Sacred Symbols

UNLOCKING THE SECRETS OF THE SPIRITUAL SIGN

BY AMELIA WALKEY

From spirituality to superstition, people have laboured long and hard to find methods which suit their personal belief. Our faiths and feelings are manifested throughout history in art, architecture and literature; but perhaps our most personal means of communicating spirituality is through bodily adornment. Jewellery has always carried representations of the sacred and highlighted our divine devotions, fears and aspirations. From complex mathematical arrangements to hand carved wards and charms; spiritual iconography commonly forms the heart of a pieces symbolic form.

Spiritual symbols in jewellery are believed to harbour powers of healing, protection and even immortality. Wearing talismans can be a mark of faith or membership of a religious group; or they can simply denote a personal spiritual philosophy.
As time marches on and cultures around the world change and evolve, do these symbols and icons retain their former glory? Charged with ancient intent and historical hubris how relevant and in some cases welcome, are these sacred symbols? Do they still hold sway in a modern society; or has the cult of the consumer overtaken? And what new meanings do these symbols have for us today? Here we explore several important religious symbols from around the globe, delving deep into their origins and roles, past and present.

Crossing Boundaries

Perhaps the most pervasive of all religious symbols is the Crucifix. The cruciform, incorporating two intersecting horizontal and vertical lines, pre-dates Christianity as a symbol of sacred fire and a mystic representation of lightning, as well as the symbol of Christ’s sacrifice and resurrection. But just how many meanings can be associated with this one symbol?

Based in Vancouver, Canada, jewellery designer Benée Rubin tells us that the “basic shape of a cross has, since prehistoric times, been employed in Christian culture throughout the world. All similar shapes of the cross symbolize health, fertility, life, immortality and the union of heaven and earth, spirit and matter, sun and stars”. Additionally, its four cardinal points map onto four-fold systems: the four directions — north, south, east, west; the four seasons; the four elements; and the four winds.
The widespread use of crucifixion across the ancient world drastically transformed the cultural meaning of the cross. The symbol’s strong association with this means of capital punishment meant that the cross did not come into widespread Christian use until the second century AD. The use of the cross is still rejected by some Christian denominations for this very reason. Mormons take the meaning of the cross very literally, understanding it to symbolise a murder weapon, whereas followers of Catholicism often wear the crucifix, complete with the corpus form of Jesus nailed by his palms. Protestants, on the other hand, prefer a plain cross, with their faith focused on Jesus’ resurrection rather than his execution. Rubin informs us that “in Christianity, the cross represents Christ’s victory over death and sin, since it is believed that through His death, he conquered death itself”.

More recently in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, jewellery artists began to play with the form of the cross in order to comment upon an emerging cult of globalisation. David Poston’s Pectoral Cross The Real Thing is a three-dimensional cross, forged out of recycled Coca Cola bottle tops he collected from a bar in Rwanda. The artist created the piece to pose a multitude of questions, challenging the concept of Coca-Colonisation. He juxtaposes the Cross with the Coca Cola brand; as well as the poverty-stricken Rwandans compared with that of the Americans running the soft drink giant and core Christian values, such as charity. Finally, he questions the compatibility of Christianity and commerce, asking us whether or not the piece has any real meaning at all.
Duality and Balance

Balance, natural elements and compass points are a recurring theme in religious iconography across cultures and there is certainly a level of aestheticism when it comes to these mathematically perfect sacred symbols.

The Star of David, which represents Judaism and features on the Israeli flag, for example, comprises two overlapping equilateral triangles. The hexagram came to be known as the Seal of Solomon as a result of its association with the biblical King Solomon, who is said to have used it to protect against evil.

Like the Cross, the Star of David embodies multiple meanings. Benée Rubin asserts that the Star encompasses heaven and earth and provides the balance in conjunction with Earth, Wind, Fire and Water. Masculine strength and feminine nurturing are symbolically represented by the double triangles. Rubin tells us that all aspects of our world, both physical and metaphysical, are found within the star, whose “six points ... symbolize God’s rule over the universe in all six directions: north, south, east, west, up and down”.

For Judaism, the superimposed triangles have a practical meaning, signifying their relationship with God. The upward pointing triangle represents God, while the downward-pointing triangle represents people on earth. The six sides represent the six working days and hexagon at the centre represents Sabbath.

The Yin and Yang is similarly a beautifully balanced symbol of Chinese culture, circular in shape and divided in two by a flowing curve. The symbol describes the state of being between polar opposites as they occur in the natural world. Dark versus light, female versus male, low versus high, cold versus hot. These are all manifestations of Yin and Yang and always occur in equal, yet opposite, forms.

Rubin states that “yin and yang sides are forever in balance and one cannot exist without the other”. As a master goldsmith, Rubin has been handcrafting and creating jewellery for a period of twenty years. With training from Swiss jewellery designer Alois Lander and Danish master jeweller Erik Lyth, Rubin focuses on creating works of wearable art.
A major feature of her handcrafted jewellery is that pieces can be split in two, worn by lovers to signify their connection as a couple. The interlocking symbol necklaces in sterling silver incorporate symbols such as yin and yang, crosses, Jewish stars and mandalas; providing a cross-cultural relevance.

Her YinYang Couple’s Necklace combines imagery of the dragon and phoenix to symbolise harmonious equality in marriage. Handcrafted in sterling silver with black rhodium plating, she explains the necklace’s two halves. “The white half, or the yin side, represents the sun and summer; the dark half, or the yang side, represents the moon and winter.”

Chinese symbolism inspires other examples of Rubin’s mastery. Her Double Happiness necklace draws from an ancient Tang dynasty practice, in which the wedding couple doubled the Chinese character for happy on a red piece of paper, hanging this on a wall to symbolise their joy. The necklace pair features a men’s half, featuring a blackened dragon and a woman’s half, detailing plum blossoms, both of which surround the ‘Double Happiness’ characters.

Her work has even been used in the movies (Jet Li’s “The One”) and has gone into outer space. To see more of her work please go to www.beneerubin.com. To have an in-home or in-office showing, please feel free to call me at (604) 351-9251.

Sincerely,

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