

DO YOU BELIEVE IN MAGICK?

Essays and Works by

Judith Hoch

Aphrodite's Epiphany/ Or The Sudden Discovery of a Divine Being



In my piece, *Aphrodite's Epiphany/Or The Sudden Discovery of a Divine Being*, Aphrodite's Tree of Life is prominent, as are symbols of mother and maiden, sea foam, her dove, and the spiral of creation. Aphrodite's face hides behind a black mask, covering the startling truth that her energy is the *whole* divine, not just a little parcel of it limited to voluptuous movie stars or legendary whores. The Greek Aphrodite, whose name evokes a sly smile because she's imagined as a "sex goddess" (notice the small "g" for "goddess" in most literature, while a male "God" is usually accorded a capital) was, in fact, maiden, mother and crone, a three-in-one deity, said to be older than time. Other Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures knew Aphrodite as Ishtar, Inanna (about whom, her priests wrote the first theological literature), Astarte, Turan, Asherah, and Venus.

Greek Aphrodite arose from sea foam, fully grown and beautiful. In her honor, the Venetians named their gorgeous city, Queen of the Sea. Greeks and Romans both believed that a single glance from Aphrodite was all it took to love her forever. When we hear this belief about Aphrodite, we imagine someone like a beautiful Latina prostitute in Havana throwing a sexy wink over her shoulder. Of course, Aphrodite's temples honored loving sexuality and practiced it to attain divine realization, the ultimate union of male and female, but Aphrodite's path was more than this. The Greeks and Romans knew Aphrodite as a God, like the great gods of all mystics, who could seduce a seeker for life with a single magnificent glimpse of her divine visage. In her temples, the Cypriot sage, Zenon, taught Aphrodite's philosophy, which directed people toward union in nature and the natural cycles governing life.

That her teachings were about nature is not surprising. Before Neolithic times, this universal female God's worship took place in sacred groves of old trees near river and sea; but when settled peoples built sanctuaries and temples, they worshipped her indoors, a sacred timber pillar holding her image. Nevertheless, there were local trees and springs still associated with her energy, wild, in the out of doors.

In these “olden” times, trees gave alphabet and divination systems to people from Ireland to Nigeria. These are the ages spoken of in myth and symbol from many traditions, when people were quiet enough to hear the Old Trees speak and had time enough to listen. Sacred groves absorbed and amplified spiritual and natural energies, and people sought them (as they do today) for their revelatory and healing qualities. The “Aha” moment (glance of God) often occurs while meditating silently under an old tree. For instance, the ancient *Bodhi* tree nurtured the revelations of Sidhartha, who awakened under its spreading limbs to become the Buddha. Sit under a tree quietly for a couple of hours and feel the nurturing energy of the Great God, Aphrodite.

Frog Goddess



In *Frog Goddess*, I created a man and woman, dancing the round of life, struggling in conflict to understand the meaning of their existence together. Next to this life-weary pair is a yogi meditating alone, stilling his mind, opting out of relationship. Frog Goddess, on the far left, embodies the natural law of *growth through transformation*. Frog looks with one face toward the mortals, while her other face listens to a million frog songs from the primeval woodland. While I worked on this piece, I imagined Neolithic artists listening to a frog chorus from the wetland beyond the meadow, staring at a black sky lousy with stars, while dreaming the mysteries of life.

I discovered that frogs appear on Neolithic icons when I read Marija Gimbutas' book, *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe*. I was delighted that my Neolithic artist ancestors drew the frog image to suggest the states of transformation integral to life on Earth. The frog, like the butterfly, is particularly dramatic in its changes. Who could imagine a frog from first view of a baby tadpole? The mystery of transformation is one of nature's most closely guarded secrets.

Gimbutas found the Neolithic artist using a frog's bent, hind legs to symbolize a birthing woman, and that the artist used the frog's tail to express spiraling womb-energy. The symbols on the body of my *Frog Goddess* figure are part of this Neolithic, artistic vocabulary. Neolithic artists used animals to represent qualities admired by humans. The frog transforms itself from egg to tadpole to swimming amphibian at the right time and without undue stress. Can we *Homo sapiens* do the same? Can we transform ourselves from juveniles into adults capable of living on Earth in a sustainable and peaceful way? The answer to that is just around the corner. Some say it will come with the end of the Mayan calendar, others with the end of petroleum.

Artemis and the Snake God



Artemis is an ancient Goddess worshipped at Ephesus under the Latin name of Diana. Her temple was in its glory around 550 BC and was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The legend of the day was that Amazons built Artemis' first temple.

Over the course of the fourth century, Ephesians converted to Christianity. Because of the hatred of the new Christians, Theodosius declared Artemis' temple closed in 391 AD. In 401, a mob led by St. John Chrysostom finally destroyed this great architectural wonder, and the stones were used in construction of other buildings. Some of the columns in Hagia Sophia originally belonged to the Artemis' temple. This was a common way of completely erasing pagan religion from the map: destroy a sacred site and reuse the building materials.

In my *Artemis and the Snake God*, Artemis contains her regenerative fish (later taken by Christianity as its symbol), water symbols (she used water to turn Actaeon into a stag), and her death-dogs drink at her large breasts. From her hand, she throws a thunder bolt. An enthroned Snake God sits across from Artemis. This giant God is inspired by a powerful Neolithic icon from Thessaly, possibly an early version of Artemis. The Snake God's long neck, surmounted by her bird-head, is very phallus-like, holding the power of male and female in protective unity.

Years ago at the Vatican, I saw a famous marble copy of a statue of Artemis from Ephesus, in which pendulous breasts hang on Artemis from neck to ankle. "I have breasts, therefore I am," is a proverb uttered across the ancient world. Found on tomb interiors in Egypt and still quoted in some Wiccan ceremonies today, it expresses a concrete truth based on people's practical experience, but like all proverbs, is also metaphorical. This saying about the Great Mother God metaphorically suggests how Nature has infinite means to nourish her children.

Artemis, like all Great Gods, also has a destructive aspect. She is a hunter whose dogs are terrifying killers. When one of her worshippers, Actaeon, saw her bathing in the forest, Artemis changed him into a stag; then she whistled, and his own dogs rushed from the forest and tore him to pieces. Artemis is not the only killer among Mother Gods. Some like Inanna led armies and smote enemies, and several, like Inanna, Ishtar and Isis, annually slew their young male lovers. When Hades kidnapped Persephone, Demeter's anger caused the whole earth to shrivel

up. The ancient Goddess was no wimp. Like Jehovah, she created, sustained and then took away life, no one exempt from her powers of creation or destruction.

Minoan Rites



I first visited the island of Crete in 1978 before all the motorbikes arrived. What a quiet and magical place! I wanted to move there, get lost in its music and food, pretend that the ancient Minoans were still around, just waiting for my lover and I across the mountains. We stayed in a room overlooking the sparkling, clear Mediterranean, a fresh breeze wafting through the open balcony doors. Fishermen washed their blue boats under our window and beat octopus on the rocks.

We wandered around the palace and temple of Knossos. The murals at Knossos were repainted in deco style by early excavators; I loved seeing them along with the iconography of Minoan culture in the museums. I loved the powerful and mysterious women, bare-breasted, riding bulls, or surmounted by snakes, holding alchemical vessels. I adored the dolphins, joyful spirals, and the honey bees on jewelry and pottery. Creti honey, even in my day, was exceptional, and I know because I've kept bees and tasted many honeys. I can only imagine how the unpolluted volcanic soil and climate five thousand years ago would have enhanced the culinary pleasures of a Minoan flowered honey.

The social historian, Riane Eisler, believes that in Minoan Crete equality between women and men contributed to a long era of peace. She conjectures that harmony in Crete ended when invasions of patriarchal peoples, who did not accept the female Great God or gender equality, caused the fragmenting of Minoan society and beliefs. The invaders were the precursors of the patriarchal Greeks, among whom married women could not vote or even leave the house without male protection. Only the hetaerae, Greek geishas trained in the arts, conversation, and love making for the pleasures of men, had any sort of freedom, some becoming quite influential behind-the-scenes where men had the leading roles.

Before beginning my work, *Minoan Rites*, I imagined the appearance of the sword bearing armies who put an end to the “honeyed” culture of Minoan Crete. I thought these invaders would have hated everything feminine that was powerful, even the female bees in the famous hives of Crete. Like hives today, in Minoan Creti hives, female worker bees predominated, while only a small number of drone males existed, super-nourished by workers to become fertile males, capable of impregnating the queen. My bee women in *Minoan Rites* are bare breasted like the Minoan women in the murals at Knossos temple, cooperating with one another to keep their queen and hive alive. This is still a healthy hive because there is only one drone with fertilizing ability, the “sword” the little male bee places in the Queen’s

hand. However, the bees' faces and dance express what the dark eggs and wheel symbolize: the coming of death and destruction to the Minoan isle of paradise.

Return to Our Source



In my piece, *Return to Our Source*, the great Bird God watches over the world, and encourages two seekers to fly upward into her wisdom, holistic perspective, and magnificent beauty. To rise higher is to purify one's vision. The shaman-people in *Return to Our Source* take flight into the splendor of the primeval bird-world of towering forests, shining mountains, and pure crystal waters.

I've always been fascinated with the prolific representation of birds in ancient art and feel rapport with the artists of seven or eight thousand years ago who were equally mesmerized. I equate the health of birds with the health of forests, rivers, and ocean. When I was growing up in Florida, I could see flocks of giant egrets, herons, spoonbills and cranes in their thousands, but now, to see a pair of birds is a lucky day. Birds grace our garden and capture my imagination for hours. They have the ability to concentrate, focus all their gaze and energy on their prey, disappear in a moment and are beautiful with a range of color like tropical fish.

In ancient art everywhere, birds fly upward and outward into the unknown, carrying souls from earth, blending features with humans, and laying magical eggs. Forces of light, bringers of death, messengers, birds are powerful spirit entities as well as a source of nourishment. The magical qualities of eggs and flight set birds apart from people and provide powerful symbols of regeneration, birth, and spiritual evolution for the artist.

In every end of the "old world", bird feathers were an adornment suggestive of the power of flight, a power connected to shamans, yogis, and seers. Becoming a bird in a visionary trance was the hallmark of shamanism in Asia, the South Pacific, and Siberia. In ancient Europe, bird figures date from thousands of years before Christ. The bird travels freely between heaven and Earth, true soul freedom without the limitations of weight and gravity. Birds (chickens to be precise) are the closest living creatures to dinosaurs who roamed the planet undisturbed for millions of years. Their longevity speaks of intelligence and adaptability beyond that of the human species.

Dance of the Winter Solstice



The *Winter Solstice* was celebrated for thousands of years before the time of Christ, Mohammed, and Buddha. This solstice was the shortest day of the year, the day after which, sunlight would once again lengthen. It meant a lot to people who spent their lives out-of-doors and who depended for their survival on knowing the laws of nature. Five thousand years ago, the winter solstice was celebrated body, mind, and soul as part of the Great Round, or circle of life. My work commemorates these festivities using ancient symbols like the owl and the Minoan lute player to suggest the origins of the holiday.

I was lucky to live in Britain before barbed wire surrounded Stonehenge with entrance tunnels leading under a busy highway. There's something about the stones that makes you come away changed, but you probably don't realize it for a while. They exert attracting energy, so that some part of the soul longs to return. It was the stones that first awakened me to solstices and equinoxes. Until the age of nineteen, I had no idea what those terms really meant.

Stonehenge, and the hundreds of other stone circles, lines, and menhirs (single tall stones) in the British Isles, had alignments with many significant lunar and solar events. Many of the stone circles and lines were calendars of great precision, which marked the solar and lunar expansions and contractions across the natural year. Megalithic/Neolithic cultures studied the skies with such concentration that they could predict the eighteen-year little wobble in the cycle of the moon with their stone observatories. The solstices were the corner points of the year (still are!) marking concordance between Earth and Heaven.

Trickster's Laughter



Trickster's Laughter draws on a universal archetype known as the trickster in myth and legend. Trickster figures exist to teach the limitations of our perceptions.

Tricksters like Eshu in Nigeria or Coyote in America say, “So, you think there is a law of gravity? Now, watch me walk on the ceiling!” If the trickster could have two lines, they could be these from William Blake: “If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thru' narrow chinks of his cavern.” Trickster stories illustrate how cloudy our awareness is of our own lives, and how we create our own reality through our beliefs.

In *Trickster's Laughter*, I imagined the Santeria trickster, Elegguá, grinning at the ignorance of human beings. The pregnant woman, her labyrinth womb, and her god-lover with swollen phallus, refer to the great round of life, celebrated and suffered from birth to death. Next to this couple is the face of the Bird God. Bird gods with universally feminine features appear from Europe to Africa in ancient art and are messengers of spirit. The mammoth, toothy beam of trickster rises above the human fray and merges with this ancient knowledge.

As science becomes more sophisticated about the role of the observer, we discover more about how intention shapes reality. We live in a universe mysterious beyond all possible belief. We see the closest star only as it was when we started to evolve as humans on Earth! In fact, all the stars may long ago have disappeared from the sky. Trickster watches how we live our little lives as if we know something important, and then he roars with laughter.