

Review
Rick Poyner

The Book of Symbols is an exhaustive reference work that charts the visual representation of human experience. It's also a must for designers

The history of humanity, in pictures

Below: A Swedish rock carving dating from the Bronze Age (1800–500 BC) depicting ploughing as the transference of the forces of vegetation to the earth. Petroglyph © Vitlycke Museum, Sweden

I was browsing in the art bookshop at a museum in Copenhagen when I chanced upon a copy of *The Book of Symbols*. Even at first glance the 800-page volume was thrilling. I had barely begun to leaf through it when the shop assistant, who was moving around stacking books, paused to say that it was still possible, even now, for publishers to do something we have never seen before. My sentiments exactly. Only the high Danish price stopped me buying a copy there and then.

Thirteen years in the making, *The Book of Symbols*, published by Taschen, has been assembled and written by a team of writers and editors working with the Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism (ARAS) based in New York and other locations. The collection, inspired by the psychologist Carl Gustav Jung's work on archetypes and the collective unconscious, is home to 17,000 photographs, along with commentary about their cultural and historical backgrounds; the entire image bank can be accessed online for \$100 a year.

This citadel of a book is divided into five main sections: Creation and Cosmos, Plant World, Animal World, Human World and Spirit World. Thumb tabs, a traditional device that feels exactly right here, facilitate access – the 350-page section on humanity is the size of a book in its own right. Each section is further subdivided by theme. Human World covers the body, movement and expression, work and society, tools and other objects, house and home, buildings and monuments, colour and sound, and each of these categories is

then broken down by symbol. Under the human body, for example, we find entries on bone, spine, skin, hair, baldness, eye, tears, ear, nose, mouth, beard, teeth, and so on. The thematic survey is exhilaratingly clear-eyed and forensically systematic. Almost every significant area of human experience and symbolism is documented.

Each symbol receives at least a double-page spread, with the text placed on the left-hand page; some of the larger subjects, such as the head or hand, run to a second spread. Jung used the term 'collective unconscious' to describe the past experience of humankind, which has been hard-wired into the evolving structure of the brain. (Now I think of it, shouldn't 'computer' be in the archive by now? They have car, train, compass and telephone.) The collective unconscious is therefore part of every person's unconscious, reflecting universal ideas found in all cultures, which are manifested in the omnipresence of the archetypes. The book's picture selection, a monumental feat of research, is outstanding, with images and artefacts from every culture and period in history to demonstrate the recurrence of these archetypal symbols. Where the right image couldn't be found, notes Ami Ronnberg, the book's editor-in-chief, the symbol wasn't included.

Sometimes the subject is illustrated with a single image, which can be intriguingly oblique. For the crescent, in the Creation and Cosmos section, the editors offer one of Magritte's deadpan visual conundrums, showing the nocturnal moon apparently caught within the branches of a tree. Where the subject demands,

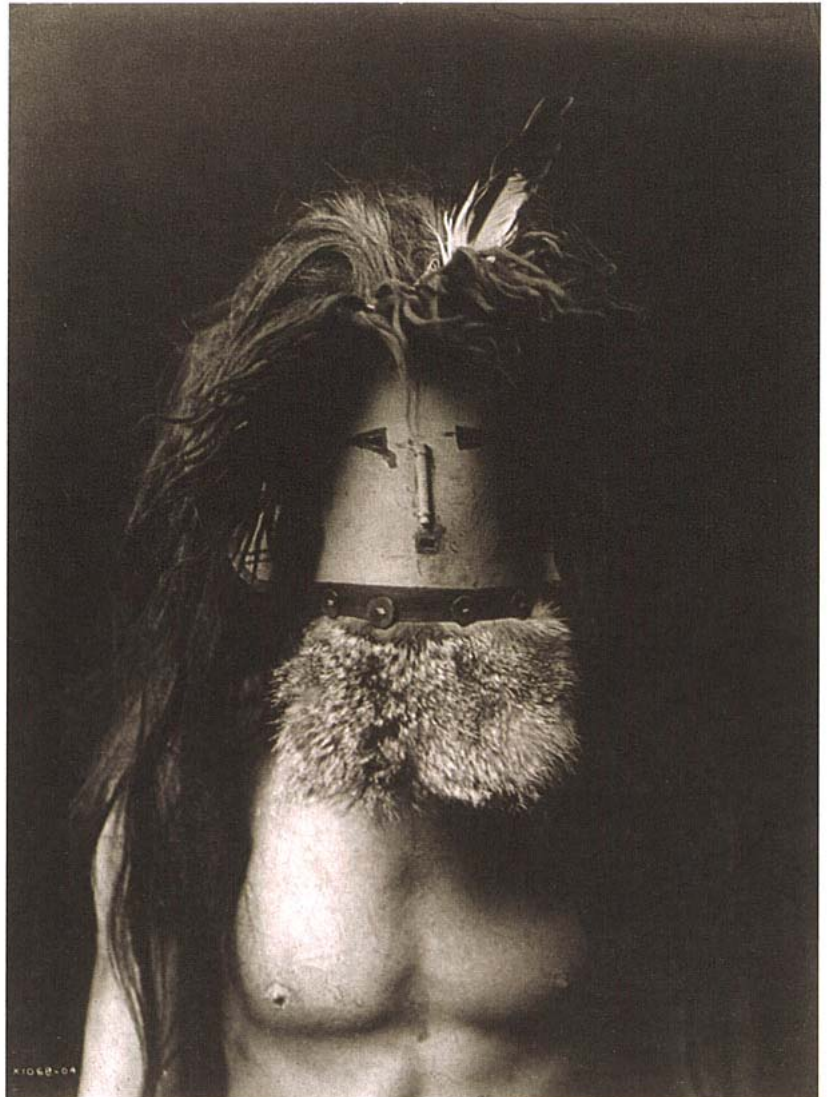
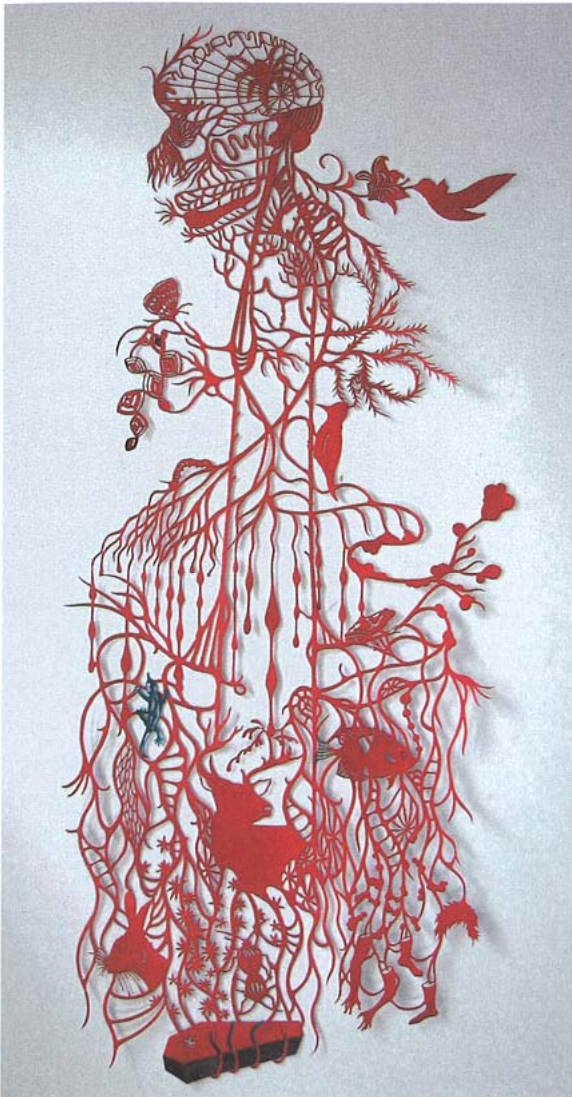


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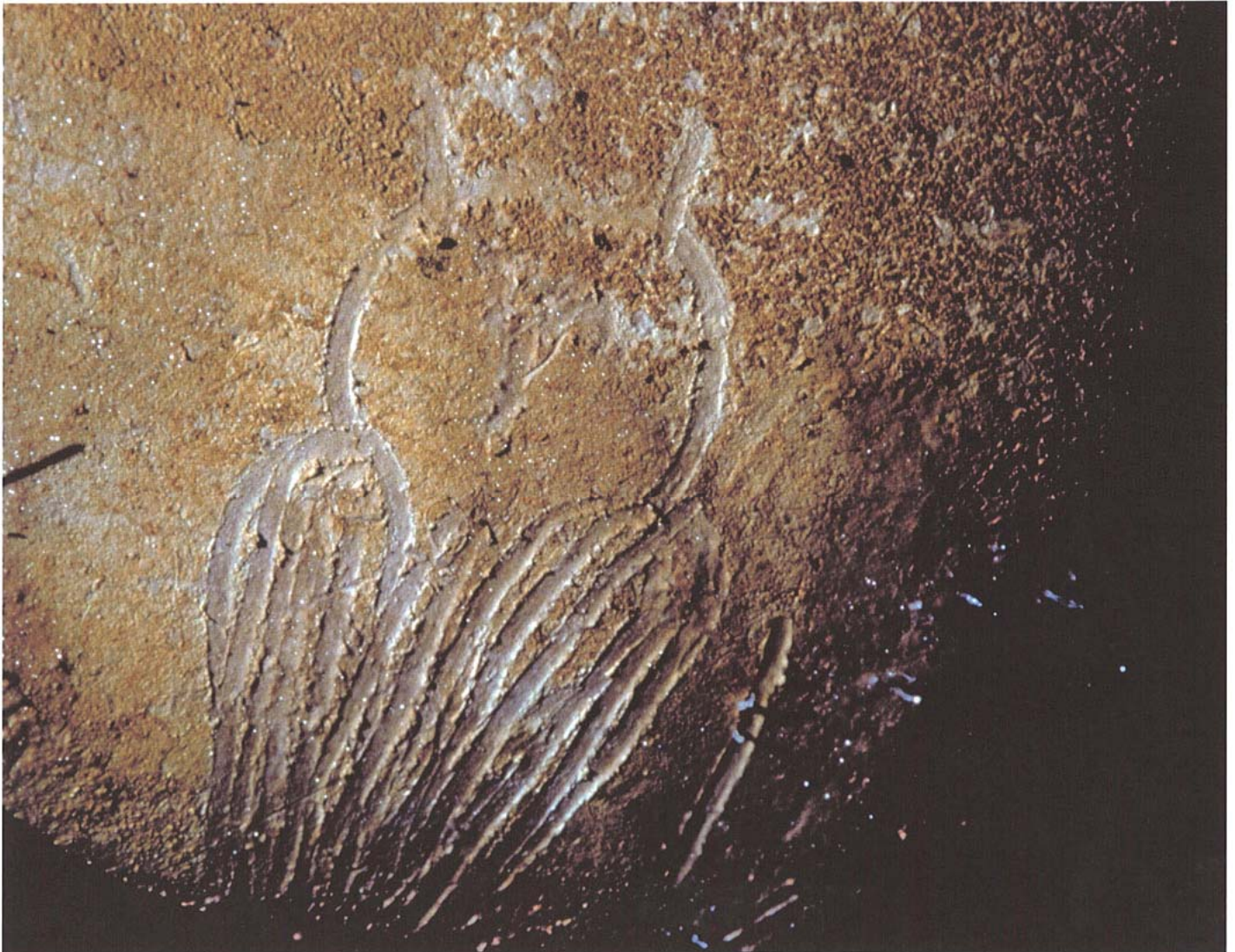
the image can be unsparingly direct. In the section on sickness and death, the grotesquely vivid torments of Matthias Grünewald's 16th-century Isenheim altarpiece represent the theme of crucifixion. There are many captivating shifts of visual mood. The previous entry, devoted to drowning, shows Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein's wittily dolorous comic-strip *Drowning Girl*: “I don't care!” she thinks in her final, petulant moments, “I'd rather sink than call Brad for help!”

Entries for other symbols make their point at more essayistic leisure with a selection of images in various sizes. The heart is displayed in a ceramic figure from 1000 BC, a similarly ancient heart-shaped amulet, a drawing by Leonardo da Vinci of the heart and blood vessels, and a painting of a bleeding heart from 19th-century Mexico. An entry about the image of ☽

Below, left: Kako Ueda, *Tree of Life*, hand-cut paper, 2005. © Kako Ueda
Below, right: Edward S Curtis's photograph of a Navajo man wearing a mask of Haschebaad, a benevolent female deity (c. 1905, US)



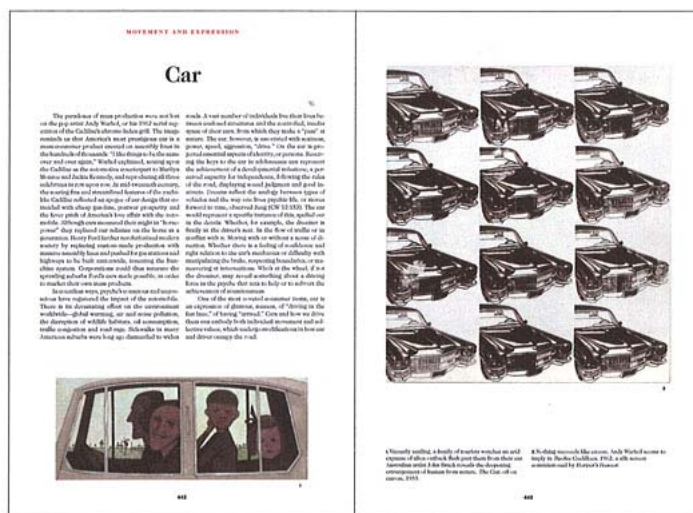
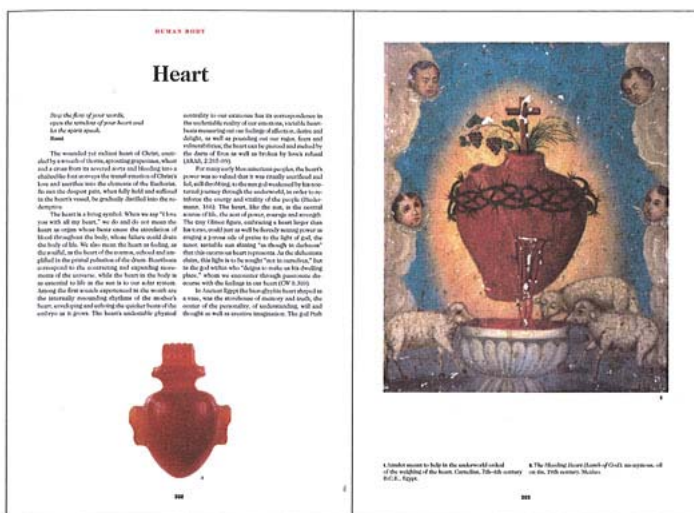
Below: The earliest known rendering of an owl from the Chauvet Cave in southern France was discovered in 1994. The work is thought to be 30,000-32,000 years old. Courtesy of the French Ministry of Culture and Communication



Below, left: A spread from *The Book of Symbols* dedicated to the heart features a Carnelian amulet from the 7th–4th century BC, found in Egypt, opposite an anonymous 19th century Mexican oil painting on tin, entitled *The Bleeding Heart* (Lamb of God).

Below, right: The car is also included in the book, represented by Australian artist John Brack's painting *The Car* (1955) and Andy Warhol's silk-screen for Harper's Bazaar, *Twelve Cadillacs* (1962)

See also: *The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism* at aras.org. Access to the online archive, which includes 17,000 photographic images (each cross-indexed and accompanied by a detailed explanatory text) costs \$100 a year



the stranger matches photographs of mysteriously indistinct figures by Betsy Meyersheim and Michal Rovner, both shot in the 1990s, against a picture of a shadowy intruder in a doorway taken from *The Birth of St John the Baptist*, a Renaissance painting.

The writers use these images as points of departure for around 350 short essays that embrace perspectives from religion, philosophy, psychology, art history and anthropology. The editors leave the texts' style and approach to the authors, but it's a shame the essays are unsigned; it feels a little impersonal. The 'stranger' essay is typical of their historical and conceptual range. It begins by mentioning Luca Signorelli's painting of the man in the doorway, "the mysterious other", before weaving together references to Christ's teachings ("I was a stranger and you took me in"), the

Old Testament, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the philosopher Francis Bacon, and Jung's description of the unconscious as "the Unknown as it immediately affects us". By integrating the unknown, the writer suggests, we work towards achieving wholeness as people.

Regular Taschen designers Andy Disl and Birgit Eichwede of *Sense/Net* in Cologne have designed *The Book of Symbols* and once again they have done a magnificent job. The two-column layout is restrained and unflashy as befits a project of this gravity, but not the slightest bit textbook or dull. The balance of text and pictures against white space is perfectly measured: the book feels dense with information yet leaves plenty of room to breathe as you explore its corridors and chambers. It's a pleasure to get lost in.

The *Book of Symbols* is a project of

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Ami Ronnberg, editor-in-chief

mind-blowing ambition and reach, and a book with an almost old-fashioned educational appeal. Bright, optimistic, bountiful and brainy, it makes you reel with a sense of wonder at the complexity of the human mind and soul. "Symbolic images are more than data; they are vital seeds, living carriers of possibility," writes Ronnberg. The blurb suggests the book will appeal to therapists, artists, art historians and – smart of them to think of this – designers. This fabulously instructive and inspiring work of reference will make an inexhaustible addition to any design studio library. No home should be without one either. All of human life is in there. You can't ask for more than that.

The Book of Symbols, by *The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism*, is published by Taschen; £24.99. taschen.com