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Three Pictures of Saints

1. Virgin Mary – protectress of the animals
2. Saint Catherine's wheel – lived up to the edge
3. Saint Barbara's tower and her Barbarines

The pictures are my own creations: I want to share my knowledge of legends, myths, popular beliefs and rituals, ethnology and iconography by the means of amplification and interpretation in a Jungian way and connect theory and artistic practice on an equivalent level. By using this approach of reverence and twinkling humour I want to open the realm of saints beyond any specific denomination. The saints are rooted in Central Europe, but they exist worldwide and represent archetypal forces. Saints are usually connected to certain places of worship and patronage. I have used photographs of paintings and statues, the most of them located in Switzerland, and show a mixture of installation, collage and performance, while the pictures are accompanied by poems and songs.

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Short Biography:

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The images of Saints

[See images at the end of this document]

Images of saints coming from former times appearing in the present

The Virgin Mary – protectress of the animals

The Virgin Mary has been the outstanding saint of the Catholic Church throughout the ages. Many attributes of pre- Christian goddesses have been transposed to her. For the ordinary

people one outstanding characteristic has been that of being female intercessor in their prayer to God.

The growth of the adoration of the Virgin Mary coincides with the accomplished Christianization of Europe which had in general terms taken place in a one way direction from upper classes down to ordinary people. Nevertheless the ordinary people felt a substantial need for a female arbitrator in heaven for their needs and fears. According to the gospel the Virgin Mary fulfils this deep desire in an outstanding complexity. She has been shown with many different attributes and surnames. This development having flourished in the Middle Ages when knowledge, especially felt knowledge was distributed via images and pictures, we now find a tremendous richness in Mary's iconography,

One of these types of design is the protectress of people.

Usually she is shown in a tent- like robe (or coat) with which she protects numerous small human beings located close to her feet. According to rules of worship and of painting in those times the Virgin Mary is shown much taller than other beings in that composition. There do exist precursor versions of this design, e.g. from the Celtic- Roman period. In the old ages there existed a custom to adopt a person legally by covering him with one's robe.

Paintings of this type have been existing within the Catholic Church from the 13th century onward. Quite often the person(s) who ordered the painting are shown under the precious coat, them usually being either worldly or clerical upper class people. Seldom other saints, such as St. Ursula or St. Barbara are shown with a protecting coat – for details look at the publications of Angela Mohr who did in-depth research on that.

Well, what about nowadays? My own Catholic upbringing established a deep love in me to the biography of saints, especially to the numerous illustrations of their vitae in chapels and churches.

Recently one specific aspect of the Virgin Mary took me in violently: the Virgin Mary acting as intercessor for despised and detested animals:

Thus in my illustration you see numerous despised animals:

at the bottom, on the left: fish, frogs, toads;

at the bottom, in the centre: bats, spiders, scorpions, owl and some beetles

at the bottom, on the right: crocodiles, snakes

at the top, on the left: miscellaneous pigs, including a wild boar

at the top, in the centre: cats of prey, lions, tigers, leopards, hunting- leopards, panthers

at the top, on the right: birds, a bird of prey, flying insects like flies, dragonflies, midges fill the air.

In the picture I want to share with you the Virgin Mary is “not alone” with the multitude of beings seeking shelter close to her. – St. Martin, Saint Ursula, the Virgin Mary with a deer antler, the Virgin Mary treading down the snake of temptation come to her support.

Additionally and especially her pre- Christians ancestors from the Palaeolithic period, the ancient goddess of the animals, the Lady of the beasts known to us as Artemis and Diana and their sisters from the Neolithic Age, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age.

I daresay that the manifestation of Holy Mary as protectress of the animal world implies the hope we humans might finally realize that all living beings are part of one creation, everyone with his own worth and dignity and all together gathering in one all- embracing truth.

In German speaking Catholic communities we have a song from the 1640s invoking Holy Mary in the capacity of protectress:

“Mary- spread your coat to give as shelter/ Let us be sure thereunder/until all storms passed by/Patroness full of gentleness protect us all the time./Your coat is pretty large and broad/it covers the whole christendom/itcovers the large broad world/it is refuge and shelter for all./Patroness full of gentleness protect us all the time!/Mary help the christendom/ show us your help all the time/ With your mercy stay with us/protect our souls and bodies/ Patroness full of gentleness protect us all the time!/"

I want to broaden this invocation in order to include all living beings:

“Mary – listen to the sounds of us, creatures in the dark and show your mercy upon us-

Mary – listen to the sounds of us, creatures in the dark and protect us from those who forget to share

Mary – listen to the sounds of us, creatures in the dark and give shelter to us who have been bereaved of their natural living

Mary – listen to the sounds of us, creatures in the dark, abandoned from nature and reduced to human food or shadow lands of human abhorrence

Mary – listen to the sounds of us, creatures in the dark, and by thy intercession let us reconcile and befriend with man again!

Saint Catherine’s wheel – lived up to the edge

Saint Catherine of Alexandria was a quite famous saint in the late medieval times. Whether she really existed is a question of theological and historical research which cannot yet be definitely answered. Her cult in both the Catholic and the Orthodox Church has prospered and is deeply rooted in daily worship.

According to the legend of her martyrdom we meet her regularly with the symbols of a drawn sword and a broken wheel. St. Catherine, St. Barbara and St. Margaret form the three female canonical helpers in need the Catholic church knows (in total there are 14 helpers in need to turn to in specific needs).Saint Catherine has been worshipped as patron of millers and wainwrights. We find paintings and sculptures of her in many chapels and churches and she is patron saint of many churches.

As with many others, Saint Catherine may be hypothesized as the heiress of pre- Christian goddesses. Barbara Walker assumes in her study “the Women’s Encyclopaedia of Myths and

Secrets” Saint Catherine might be heiress of an Asian goddess who has been portrayed on top of mount Sinai as dancer in a wheel of fire symbolising the universe and her at the very centre.

In western Europe Saint Catherine seems to have inherited the iconography of Celtic- Roman matrons, of the Germanic Beths (who had been connected with fate), and of Greek, Roman and Germanic myths. This applies to Saint Barbara and Saint Margaret, too.

Similar to many other saints via her commemoration day she is connected to ancient weather proverbs and the calendar.

Even in western Europe Saint Catherine has pre- Christian similarities: the Roman goddess Fortuna was often shown with a wheel and a cornucopia. The Celtic goddess Rhiannon was shown with a wheel of stars. The invention of the wheel which occurred around 4000B.C. may be understood as of utmost importance for the development of civilisation. It might have been understood as of divine origin. Later on gods and goddesses are often shown on wheeled carriages.

The wheel itself is one of the outstanding symbols of mankind. It is of tremendous importance in many cultures. The well- known Buddhist Kalachakra mandala is connected with the wheel of time. Shiva, heir of the Goddess, dances his eternal dance in a wheel.

The wheel seems to be connected with both, with transportation and with the issue of time passing.

Saint Catherine has a deep connection with the passing of time which was of high importance in rural societies.

In Fiesch, Wallis, a different aspect is shown: Saint Catherine as a warrior, swinging the wheel like a shield.

Alas, usually in Christian iconography the wheel is shown as a broken one!

When I started my inner approach towards Saint Catherine I felt the deep obligation to mend the wheel or, in other words, to re-establish the lost wholeness. I wondered about the idea of sheathing the swords, that is to reconcile Saint Catherine’s opposing symbols, wheel and sword. Could the swords be used as spokes? Could they be used as knives for cutting?

In this illustration I enriched knives and wheels with wheel- resembling flowers (as heiress of the Old Goddess Saint Catherine is mistress of the plants, too). As wheels are multi- functional I show them as mill-wheel and balance- wheel, too.

Behind a whol in the center of the picture is affixed a little monitor which shows a video with wheels in action: wheels of cars, bicycles, wind wheels and a huge mill wheel.

Song for Saint Catherine:

Saint Catherine – you turn the time

you turn the wheel

dance with the wheel

dance on the wheel

turn the wheel, let go of the sword

feel the circle of the wheel

feel the circle of our dance

dance with me and keep me on the track

whatever time might bring

turn the wheel.

Saint Barbara and her “Barbarines”

According to Christian legend Saint Barbara, daughter of a barbarian (that is “bearded” = “barbatus”) nobleman was held captive by her father in a high tower to prevent her from getting in touch with Christianity. Nevertheless she was baptized, but died as a martyr in her blooming youth. The legend describes the miracle of angels dispensing the Holy Communion to her on her deathbed. Thus the symbols that accompany her frequently are the tower and the chalice. Her commemoration day is Dec. 4th. It is an old custom to cut branches of apple, cherry or plum on that very day and wait for their blooming on Christmas Day.

The tower was in ancient, pre- Christian days a place to perform sun cult rituals like in Mesopotamia around 3000 B.C.. The tower of Babel is familiar to us from the biblical tradition. The “Zikurrat” was meant as centre of the world and as axis for the world, a ladder towards heaven and a symbol for the path the soul has to climb. It was used for initiation rituals and for the ritual wedding of the high priestess with the chosen king.

In some ancient culture young girls were protected in towers from the outside world during the days of their first menstruation.

Towers were frequently used for divination rituals. The Roman historian Tacitus tells about wise women living in towers at the river Lippe – the most famous one named Veleda.

The city of “Magdeburg” in Germany is said to have had a “women tower”.

Researcher Lore Kufner, who has written a book on “Baptized Gods”, reports about a Serbian wise woman, Vila, who was said to have her sacred tower somewhere up in the clouds.

In patriarchal days the symbol of the tower is connected with male power, the phallus himself, and with global power. Architects compete with each other when constructing the highest towers they dare to think of. Destroying the twin towers on Sept. 11th has been more than a blow into the façade of the US.

Anyhow, the chalice has kept its relevance as a symbol of the female lap- whether as cauldron, cup or any other vessel – the overall idea is that of incorporation and containing.

Sometimes we find Saint Barbara with a sword or a flash of lightning, both according to the legend entire parts of her martyrdom. Furthermore there are clues that point to caves where she is told to have found shelter. Like Saint Catherine we might find a palm leaf in her hands, symbol for her victory over the death.

Different professions claim her as their patron saint: miners, shot firers, soldiers, tower builders, builders of fortresses feel that she protect them. Thus she is connected with both, light and darkness, the sun and with the interior of the earth as well as the interior of towers.

I have been collecting paintings for many years and especially with Saint Barbara I was fascinated by her tender connection to the tower in which she had been held captive. Sometimes she even seems to caress the tower like a small child. A special charm touches me looking at J.v.Eyck's painting which I used for this picture too: the saint, playing with a palm leaf, leans at the fragments of a tower which still is in the process of creation. Many persons are around and they might feel protected by her.

Song of Barbara:

Barbara,

chalice and tower,

swirl around, you and me, me and you

entering the tower, entering the dark

bitterness turns sweet,

from death we come to life

on our journey, you and me.

In my pictures I tried to open my mind to inner visions, to get involved into an intuitive play with paintings, chalices, towers, wheels, animals, swords, knives, etc.

Within Catholic iconography different aspects of saints can be looked at from various angles, I looked at various saints and at relevant aspects of their lives. And I found strong reverence to the assumption that ultimately we do not deal with "real persons" here but with archetypal forces embodied in legends and traditions.

Technique: Collage, Installation, relief

Material: mixed media: Wood, acrylic paint, fabric, animals for sandplay, feathers, filament, styrofoam, beads, feathers, colored sand, dried leaves, little wheels for toys, flowers from fabric, metal, artificial lawn, glass, etc.

Maria Anna Bernasconi/Zurich July 2008





