

Unlock the Mysteries of Life with “Symbols: A Handbook for Seeing”

by Sara Rosen

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The human mind is a magical, mysterious place where things are (as much as they are not) what they appear to be. Within the mind, layers are added to experience in the form of narration, translation, and interpretation in search of the great, vast overwhelming call for meaning in this majestic and monstrous world. There are so many questions we ask ourselves when we behold that which lays before our eyes. The desire to know can become a need, as our mind is inclined to require a structure upon which it can operate.

So we find ourselves in this curious space where we both seek and receive information that we do and do not understand. Most of us are disinclined to the rigors of critical thought, for it drains us of illusions and fantasies and replaces it with a state of ongoing doubt. It is far easier, and less unnerving, to skate along the surface of life—though invariably the ice is thin in places we may not foresee. Thus, the questions show themselves. Who the what now—and can someone please tell me why?

Swiss psychologist Carl Jung (1875–1961) made great strides into articulating the nature of the mind and the way in which it interacts with the world around us in his 1934 book, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. Here, he supposes, “Whereas the personal unconscious consists for the most part of ‘complexes,’ the content of the collective unconscious is made up essentially of ‘archetypes.’ The concept of the archetype, which is an indispensable correlate of the idea of the collective unconscious, indicates the existence of definite forms in the psyche, which seem to be present always and everywhere. Mythological research calls them ‘motifs.’”

Ahh yes, the archetypes, myths, and motifs, all which go by a more common name: symbols. Ohh but don’t you just love a symbol? It’s the perfect bon mot: simple, handy, and universally understood. They live everywhere, in all cultures and all times, even inhabiting the world of our dreams like instant messages from the other side.

Symbols are so prevalent we do not question them—we just take them as they are, trusting in the universe that this knowledge cannot be questioned or undone. Jung believed that they were evidence of, “a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals.” Ohh yes, it sounds a bit outlandish, but it has proven to be so pragmatic that he might just be on to something here...

The Monacelli Press understands and has just released [*Symbols: A Handbook for Seeing*](#) by Mark Fox and Angie Wang. This glorious paperback is the perfect reference guide for artists, designers, and the visually inclined. With more than 400 images from sources as diverse as Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* to Stonehenge, *Symbols* is a crash course in the nature of the collective unconscious and the vocabulary it uses to manifest its ideas.

Organized into five sections that include Nature, Animate, Human, Man-Made, and Abstract, *Symbols* provides intriguing overviews of the archetypes that have fascinated humanity for thousands of years. From the sun, moon, and stars to lions, tigers, and bears to the cross, circle, and the spiral to the hand, eye, and mouth—it’s all here. And what’s more, *Symbols* reminds us that in a world filled with emojis, we are naturally a visual culture.

Once upon a time we were pre-literate. But as *Symbols* reveals, that’s quite natural—thus the return to visually dominated communications. Whether selfie or meme, emoji or gif, we love a shortcut fueled by the universal experience of the archetype. And while we may know, in that ineffable way that images work, *Symbols* articulates that knowledge into understanding via the usage of words. Here we can delve into the details that unite Lewis Carroll’s March Hare with erotic toys, revealing how Easter is named for the moon goddess Oestra, who bore a bunny head and celebrated the resurrection of life every spring. *Symbols* is as compelling as it is charming, a must for those intrigued by the modes of speaking every language at the same time without ever having to utter a single word.

[*Miss Rosen*](#) is a New York-based writer, curator, and brand strategist. There is nothing she adores so much as photography and books. A small part of her wishes she had a proper library, like in the game of Clue. Then she could blaze and write soliloquies to her in and out of print loves.