The Art in The Red Book

Let me first tell you why I chose to talk about the art in the Red Book. When I opened the Red Book for the first time, I was stunned by the quality of the work: the calligraphy of ancient times, the meticulously colored illuminations, and the intriguing paintings. The aesthetic appearance of a monk's work from the Middle Ages that Jung chose to give to his journey into the unconscious had something compelling. This book was not only beautiful, it was odd. Not only was it at its birth already a hundred years old, but it seemed to come from far earlier times, when monks would devote their lives to the calligraphy of sacred writings. This is why I had to come home on that day with the Red Book under my arm.

Talking about art in the Red Book has something provocative, and Jung would protest if he were here. He himself denied vehemently that his Book had anything to do with art. But art was in fact the topic of one of his earlier fantasies. Before embarking on his imaginative journey, Jung had been a devoted scientist, passionately interested in understanding the working of the mind of the mentally ill, and eager to be recognized and to exchange his views with the best brains of his time. As a young psychiatrist he had for example designed a method of researching complexes on his patients. When, in his late thirties, he had to submit to an inner compulsion and open up to whatever came from his psychic depths, it was an extremely painful and humbling experience for him to let go of his intellectual assets and give up on his rational control. So not unexpectedly, while he was once writing down his fantasies, he asked himself what exactly he was doing here - since it was obviously not scientific. To his surprise he heard a voice coming from his unconscious, telling him that what he was doing was indeed art. He

countered the voice firmly, saying that no, it was not art, "it was nature". To say that it was art would have diminished in his eyes the authentic, unaltered quality of his fantasies. But this question stayed in his mind and he still remembered this episode when he dictated his memoirs in his late eighties.

Jung had in fact a strong affinity for art. He had had a lively interest in visual art in his younger years and had visited a number of art museums in Basle (CH), Paris and London. He had also practiced painting and developed fairly good skills with water and oil colors. Painting became again, with his work at the Red Book, an important part of his life. He liked to show and discuss his paintings with his analysands and encouraged them to paint. Many people in his circle of friends painted. But he was wary of "falling into art" as he put it, and of identifying himself solely as an artist. He did not join his friends when in 1919 some of them exhibited their works together with well known artists at the art museum in Zurich (Riklin, Arp, Täuber, Picabia, Giacometti). And although he spent much of his time sculpting and painting, at his tower house in Bollingen in his old age, and although he recognized that this was the only way (for him) to come to terms with unfathomable inner experiences, he would not call himself an artist.

So the artist is just one of the many facets of this truly extra-ordinary person. Jung proved to be an impossible combination of many beings, among them a scientist and an artist.

He was convinced that his artistic work in the Red Book was not to be an end in itself but yet another step in his lifelong task. As he was beginning to work on his fantasies, Jung's very first task had been to find an appropriate verbal expression for his different mental states (imaginal dialogues, lyrical

visions and reflections). He wrote and re-wrote his manuscript several times. But then, once he set on to write the final version, he chose to take as great pains over the form as he had taken over the words. The Red Book had to be a master work, as accomplished in its appearance as its content was timeless. So he had to find the appropriate inks and pen nibs from earlier times and to learn the calligraphic art of the monks of times long gone. Creating images and visual symbols was another milestone in his self-experiment of 16 years. As he reported in his memoirs, the painstaking working of art helped him to find out what he was supposed to do with all this. He should not remain at that stage, his "moral duty" as he put it was to go on and bring his insights into the outer world, and integrate them in real life. The last step of the work, which was to keep him busy to the end, was thus to mobilize all his powers, including his thinking, and channel the "lava streams" of his fantasies into psychological concepts accessible to all.

So if the work at the aesthetics was not a final achievement, it proved nonetheless an indispensable stage in his process. Jung must have spent innumerable days and nights at the calligraphy, the illuminations and above all at the paintings. His book had to be unusually beautiful, the container had to be as precious as the contained, for in that book was his soul. These are the words he used when he explained to his analysands why they should also write their own book:

> "Think of (your visions) in your imagination and try to paint (them). Then when these things are in some precious book you can go to the book & turn over the pages & for you it will be your church - your cathedral - the silent places of your spirit where you will find renewal. If anyone tells you that it is morbid or neurotic and you listen to them - then you will lose your soul - for in that book is your soul." (RB, p.

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Liber Primus, fol. i:

The calligraphic manuscript of the first book, or Liber Primus, was written on parchment pages which Jung later inserted into the folio volume. He thus reproduced meticulously the medieval illuminated manuscripts. Page 1 bears the title of the first book: “The Way of What Is to Come”.

The historiated initial, a “D”, shows a Swiss village with a church surrounded by medieval walls and towers, and mountains in the background. Close by on the far left is a protective fortress. Closer to us we see an ancient boat on a river. Higher up, the sun, the moon, a few stars and the first six signs of the zodiac are looking down on the scenery, making it clear that the mysterious forces of destiny are also having their say. What at the first glance might look like an idyllic Swiss landscape changes definitely when we discover the uncanny animals in the foreground: on the right is a big black scorpion, on the left a red-eyed monster resembling an octopus. So the stage is set, and we understand already that the process that Jung is going to describe sent him back into unsettling, frightening ancient times. The crowned serpent painted in the main branch of the “D”, that rises from a burning cauldron, gives a clue as to how his quest will end: with the birth

in his psyche of a new divine force or guiding principle, once his old values have been sacrificed (in the fire).

Liber Primus, fol. iv verso:

This is an example of the amazing amount of work Jung devoted to the transcription of his fantasies: historiated initials, illuminations and small illustrations ornament the carefully drawn lines of calligraphic writing.

Liber Primus, fol. v verso:

The picture in the upper right half illustrates Jung's first encounter with Elijah and Salome, described in chapter 9.

The two figures' regal composure and their temple like house in the background make a very dignified impression, and are in a striking contrast to the narrator (Jung) who appears to need Elijah to help him stand up and thus speak to them at eye level. Elijah is dressed in blue, the color and the coldness belonging symbolically to spiritual depth, Salome's red dress alludes to the warmth of lust. The opposition between red and blue is everywhere, and represents the combat between spirit and desire. At the bottom of the picture we see on the left the linear, cleanly cut, metallic blue stabs; on the right is a red being, maybe an octopus, whose many red arms are wound all around the blue stabs. Although the stabs extend as far out as the arms of the octopus, the latter seems to have the upper hand. We understand that passion and desire are going to be just as strong partners in this quest as spirituality will be, and that they will exert their influence on the seeker in a surreptitious, serpent like way.

Liber Secundus, p. 1:

The second book, or Liber Secundus, was also written in calligraphic script, but this time directly on the paper of the folio pages. And so were the paintings. The first page bears the title of the second book : “The Images of the Erring”. The motifs here, the eye, the flower and the red and blue strings in the main branch of the “D” are connected with the story that is unfolding. The eye might have to do with the images and the delusions that Jung is referring to in the title (“the erring”). As for the red and blue strings, we have already encountered the same opposition (between red and blue), embodied by Elijah and Salome. There the image was telling us of Jung’s inner struggle between the forces of passion and of spirit. This time however, the image is different. It is a nearly precise medical diagram of the

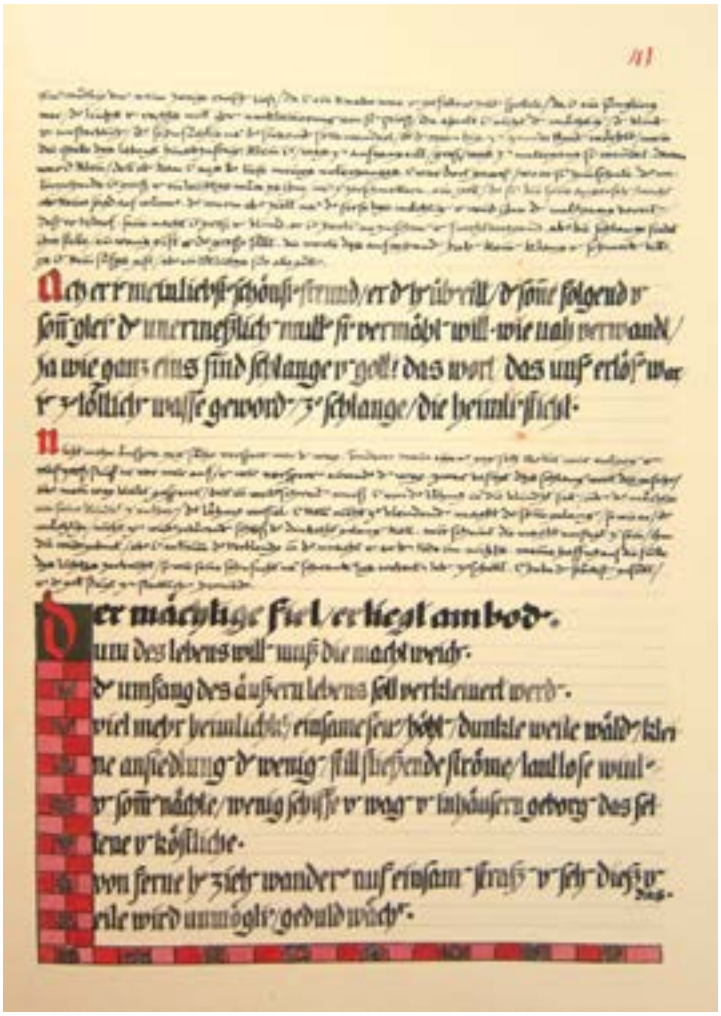
blood flow in the organism, between arteries (red) and veins (blue). The two kinds of blood vessels have their distinct roles but they are at some places closely intertwined because the blood flow cannot function properly without them communicating with one another. This image tells us that spirit and desire remain opposites but that they are complementary, just as the opposite forces Yin and Jang belong together. Psychologically speaking, it is now clear that the solution is not to follow solely one or the other urge but to accept that only the inner conflict will maintain the psyche alive and healthy.

Liber Secundus, p. 29:

Chapter VI begins with the initial „D“ of „Der Tod“, or „Death“. This time, the picture is not woven into the letter but is given nearly the whole space as a main motif and not a mere illustration.

The fierce looking giant lizard with the many paws reminds us of the fearsome totems used in magical practices in many ancient cultures to protect the people from the evil spirits. This impression is reinforced by the mysterious colorful ideograms aligned along the frame. The lizard's brown color, of the same brown as the ground it rises from, shows that it belongs to the chthonic, the subterranean forces of Mother Earth. The sharp teeth bestow a relentless, wild quality to the animal. Its cold gaze, like that of a reptile, that looks through us rather than at us evoke the destructive forces of nature or the deadly strokes of destiny. The fiery globe on which the lizard stands, is somewhat like a sun in reverse, as luminous as the sun but underground. So like the sun its symbolic meaning has to do with a sovereign energy and totality, but in the underworld this time, in the world of the dead.

Liber Secundus, p. 41:



Notice the exquisite play of scripts and colors, between the black of the different writings and the red of the initials and ornamental borders. This piece of lyrical writing is a lament over Jung's guilt for causing the Great God Izdubar to lose his power, and over the loss of his own high expectations. The aesthetic appearance of the writing tells us already without words of Jung's inner struggle with grief (black) and love (red).

Liber Secundus, p. 54:

The serpent is a frequent symbol in the Red Book and stands mainly for an alluring, divine force that holds the highest wisdom, the mystery of death and renewal, but can also seduce and poison the mind in a devilish way. This gorgeous snake looks as magnificent and fearsome as a mysterious, archaic power. Jung has entitled his painting “Brahmanaspati”. Brahmanaspati is the Lord of prayer or worship of the vedic religion of India, dating back to many centuries before the Christian era. The god is said to have found the dawn, the sky and the fire. Jung understood the God images of ancient cultures as archetypal images or if you will as symbolic representations of basic existential experiences of all humankind. He had studied the age old god images of Eastern religions, and the images that spontaneously came to him to express best the huge energy contained in his

inner experiences were inspired by these religious symbols. This snake has as a matter of fact an ambivalent effect on us, we find its sensuous beauty fascinating, but the threat of its poisonous bite is repulsive. In this picture, the serpent uncoils and rises from a fire born in the dark. The golden and blue rays that gush out of its mouth bring light and color in darkness as the first rays of the sun do at dawn. So Jung's image again bears witness to his experience of an improbable union of the sacred power of light and fire with the dark, natural wisdom of the snake.

Liber Secundus, p. 71:

This picture makes a more emotional impression than most others. The snakes represent here a very different aspect of this symbol. We see three

snakes, or rather worms since they seem to have no heads, wound around one another and around the stabs of a lose trellis. Since the snakes are colored in a sumptuous deep blue, and this ocean blue has often to do with the collective unconscious, their tender entanglement in one another could express deep, unavoidable bonds between them, bonds that feel like destiny. They seem to be experienced on the backdrop of passionate involvements, a passion evoked by the vibrant red of the background. The stabs give a structure to this entanglement, in the same way as social commitments shape relationships. But they extend beyond the frame, as though they went "overboard", the one leading to the other, with no end to them. They might therefore be felt as being "too much", too complicated or too much of a burden. Jung once commented this picture to a lady friend saying that it represented the dilemma where he and the two women he loved found themselves.

Liber Secundus, p. 131:

Jung's craftiness improves steadily in the course of the book. To obtain the effects of this very evocative picture, he had to use quite sophisticated techniques. It is night. We look up to a heavenly body as though we were standing slightly below the big tree in the foreground. But it is not the moon we are looking at, for the sprinkling cold light shining over the landscape abides in the tree, between its branches, and the moon is also there, far smaller, higher up in the sky. What might have appeared at first sight as a realistic landscape is in fact a magical scene. The heavenly body glitters like a gem and its rays illuminate the tree and the sky around it in a circle as in a spider web. This luminous body reminds of the "lapis philosophorum" (the philosophers' stone of the alchemists), symbol of the highest wisdom. It is as though the tree were on fire, but a cold fire. Remember Elijah's blue robe. The blue sky and the cold belong to the realm of the spirit, just as the red blood and warmth to the realm of passion. The painter is standing on the

dark side in the front, as an observer. He sees in front of him the black shadows of the mighty trunk and branches, and makes out further away the black shadows of trees against the backdrop of a desert. The mighty tree could well represent the tree of life that Jung mentions as a symbol of the psychic growth that he is experiencing and that he later called the individuation process. So here he is contemplating what his self-experiment is coming to: he has to recognize a new spring of wisdom that will bring his tree of life to grow strong and high. This picture seems to tell us that Jung has not yet made the final step at this point, that he is contemplating it, knowing full well what is ahead, but still feeling in the grip of the dark, of his fear of the unknown. In his words:

> "Night sinks blue and deep from above,
> earth rises black from below."

Liber Secundus, p. 135:

To this picture in the shape of an egg, Jung wrote a legend. His language is lyrical and tells a myth. He says:

> „The fire comes out of Muspilli and grasps the tree of life. A cycle is completed, but it is the cycle within the world egg. A strange God, the unnameable God of the solitary, is incubating it. New creatures form from the smoke and ashes."

In the Norse mythology Muspilli is the abode of the Fire Gods. For Jung, the egg represents the world. The white light shining from the middle of the tree is again an important motif in this picture. But this time the light is broken, as though the precious stone we saw before were exploding. The world egg is divided into two parts, and there seems to be almost no connection between the sky, a blue-green and black chaos, and the red-brown earth. Will the fire and the smoke from below end up darkening the

sky completely? Or will the blue sky prevail? The painter is obviously in the middle of an upheaval with no clear end. The fragmentation would be hopeless, if not for the little window in the lower middle of the picture, with a view into an intact landscape, a green valley and mountains under a clear sky. Does this represent the birth of the new world? Of the tree we actually see only the trunk and its sturdy roots that rest on a rainbow in reverse, a bow in earthy colors. Is the bow supposed to be a door to the new world? The bow might also lend its earthy solidness to the roots. For these seem to hold firmly on to their surroundings, giving the impression that the tree will survive the fire. In the foreground, all sorts of strange animals, the "new creatures" Jung was mentioning, are creeping on the red, burnt earth. They stare with the indifferent gaze of archaic creatures. Among them is a giant lizard with sharp teeth and on the right animals resembling a rhinoceros and an elephant. The sky has exploded and the earth has burnt but new life is sprouting. Should the picture depict Jung's inner state in his inner world, it says that in the aftermath of psychic disintegration and loss, there is hope for renewal.

Liber Secundus, p. 159:

This luminous mandala is one of the last pictures in the Red Book. Jung painted it in 1927 and dedicated it to the memory of a recently deceased friend. He commented on it at length. He explained during a seminar that at the time when he had painted it he had not yet understood that mandalas were universal symbols of wholeness applying to the personality as well as to the universe. He had imagined that he was the jewel in the center and that the little lights were other people around him. He made fun of his own presumptuousness saying: ” I thought very well of myself that I was able to express myself like that: my marvelous center here and I am right in my heart." But he had had to correct his “Western prejudice” and understand that the ego was not “the whole show, the king, the god", but that the center was the center of life and he was just “one of those little side lights”. “The rose in the center”, he further explained, “is depicted as a ruby, and its outer ring is conceived as a wheel or a wall with gates (so that nothing can come

out from inside or go in from outside)". Its pattern is like the plan of an ideal city, divided into even quarters and surrounding a citadel in the center. He also noticed that this mandala combines a number of classic motifs such as the flower, the star, the circle, and the precinct, a protected area in the center. Interestingly, all components around the center go by four or multiples of four, and with this confer an impression of perfect balance to the whole. The flower in the center calls the lotus of the Buddhist iconography to mind, a symbol of the highest wisdom (prajnaparamita). The flower is at the same time an eight-pointed star. Its white glow that spreads in eight directions seems to spring from a transcendent realm, beyond earthly existence and time. The colors around the central motif are unexpectedly earth bound. The green in the immediate surrounding is the color of vegetation, and the warm brown pattern reminds us of a current style of furniture of the time. This picture makes again clear that, as always with Jung, there has to be a balance. By this time, fourteen years after setting on his inner journey, Jung was convinced that to have an inner connection to transcendence meant also to lead a life firmly rooted in nature and in daily matters. He made a very moving comment on this painting saying: "The whole thing seemed like a window opening on to eternity".

'A window to eternity', that is in a nutshell the impression that Jung's paintings in the Red Book made on me.