

C.G. Jung, The Red Book, 72

ON ASPECTS OF BEAUTY IN C.G. JUNG'S RED BOOK

By Paul Brutsche

The publication of *The Red Book* has met with tremendous success. Such success, of course, rests on the exceptional quality of the content and the depth and richness of the imagination conveyed throughout; also of central significance is the unique artistic quality. The book immediately impresses by the beauty of the calligraphy, the stunning images and the many beautiful adornments. It amazes by the technical skill and the aesthetical sense of the author, reaching a level of artistry one would not have expected from a scientist. The patience and care with which this precious work has been elaborated is profoundly moving. One finds oneself witnessing an inner process of a rare depth, having taken shape in the silence of a long and loving encounter with the soul.

The beauty of the forms one finds in *The Red Book* did not primarily emanate from an aesthetic preoccupation on the part of Jung: for him this was a soul matter. It is amazing to think that a person, throughout 16 long years, would be willing to produce a transcription of a text containing inner experiences previously written (in the Black Books) and to invest an incredible amount of laborious devotion to embellishment of color and pictures; and all this without the intention of publishing it, at least not while he was working on it. While elaborating his pictures and carefully transcribing his original reflections in a calligraphic style, Jung's mind was not turned towards a future public he wanted to please or to whom he wanted to teach something; this endeavour was a goal in and of itself.

The question that I would like to explore is as follows: how should we understand the aesthetic and artistic form which Jung gave to his inner experiences? Why did he need a calligraphic version of his intimate notes and why didn't the Black Book version seem sufficient to him? What could have been

the goal of this aesthetic shaping and precious form he gave to his imaginative dialogues?

ASPECTS OF BEAUTY

Objective Registering of contents

The striking beauty of the images of *The Red Book* expresses the value and significance of the represented contents. Beauty enhances their intrinsic quality and objective essence which was primary for Jung while individuality took a secondary position. The images served to bring closer to his consciousness what emerged from the depth of his soul. Jung's approach is the radical opposite of a spontaneous and impulsive sketching in a momentary emotional state as it is practiced today in art therapy according to Arno Stern's concept of "free expression" for instance (Stern 1998). The images in *The Red Book* are not arbitrary utterances of the Ego but cautious depictions of contents arising from the objective psyche.

With this goal in mind Jung adopted a method of working which has more to do with skilled craftsmanship than with art in the strict sense of the word. By this, I don't intend to make an aesthetic "judgment" but simply to describe the procedure chosen by Jung. The work that resulted obviously manifests an extraordinary creative power and its beauty is so impressive that one could easily call it art (if one would reduce the complex notion of art to beauty and skill). But Jung does not create art and he would probably have vehemently refused such a qualification. We may remember his struggle with a female voice insinuating that he was an artist, as reported in *Memory Dreams, Reflections* (1961/1989). Without any doubt, Jung's technical skills were amazing and he possessed an unusually powerful aesthetic sense. With his paintings, however, he was

specifically attempting to give visible shape to the contents of his imagination. Painting was nothing more than a tool for registering and elucidating what he had previously seen and experienced within his own mind. Through painting, his inner experiences could acquire the firmness and solidity of a lasting and precious object.

Jung's receptive attitude toward recording his inner life through painting does not necessarily qualify him as an artist. What is missing is the confrontation between the reality of the unconscious with its contents offered from within and the reality of the individual artist with his own artistic ambitions and aesthetic concepts. There is no dialectical confrontation taking place between the realm of inner objects and the realm of the subject with his specific conditions – the tradition of art history and the context of the time he belongs to or the formal intentions which are his own – as would be required for real art. Painting, in the context of *The Red Book*, was practiced by Jung as a pure registering and appreciative recording of what had made manifest in his imagination. Painting was an instrument aimed at defining, describing and representing as exactly as possible what was visualized but not yet known. Therefore no conflicting confrontation took place between the offerings and suggestions of the unconscious and the formal principles and aesthetic ideas of the artist's conscious ego. Such a conflict nevertheless would be the *conditio sine qua non* in order to qualify it as art.

What took place was a careful and impressively skilled representation of figures, objects and symbols emerging from within. Jung made use of his outstanding skilled craft, but he did not produce art. The pictures he made are themselves products of an inner dialogue between the conscious and the

unconscious, but the images that result from this dialogue are merely rendered as such without submission to an autonomous artistic program or intention.

Craftsmanship approach

The artisan-like conception of *The Red Book* pictures becomes apparent through evidence that the images have often been *sketched out beforehand with pencil*. Some examples given in the appendix of the *Red Book* show this very clearly. The pictures are not the result of a spontaneous gesture whose meaning would only reveal itself at the end of the process. They are, on the contrary, illustrations of inner images already perceived that acquire outer shape through the act of drawing and painting. In a sense, we can consider them to be ingenious records or drawings made from a model.

The handicraft aspect is also visible in the manner in which *color* is used. The color fills out the pre-existing forms and spaces determined by the drawing.



Figure 1 Mosaic from *Basilica San Vitale, Ravenna, 6th century*

Jung doesn't draw with colors, but he adds color to already well defined shapes. His particular use of color in painting suggests comparisons with other media where color is also treated as an objective quality inherent to things. We may think of mosaic-work,

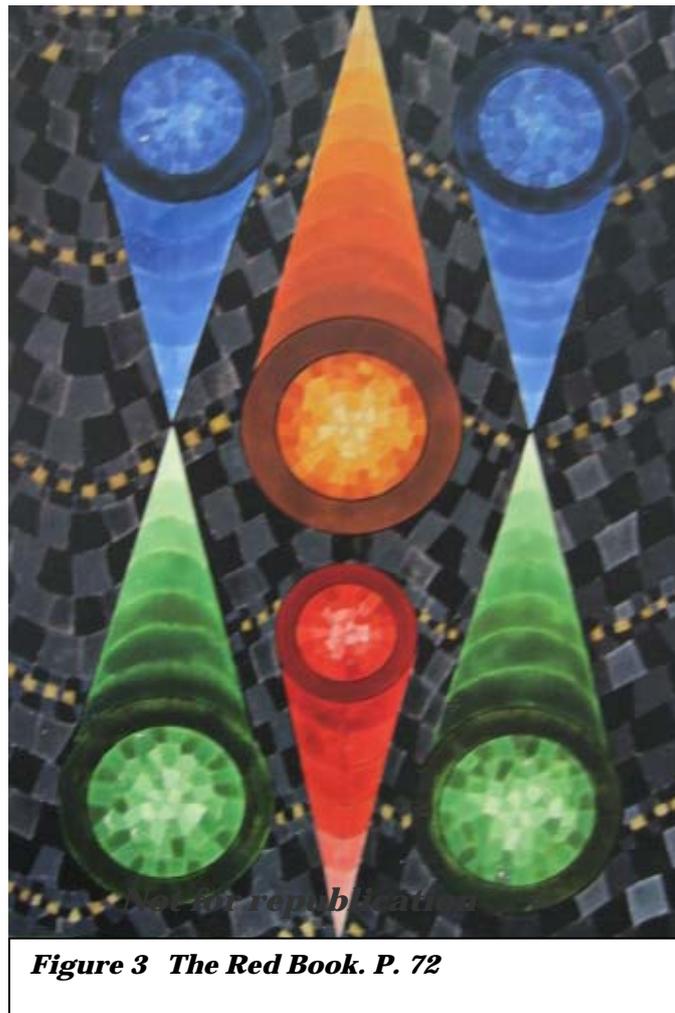
weaving and glass-painting. In these techniques color sticks to the depicted object as if it were a sensory quality of the object itself.



Figure 2 *The Red Book*, p. 79

Decorative tools

In accordance with the artisanal approach, the images in *The Red Book* are displayed in a strikingly decorative and ornamental way. There are four specific decorative features, which ensure a fascinating aesthetic effect: these include the frequent use of symmetry, repetition, contrast and graduation. The precise execution of these decorative means and the fine sense of color provoke an inevitable natural experience of beauty. The image on page 72 of *The Red Book* gives a good example for the perfect use of the four criteria with regard to style.



The picture is characterized by a clear *symmetrical composition*; there are two pairs of conic forms opposing each other on a central axis of symmetry and on the central line two cones of slightly different size are facing each other. This symmetrical order gives the picture a quality of stability, firmness and peaceful calm.

We are witnessing the occurrence of many *repetitions*, which also contribute to the beauty of the image, a form of beauty as one may experience in the rhythmic waves of water or in the melodious movements of music. Observing this picture one may also pay attention to the curved lines in the background with

the yellow points or to the regular alternation of black and grey squares. The reference to the technique of the mosaic-work is obvious here.

The picture also shows the powerful effect of *contrast* as an aesthetic tool. The colored cone forms detach themselves in striking contrast with the dark night background. The chosen colors of the 6 cones also mark a strong contrast between cold and warm colors. Furthermore, the unmediated meeting between circular and pointed forms is full of tension. The kind of beauty that comes out of such contrasts generates an impression of vital brightness and intense energy.

This image finally gives a remarkable example of the method of *graduating light and color intensity*, which Jung often used with extraordinary skill. The cone forms tend towards the brightest point by passing through consecutive levels of brightness. This technique of slowly diminishing degrees of color saturation results in a mysterious transparency, which has the quality of a numinous event or of a transcendent experience. Reminiscences of the effect which glass-painting produces are unavoidable. Surprisingly enough one may also discover similarities between the pictures of Jung and paintings of Paul Klee who for some time had been responsible at the Bauhaus for teaching glass-painting. Nevertheless a reciprocal influence in whatever form can be excluded as they never met nor did they know of each other's existence in spite of their undeniable affinity and physical proximity.

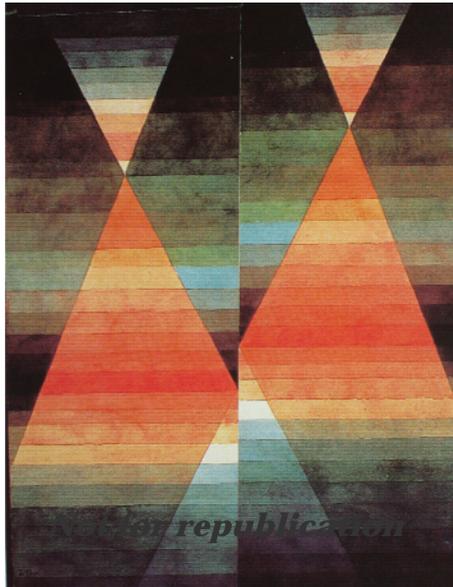


Figure 4 Paul Klee: Double tent, 1923



Figure 5 Paul Klee: Ceramic/erotic/religious 1921

The effects of this artisanal style are threefold: it creates an objective order independent from the subject; the pictures appear more as beautiful realizations of the unconscious than as aesthetic products of the conscious mind; and the pictures become precious objects. In other words: the artisanal type of painting uses aesthetic quality as an objective natural fact inherent to things themselves. It is apparent that beauty can create order, make the contents of the imaginings become intensely alive and make them manifest with their own special value.

DIFFERENT FUNCTIONS OF THE MAKING OF IMAGES

In 1959, two years before his death, Jung made significant comments in an incomplete handwritten epilogue on the significance of *The Red Book*. Now published in this volume, one can distinguish three main ideas.

A first thought: “I worked on this book for 16 years. *My acquaintance with alchemy in 1930 took me away from it.* The beginning of the end came in

1928, when Wilhelm sent me the text of the “Golden Flower,” an alchemical treatise. *There the contents of this book found their way into actuality and I could no longer continue working on it* (emphasis mine) (p. 360).

With the discovery of alchemy Jung’s interest apparently shifted from the personal experiences manifesting themselves inwardly towards an outward fascination with alchemical texts. This was an important step from inner dialogue and imaginings to intellectual interaction with congenial authors and their ideas, a “way” that led him from the lonesome inner surroundings into the interpersonal “actuality” of shared and commonly reflected experiences.

Looking back one could therefore state that producing pictures in *The Red Book* had served Jung as a means to orient himself in the unfamiliar world of his inner experiences. He had used it as a method for giving shape and honoring the not-yet-known. The making of images had been a heuristic resource in order to grasp and apprehend, to a certain extent, new knowledge in *statu nascendi*. It had been a provisional container for capturing on a non-verbal level and in a symbolical language what he would later elaborate on a theoretical level.

A second thought is expressed as follows: “To the superficial observer, it will appear like madness. *It would also have developed into one, had I not been able to absorb the overpowering force of the original experiences*” (emphasis mine) (p. 360).

The Red Book functioned for Jung as a container, a sort of womb in which the original experiences in their overpowering force could be “caught,” contained and absorbed. The careful aesthetic presentation helped tame, form and order the powerful, fascinating and unfamiliar experiences Jung had submitted himself to. The overwhelming and the unlimited were brought into the “cosmos” of the

refined writing and the beautiful images. The ineffable was transformed into the limited, individual and concrete shape of a symbolic reality.

It is easy to imagine how much effort and discipline were needed in order not to be carried away by the power of the inner experiences but on the contrary to submit them to the law of the beautiful form; how much patience and humility such a process required! The physical effort that was demanded to achieve a satisfactory representation of the images and to transcribe the texts into calligraphy was an extremely efficient way to practice “presence” and to anchor the real person in the here and now. This probably was what saved Jung from falling into a psychosis and resulted in the beautiful elaboration of *The Red Book* that we now see.

Finally a third idea: “I always knew that these experiences contained something precious, and therefore *I knew of nothing better than to write them down in a precious, that is to say, costly book and to paint the images that emerged through reliving it all-as well as I could*” (emphasis mine) (p. 360).

Through aesthetic embellishment, Jung honored the value of his insights by giving them a substantial container. The uniqueness of the content is mirrored by the costliness of the form and the medium, which are treated like sacramental reality where the numinous is contained by golden receptacles like a chalice, monstrance or tabernacle. This conveys a third meaning of the pictorial shape he gave to his *Red Book*: to make the intrinsic and numinous value of the experience become manifest. It corresponded to a religious and feeling-related attitude by acknowledging a sublime presence in these experiences. With the dearly held form that he chose to give his inner experiences, Jung’s attitude reveals itself as the total opposite of the relativism of the “blasé” scholar,

incapable of feeling wonder and astonishment and the opposite of mere reductionism to the already known as if nothing new could occur under the sun.

With this way of honoring his inner experiences Jung was also instinctively having recourse to an adequate means of protecting himself against a dangerous identification with these contents. The profoundly meaningful and sacred value he bestowed on these experiences endowed them with the status of “given” and not “self-made” thoughts; they were not of ego, they were “other.” This was the only adequate and psychologically beneficial way of dealing with such powerful contents. It conferred the inner experiences a general and lasting significance beyond the present moment, the contingent conditions and validity for a specific individual.

The function of picture-making as seen with the image on page 125

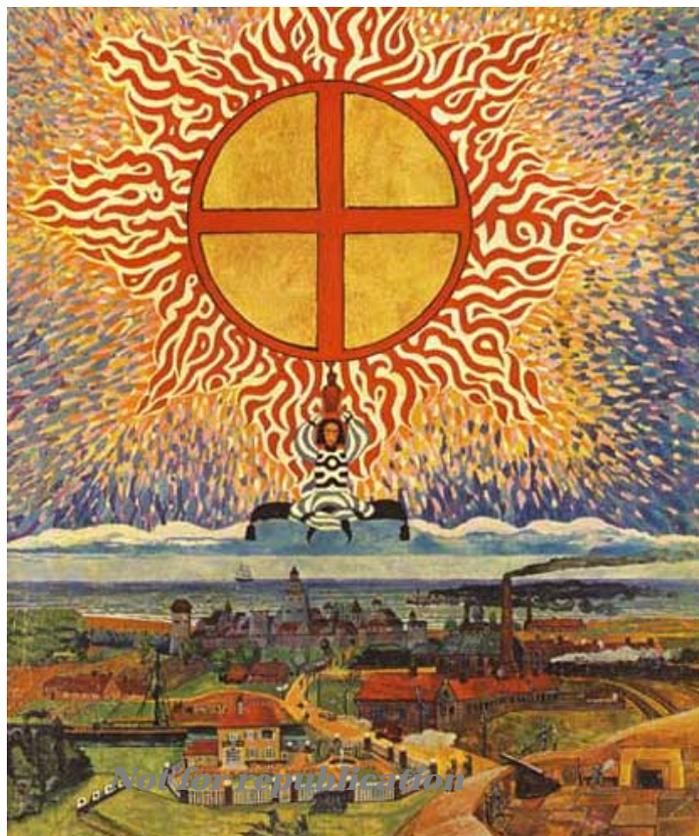


Figure 6 *The Red Book: p. 125*

This picture is different from all the others in *The Red Book*. It already stands out by its size: it is one of the largest, if not the largest one. It also differs from the others in that it has two distinct image levels with two very different pictorial styles. It is not only particularly beautiful, but also intriguingly enigmatic and meaningful. It may therefore be worthwhile to look at it carefully in detail in order to approach its possible symbolic meaning.

The upper part of the image shows a golden circular mandala-like disc with a red cross and a red circumference. Similar to the protuberances of a sun the mandala-like form sends into the space eight intense rays of energy, burning in red and white. The fire expands into the blue sky in a more refined and complex flickering of light.

The golden fire disc is like a creative primordial source, an absolute divine beginning, a becoming out of itself, an inexhaustible fountain of energy and light. It represents the autonomous sun-like active force of the Self, which acts out of itself, *sui generis*, bringing forth life, constellating developments and generating knowledge. We may think of “the overpowering force of the original experiences” Jung talks about in the Epilogue of the *Red Book* (p. 360). Or it may evoke what he later called “immediate experience”: i.e. the experience of being captured by the central archetype of the Self and by its immediate inner revelations (Jung 1958/1977, para 75).

The proximity of this creative factor *par excellence* triggers a fascinating wealth of insights *ex nihilo*, enthusiasm and awe. It points to the future while remaining grounded in its eternal sameness. Not accidentally, this image is situated opposite to the opening of the chapter entitled “The Three Prophecies.” Could it be that with this motive Jung was picturing the prophetic inspiration, which comes from an immediate experience of the autonomous reality and

wisdom of the Self? Could it be that he expressed here the basic experience he made while working on *The Red Book*: the experience of a tool and vessel for an autonomous “process of revelation,” providing knowledge of general importance which later had to be patiently processed in a lifelong meticulous work of differentiation?

Witnessing the burning irradiation of this sun one realizes how easy it could have been to fall prey to a psychotic inflation for a less robust psychological constitution or through an unfortunate identification with this powerful constellating factor.

Opposite to this upper half of the picture with the motive of numinous knowledge generated by the Self, one finds a significant difference. We witness there a rather grayish and ordinary foreground: the realm of everyday life. The horizontal dimension is clearly stressed by the flat plain where the whole scene takes place and by the accentuated horizontal wisps of smoke coming from the train engines, the chimneys and the steamboat. We are obviously here in the realm of concrete worldly existence with its characteristic horizontal “down to earth” dimension.

This reality of outer life and everyday existence is further expressed as a social world represented by numerous boundaries and special connections. Boundaries take several forms. A heavy fence, for instance, surrounds the garden of the wealthy owner. In the right lower corner at the bottom of the picture we discover military fortifications, which also point to the idea of a territory that has to be defended. The combative shooting, marching and guarding soldiers furthermore make reference to boundaries and to the distinction between being at home and abroad, between one’s home country and the world. A town wall

with donjons surrounds the medieval town in the center. We find the seashore itself to be another indicator of boundaries.

Complementary to the division and differentiation of boundaries is the reality of relationship and connection that is also explicitly stressed: indeed we discover telephone lines, power lines, traffic links and transport equipment such as railways, cars and boats that characterize a world of exchange and interpersonal communication.

This lower area of the picture, therefore, represents a rather complete inventory of real life. It could stand for that dimension which Jung will later on describe as the realm of Personality Number 1 which is characterized as the “spirit of time” (Zeitgeist) at the beginning of *The Red Book*. Jung saw himself as belonging to this earthly dimension and being responsibly connected to it. In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* (1961/1989) he insisted on how important it had been for him to be safely anchored in his professional activity and family life when he undertook the big experiment of *The Red Book*.

Two different realms are therefore represented in this image: in the upper part represents the realm of Personality Number 2 and of the inner experiences under the direction of the Self, the domain of the “spirit of depth”; the lower part represents the realm of Personality Number 1 with its real-life connections within the scope of human society, the domain of the “spirit of time.” Between the two, one discovers a harlequin-like, mercurial male figure sitting with crossed legs. He is placed on a black cushion at the horizon of the concrete outer reality where he appears to bond with the horizontal fundament in the lower world while seeming to absorb, on the other hand, a substance coming vertically from above in a red vase. Couldn't this represent the “capturing” (*Auffangen*) of overpowering archetypal forces through the physical development of *The Red*

Book? Isn't it interesting also in that respect that the vase is of red color? Could the vase correspond to *The Red Book*, the beautiful container Jung created with so much care to hold the overwhelming insights emerging from the Self?

We may perhaps push our interpretation of this motive even further and notice that the figure sits on a black cushion. Isn't it strange that the basis of *The Red Book* is to be found in the records Jung made of his inner imaginings in what he called the Black Books?

This figure mediating between the horizontal and vertical dimensions and sitting in a meditative attitude at the juncture of the lower earthly world of human beings and the upper spiritual world of the divine is a being which seems to facilitate transitions and reconciliations: he appears like a *genius* of revelation and prophecy. His mediating role resembles that of Philemon guiding Jung along his journey into new territories. The alternating bright and dark stripes and the black and white contrast on the torso evoke a dialectical being. It could symbolize a mercurial consciousness, which like the mythological Mercurius, has a bipolar adaptability. Thankfully, he can establish connections, mediate between opposites and anticipate new developments. It was most probably this kind of spirit, which animated C.G. Jung when he undertook the great endeavor of *The Red Book*.

References

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