

# Across Cultures, Image Is Everything

*The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism Turns the Human Subconscious Into a Picture Book*

By ANDY BATTAGLIA

Up a flight of quiet townhouse stairs, on a manic stretch of East 39th Street that includes, among other things, a stately cultural institute, a religious mission and a center for "foot health," hides the New York branch of a mysterious enterprise called ARAS, or the Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism. It's hard to figure out exactly what goes on there, and even harder to explain once you know. But a lot of it owes to ARAS's namesake holdings: a collection of 17,000 "mythological, ritualistic and symbolic" images meant to catalog, more or less, the whole of our collective human unconscious.

It's an ambitious undertaking. But ambition figures highly in an organization that devoted 14 years of cryptic, almost monastic work to its latest offering: "The Book of Symbols," an 810-page tome assembled by ARAS in New York and published on Wednesday by art-book imprint Taschen.

The book is comprised of sections featuring collected images and short essays that, taken together, are meant to address all that lurks behind individual objects and ideas like "Bone," "Darkness," "Mouth," "Owl," "Drowning," "Blessing," "One." The work covers 350 different subjects (other section headings include Air, Shoe, Gossip, Scent, Swimming, Silence, Scorpion and Salt). At their service are nearly 800 images, taken from ancient and contemporary art, that were chosen for what they suggest about their subjects more than for what they show. Ultimately, "The Book of Symbols" is meant to evoke the wide range of connotations and psychic currents at work in ideas of lasting significance across different cultures.

"A 'symbol' points to something beyond just the thing in an image itself, beyond the knowledge that we have in our waking, conscious life," said ARAS curator Ami Ronnberg. "What we want to do is to go into an image and let the image speak on its own, to go into the deeper meaning of it."

Added her colleague Kathleen Martin: "One of the ways we chose images was almost like how they come up in dreams."

The challenge of finding concrete ways to describe such ineffable phenomena is part of what took Ms. Ronnberg and her team—a core group of five women who met weekly at the ARAS office, plus an army of around 50 writers commissioned for the essays—14 years to complete "The Book of Symbols." One way is to invoke the early 20th-century teachings of the analytical-mystical psychiatrist Carl Jung, whose work with archetypes at a series of European conferences featuring philosophers, scientists and spiritualists laid the groundwork for what would become ARAS more than 70 years ago.

Another way is to sit around a big table and argue. "It was hard to agree on the right images for 'Basement/Cellar' and 'Incest,' but we kept those in," said Karen Arm, an artist and team member.

"We often had battles," Ms. Ronnberg said. "But what happened in our meetings was the most fun I've ever had. We sat there and just looked, with the time to explore different images and hear other people's responses. Hardly anyone except for a nonprofit organization could keep working so many years on a book and finish it." Laughing, she added: "Some people doubted that we ever would."

After a long search, ARAS found a sympathetic soul in Benedikt Taschen, a publisher known for producing big and almost fetishistically exquisite books. "Although I was not particularly knowledgeable about Jung's concept of archetypes," Mr. Taschen wrote in an email, "I have always been interested in the language of imagery—where images come from and what they communicate. To bring all kinds of visual references and information from ancient and modern cultures into one book was an opportunity to learn more about a subject that is relevant to all of us."

Indeed, the specifics of Jung's work do not figure prominently in the book's collection of images and essays, which fans out to include references to poems, plays and tales from history and myth. The four-page section labeled "Bird," for instance, features an ancient Native American sculpture, a 17th-century Iranian painting, a remark by Emily Dickinson and a quotation from a 1980s animal-facts book.

Evoking different notions by surrounding them with various kinds of human observations is what ARAS does, both in "The Book of Symbols" and in the archive it maintains on 39th Street (the space is open to the public, as a library), as well as in an online database.

"What fascinates us is how we all perceive images," Ms. Ronnberg said. "Images flood us all the time. We see them, but we don't often think about them. But if you can go into an image, when an image moves you, there is something very powerful. That's what we were looking for—the kind of experience that genuinely affects you."



From left, Anne Thulin, Allison Longerek, Karen Arm, Ami Ronnberg and Kathleen Martin at the 39th Street offices of the Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism. The organization's new book, 'The Book of Symbols,' is out Wednesday.