

*Art and the Creative Unconscious* by Erich Neumann

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*Art and the Creative Unconscious* by Erich Neumann, originally published as *Kunst und schöpferisches Unbewusstes* some fifty-four years ago, is a thorough, if at times somewhat abstract and male-centric journey into the realms of creativity and the unconscious. Throughout this collection of four essays, Neumann displays the articulate and thoughtful demeanor that has made him one of Carl Jung's most distinguished students. Throughout, Neumann dissects the intersections of creativity, culture, and the unconscious, in a deft attempt at illuminating the inner motivation of some of Europe's most famous creative men. Framing his view of creativity and the unconscious using examples strongly rooted within Western cultural tradition and mythology, Neumann introduces the reader to the individual and collective unconscious and archetypes of the creative man. He illustrates his understanding of the tension and transformative power of creativity through some of Europe's most renowned male geniuses: Leonardo da Vinci, Marc Chagall, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

In the first essay, *Leonardo da Vinci and the Mother Archetype*, Neumann explores at length the life and creativity of Leonardo da Vinci. Neumann suggests: "Leonardo fascinates us very much in the same way as Goethe, precisely because we here encounter a striving for a life of individuation, a life of wholeness" (p. 4). Throughout this essay, Neumann uses what he conceives of as a transpersonal approach which explores the relations between Leonardo's creativity, life development, and what the author sees as a struggle to create meaning in a world where the artist does not always fit in.

Neumann frames a theory of Leonardo's massive and transformational creativity by including, at length, a discussion of one of the artist's earliest memories of a dream like vision, as well as a discussion of several of his masterpieces. Like Jung, by focusing on Leonardo's vision and the archetypal qualities of his paintings, by weaving together Egyptian mythology and the content of Leonardo's creativity, Neumann develops a frame in which to explore creativity in relation to the unconscious and the transpersonal.

Neumann builds upon a theory of understanding creativity through a lens that delineates between feminine and masculine, that which Neuman calls the "Great Mother" and the "Great Father" archetypes (p, 23). He posits throughout that the great creative men of Western culture typically are drawn forth toward exceptional creative expression via the strong unconscious pull of the feminine archetype. Whereas, Neumann argues that the men who settle into dominantly expected cultural life patterns have often repressed the feminine side of their internal selves, men of great creative expression are drawn toward the branches of creative possibility in order to give voice to the feminine aspects of their unconscious selves. This, Neumann includes, often creates great turmoil within the life of a creative man; surely even more so in the often rigid gender paradigms of Neumann's era. However, even today, especially in those areas where cultural gestalts severely limit

the acceptable expression of men and women into particular roles – and, perhaps to a lesser degree, in all of Western culture – Neumann’s concept of the expression of creative genius erupting from the unconscious struggle to give voice to the archetypes is worthy of close inspection by any student of creativity, culture, and transformation.

In the second essay, *Art and Time* Neumann explores the relation between culture, era, and creativity, and suggests that “Our present inquiry lies within the psychology of cultures; it aims at an understanding of art as a psychological phenomenon of central importance to the collectivity as well as the individual” (p. 81). Neumann frames his ideas by including the collective unconscious as the origin of all psychic activity, a formless background from which all consciousness and culture spring: “For primitive and early cultures, the creative force of the numinosum supports or even engenders consciousness: it brings differentiation and order into an indeterminate world driven by chaotic powers and enables man to orient himself” (p. 85). Neumann sees the substratum of unconsciousness as a creative force welling up in the individual and collective consciousness of humankind.

Within the structure of *Art and Time*, Neumann develops his concepts of an “integral psychic field” (p. 88) within which members of a culture find and demonstrate meaning whereby, via the juxtaposition and interaction of the collective unconscious and the collective conscious, negotiate their way through the accepted canons, rites, beliefs, lifeways, and values of the group. Leaders considered faithful to the approved canons or beliefs of the time fit and demonstrate alignment with the expectations of the collective. Those individuals who question the collective are viewed during their time as rule breakers, outsiders, or worse. Often, the latter group includes those affecting the deepest transformations of culture and society; those demonstrating the most creative genius. Neumann articulates this idea via the notion of the “epiphany of the numinosum” (p. 87): the genuine and totally original creativity that explodes or erupts as an unexpected, unforeseen revelation. In this light, the most profound creativity may be seen by the dominant culture as valuable or dangerous depending upon perspective. Neumann concludes that the creativity that is accepted by the culture “resembles the digging and walling in of deep wells, around which the group gathers and from whose water it lives” (p. 92). When the great creative epiphanies are not accepted by the group, one may be shunned or violently driven away. Thus the tension formed between culture and creative expression, illuminated by Neumann’s articulate exploration, can inform our present movement into an age of chaos and creativity by giving us footholds upon which to stand above and beyond the singular perspective of one culture or one individual. For, as Neumann so eloquently states about profoundly creative individuals: “Their secret alchemy achieves a synthesis of the numinosum at the heart of nature and psyche” (p. 103). This creative synthesis surely is a key toward a graceful and ecologically sustainable transformation of our times.

As we have said, with profound creativity comes great tension. Creativity is rooted most solidly in the tension of the inner and the outer worlds of the individual, the culture, and humanity in the largest sense possible. These tensions often create chaos, dissolution,

and disintegration. The same tension that is the root of creativity, Neumann argues, leads often in our world to neurosis and sickness, individually and culturally:

“We know that the core of the neurosis of our time is the religious problem or, stated in more universal terms, the search for the self. In this sense neuroses, like the mass phenomena resulting from this situation, are a kind of sacred disease. Our whole epoch is full of it, but behind it stands the power of a numinous center, which seems to direct not only the normal development of the individual, but his psychic crises and transformations as well – not only the disease but also the cure, both in the individual and in the collective” (pp. 132-3).

In the third essay, *Note on Marc Chagall*, Neumann illuminates his belief that in a cruel and destructive world, in which the truly aware human understands and feels deeply the horrors and sufferings of his or her time, the creative individual will find solace and expression in the heart of our common unitary reality. He suggests that individuals with Chagall’s brilliance evidence transcendent expression where “geysers of creativity spurt from the tortured soil” (p. 147). He suggests that the divine and human are travelling upon the same road, enveloped within the same unitary reality. One finishes the essay with the understanding that Neumann saw no schism between this reality and another. Rather, in the truly creative person, including Neumann himself, an understanding of the non-dual nature of reality, discussed by so many mystics and masters, is illumined within the creativity which flows forth from the psychologically balanced individual.

Neumann’s last essay, *Creative Man and Transformation*, is a very profound examination of the roots of creativity within cultures and individuals, and the relation between an effective integration of the unconscious and the conscious within the individual, and the collective unconscious and collective conscious aspects of the cultural canon or group. It is interesting and very appropriate here that Neumann compares the forces of the psyche that lead to neurosis. Within this essay, Neumann gives example to the closing down of flexibility within our realities which in extreme cases lead to a kind of “sclerosis of consciousness” (p. 160). Here an individual is so consumed by the ideals of culture or ego that one loses the ability to approach the totality of self in all of its manifestations. The culture may, through expectations and rules begin to develop in the individual an ideal egoistic self that is not congruent to the whole self at all. This then leads, in Neumann’s view, to a sublimation of the potentialities of the whole self, toward the more rigid expectations or lifeways common in the local cultural environment: “In the sclerotic consciousness typical of our cultural situation, we have a radicalization of the ego and ego ideal; egoistic separation from the living unconscious and loss of the self have become an acute danger” (p. 161).

According to Neumann, within this hemmed in, rigidified consciousness, one finds dangerously locked-in emotions and psychic energies. He utilizes the metaphor of a fiery and molten underworld contained by an inflexible shell to express the result of this rigidity where the often chaotic movements of the unseen unconscious are locked within, closed off from awareness. Within this way of thinking, though rigidity may seem to provide a safe haven from the chaotic nature of the unconscious underworld, we at times

may witness the rumblings, fracture, or bubbling up of repressed psychic energy. Creative transformation of the individual, Neumann includes, must rather be rooted in a dynamic synthesis within the totality of the individual where conscious and unconscious aspects of self can inter-relate fluidly and dynamically. Here “the clearest, though not the only, indication of psychic transformation is a change in the relation to extrapsychic reality” (p. 166). One senses the perspective of *thou* toward self and world and the polarization of opposites transforms toward unity.

Thus, although Neumann wrote for an earlier generation, we may find inspiration in his at times eloquent illumination of creativity and transformation being the essence of the fully mature individual and culture. In our continuing time of chaos and violence, we may find solace in the concept of creative transformation as a full expression of personal and cultural well-being. Our present zeitgeist appears to mirror that which Neumann explored more than fifty years ago. For the student of creativity and transformation, Erich Neumann’s *Art and the Creative Unconscious* comes highly recommended.