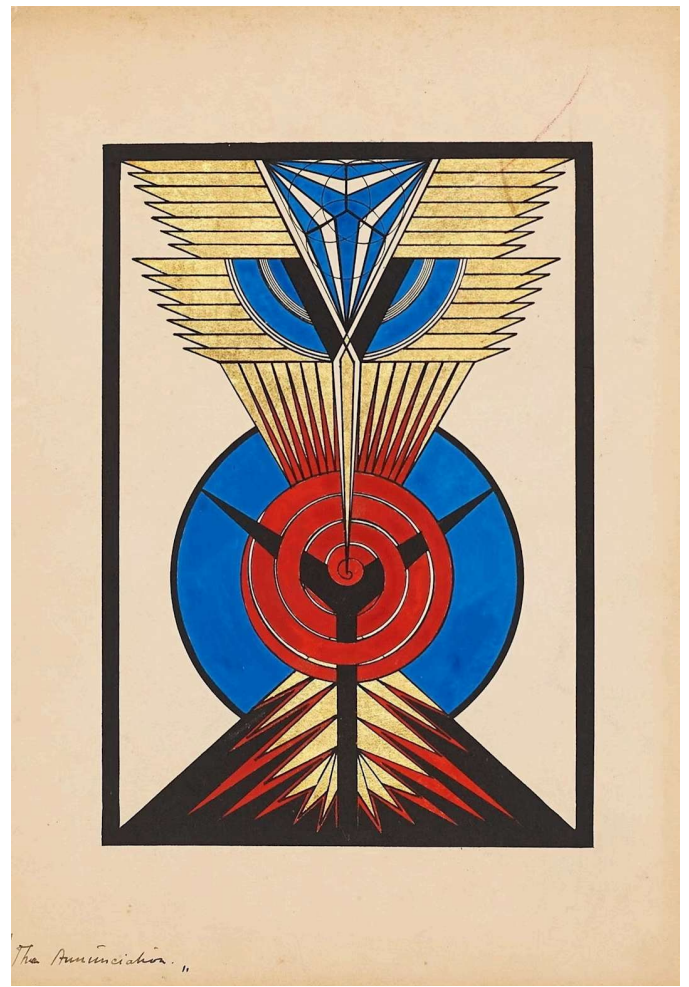


Collecting

Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn – the artist who built an archive to decode dreams

A friend of Jung, the Dutch abstractionist and mystic amassed 6,000 mythological, ritual and symbolic images to interpret the ‘collective unconscious’



‘The Annunciation’ (c1928) by Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, shown by Charles Ede at Tefaf New York

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The Dutch artist and mystic Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn (1881-1962) was, like her friend Carl Jung, obsessed with dreams. Jung had developed the theory of the “collective unconscious”, the idea that the psyche is a repository of ancestral memories that, if fully understood, might allow the dreamer to better navigate the perils of the modern world. At Jung’s behest, throughout the 1930s and ’40s, Fröbe-Kapteyn visited major libraries and collections across Europe and the US to collect 6,000 mythological, ritualistic and symbolic images from all epochs of human history.

The second world war didn't stop her. Travelling home to Switzerland from the US in the early 1940s, Fröbe-Kapteyn's suitcase full of esoteric images attracted the attention of the FBI — if they imagined she was carrying secret codes, they were, in fact, weirdly correct. (Luckily, the official who interviewed her was an admirer of Jung and she was allowed to continue her journey.) Today, the Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism is held at London's Warburg Institute.



Fröbe-Kapteyn at Eranos in the 1930s, photographed by Margarethe Fellerer

Fröbe-Kapteyn's explorations into the unconscious, however, weren't simply academic. Between 1926 and 1934, she created a series of intense abstract images in ink, gouache and gold leaf titled "meditation drawings". At once very modern and ancient, the slick elegance of Art Deco intermingles with allusions to planets, pyramids, mandalas and sacred geometry. Charles Ede will be showing three of these works at Tefaf New York, alongside a portrait bust of the ancient Egyptian goddess Hathor, who is associated with motherhood, fertility, joy and music. The pairing would surely have chimed with Fröbe-Kapteyn who, in 1938, delivered a lecture on "The Great Mother", connecting goddess figures from Aztec, Minoan, and Babylonian cultures. James Richards of Charles Ede explains: "Where the Egyptian sculpture presents the 'Great Mother' as a recognisable figure, Fröbe-Kapteyn translates it into a modern system of relationships and forms."

As with so many artists who have been drawn to spirituality, tragedy shaped Fröbe-Kapteyn's journey into the unknown. In 1915, her husband, a Croatian-Austrian flautist and conductor, died in a plane crash. Grieving, the artist retreated to Ascona, a Swiss village on the shores of Lake Maggiore. In 1900, four young seekers had founded a community and a sanatorium on the hillside above the town; they called it Monte Verità, or Mountain of Truth. Over the next 20 years or so, it became a hotbed of anarchism, vegetarianism, nudism and alternative politics and healing. At the height of its popularity, visitors included the choreographers Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman, artists Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Jean Arp, writers DH Lawrence and Hermann Hesse and, it is rumoured, Lenin and Trotsky. One journalist reported that at Monte Verità you could discover "a lizard . . . a movie star, or a new religion". In 1919, Fröbe-Kapteyn booked herself into the sanatorium for an extended stay.

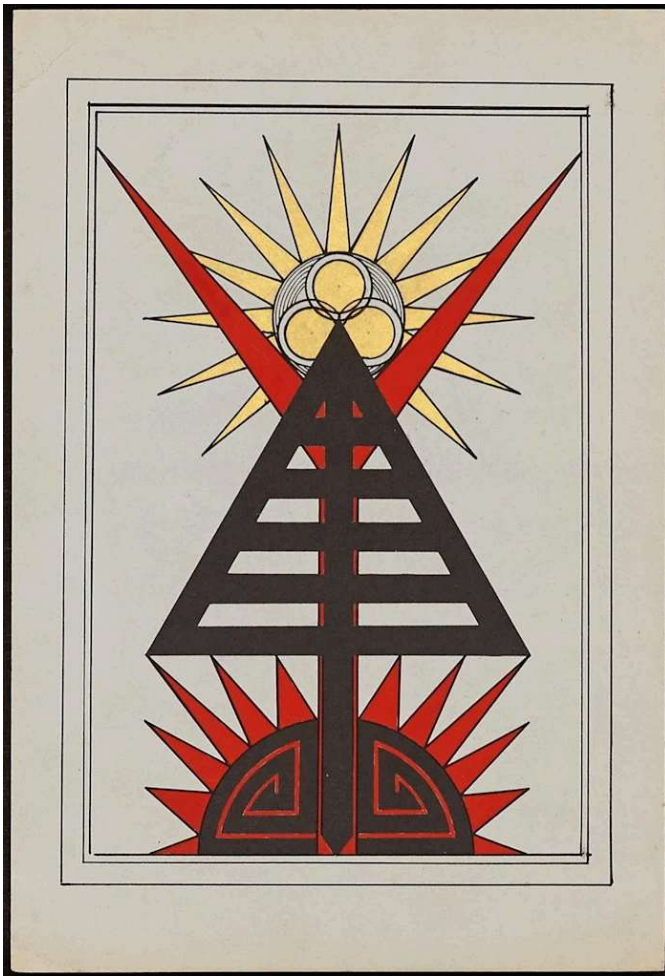


Rudolf Laban and his dance company at Ascona in 1914

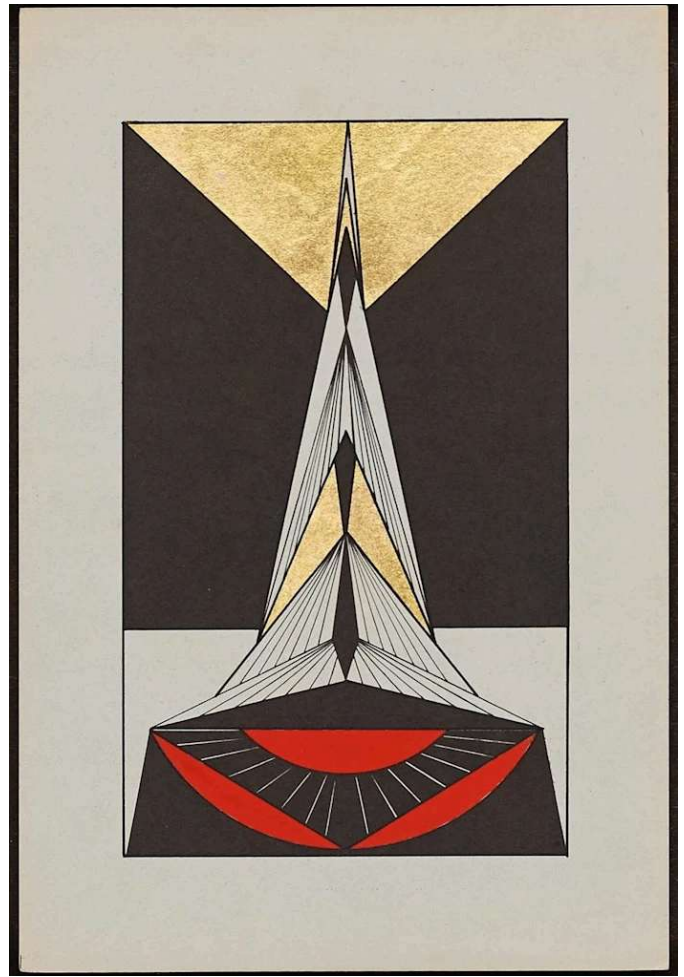
However, while fascinated by what was happening at this picturesque laboratory, Fröbe-Kapteyn disliked its wild bohemianism; her natural habitat was studious. She eventually relocated to a nearby farmhouse where she immersed herself in art, yoga, meditation and theosophy.

In 1928, as she was drawing, a vision came to Fröbe-Kapteyn: a “place of encounter and experience and a free space for the spirit, where eastern and western thought could meet.”

That year, she built a lecture hall near Ascona that she called Casa Eranos, an Ancient Greek word for a banquet where each person pays their way. She invited artists, writers, philosophers and psychoanalysts to discuss how to live an enlightened life in the midst of mass industrialisation and materialism. The inaugural symposium, “Yoga and Meditation in the east and the west” took place in 1933; Jung was the first speaker. During the war, Fröbe-Kapteyn made clear her centre was apolitical; she believed the only way to heal a world in crisis was to turn inwards. Although she died in 1962, the Eranos Cultural Forum is still going strong.



'The Purifying Fires' (c1929)



and 'The Transmutation of Pain' (1926-34), both shown by Charles Ede at Tefaf New York

It's important to stress that Fröbe-Kapteyn's artworks aren't simply illustrations of Jung's ideas but part of a rich legacy of artistic exploration into abstraction. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, discoveries such as X-rays, electricity, the atom and the microscope made, for the first time, the invisible visible — and the creative possibilities enthralled avant-garde artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian and the mystic Swedish painter Hilma af Klint, whose rise to fame in recent years has been stratospheric. Her [2018-19 exhibition at New York's Guggenheim](#) was the most popular in the museum's history and Ikea sells products decorated with her designs.

Many of the ideas that so captivated Fröbe-Kapteyn are once again gaining currency as artists search for meaning in a rapidly changing landscape. Her work has been included in numerous exhibitions, most recently in Fondazione Nicola Trussardi's *Fata Morgana: Memories of the Invisible* last year, which showcased the work of more than 70 historic and contemporary artists whose work is, or was, "propelled by the invisible, psychic automatism, and trance-like states." It was staged in the lavish rooms of Milan's Palazzo Morando, once the residence of the legendary countess Lydia Caprara Morando Attendolo Bolognini, who, in the early years of the 20th century, put together a vast library of art, the occult, spirituality and alchemy. Like Fröbe-Kapteyn, the countess understood — as do so many contemporary artists — that creating the art of the future often necessitates a deep dive into the past.

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