisioned two great realities of spirit and matter (nature) turning together as wheels within the larger circle of the Godhead. He

wrote:

“The wheel of nature turns in upon itself from without; for God dwells within himself and has such a figure, not that it can be painted, it being only a natural likeness, the same as when God paints himself in the figure of this world; for God is everywhere, and so dwells in himself. Mark: the outer wheel is the zodiac with the stars, and after it come the seven planets” (cited in Jung, 1974:239).

Boehme would make of his cosmic vision a mandala for meditation. He writes that “we could make a fine drawing of it on a great circle for the meditation of those of less understanding” (cited in Jung, 1974:239).

Boehme was much concerned with opposites. His ideas were influenced by the traditions of alchemy that prescribe the separation of base matter into opposing elements before refinement and distillation into a valuable substance. His work was controversial because he suggested that all things consist of a dark and light aspect, even God. His mandalas appear to be divided into two parts subsumed by the greater wholeness of the circle. We can see in his work a reliance on the form of the circle to contain and organize disparate elements in a harmonious whole. This reflects his mystical vision that all things are contained within the larger reality of God.



Giordano Bruno design

Giordano Bruno, an Italian living during the Renaissance, created a series of mandalas he believed would bring about positive changes in individuals who used them. His designs represent perfect forms purported to exist in an ideal plane. He encouraged the use of his mandalas in visualization exercises. Bruno believed that by taking the images into memory, the imagination would become imprinted with ideal forms. This, in turn, could result in a personal transformation for the better, more in keeping with the harmony depicted in his mandalas.

So we see that mandalas in the esoteric European tradition are not unlike those of the East. The form of the circle, filled with carefully calculated shapes and symbols with spiritual significance, celebrates divine perfection.

Contemplating these mandalas is thought to bring one into harmony with an ideal plane of existence in ways that change one for the better.

We can see that mandalas have a rich and meaningful past as a method of orientation, a spiritual practice, and a connection to the cosmic harmonies of the universe. Mandalas help human beings to know where they are and to move about safely on the face of the earth. Art, architecture, religion, and philosophy make use of circles to express insights about the nature of reality and the relationship between God and humankind. Traditional peoples all over the world use mandalas in rituals as a way to mediate contact with the sacred and to honor the power behind life's mysteries. We draw on this history when we create and color our own mandalas.

History of Mandalas Bibliography

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