OF CIRCULAR SYMMETRY AND SIGNIFIED SPIRITUALITY

By Cherrie Hung

Mathematics and spirituality. Despite being considered by many to be drastically different disciplines— with math more rooted in a rigid framework of logic, and spirituality, in the more illogical all-encompassing search for something grander than ourselves, the two disciplines are inherently connected.

One such point of overlap would be the mandala. Above, you can see several examples of these intricate radial artworks. They’ve resurged into popularity recently, etched into sketchbooks and inked into skin but the origin of mandalas go back thousands of years. The word itself comes from the Sanskrit मण्डल (māndala) meaning ‘circle’ or ‘disk’ and mandalas were originally used in both Buddhism and Hinduism as spiritual symbols to represent the universe.

Taking a closer look at Figure 1, the appeal of these creations is easy to recognize from a more logical perspective. Humans are inherently drawn to the beauty of symmetry and the appeal of the Golden Ratio in radial symmetry is captivating. Nature has realized the appeal of symmetry long ago and takes advantage of this innate response, evident in plants and animals. However, anything with radial symmetry and intricately inked lines that appeal to the eye often brings to mind the word mandala. They’ve become more commonplace and mandala, previously used more so to refer to any pattern, shape or diagram that represents a ‘microcosm’ of the universe— that is, something that represents the cosmos in a metaphysical sense — now indicates any intricate pattern with radial symmetry. Once could perhaps state that there’s been a certain loss of formality.

Present in many Eastern religions as earlier mentioned, it’s also of note that the mandala also makes appearances in Christianity, a continent apart. The halo, rosary and the Celtic cross are believed to have evolved from mandalas.

Mandalas were initially used as focus points for tantric practice in Hinduism as they were believed to represent the home of the deity— a lived, experiential reality unto itself— before eventually shifting to a broader belief that the space contained within the form was representative of the universe itself. This symbolic representation as a microcosm of the universe is also found in Buddhism, where mandalas also represent their core belief of rebirth and purity. Each detail can be inundated with meaning and symbolism and even used for more practical purposes such as basic design of the meditative temples present in Hinduism. These simple albeit beautiful designs are of anthropogenic origin but it is fascinating to note how

Figure 1: Examples of modern day mandalas. Note the radial symmetry and intricate shapes that each pattern is built from and so, ‘radiates’ from the center. (Creative Common Images courtesy of Amandalife, KaylinArt and Ridderhof from pixabay)
such transcendental designations are placed upon these simple shapes and patterns, as if they were not human creations but something else entirely.

The reintroduction of mandalas into modern Western thought is often credited to Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who founded analytical psychology. He discovered through his own art—which he felt was a reflection of his current state of being at the moment—that the complexity of these ‘circle drawings’ was inherently tied to moments of personal growth. The appearance of these circle drawings—later dubbed mandalas—was connected to the ‘Self, [and] the wholeness of personality which, if all goes well is harmonious’. There’s been a tentative psychoanalytic definition that gives the mandala another dimension in its meaning. When seen in dreams, it represents a search for completeness and self-unity.

In the end, isn’t that precisely what spirituality is? Spirituality, by definition, is the belief that we are connected to something bigger than ourselves, and encompasses a search for meaning in our life has been appropriated for more modern [usage]. Spirituality to me, also indicates a journey of self-discovery. How the human subconscious manages to connect an abstract concept with a visual prompt despite having never pondered the underlying connections is short of unbelievable. And even thousands of years apart, these same shapes are brought back light with a similar meaning conferred.

It seems too unlikely to be nothing more than a coincidence but plausible reason lies rooted in the common factor that ties mandalas and spirituality together. Humans. After all, it is our innate belief and search for the beyond that gives us the concept of spirituality and it is very much our hands that have crafted these intricate shapes, in clay, ink or cloth. The common factor is humans, and as such, humans can be viewed as a ‘translator’, linking two otherwise contrasting disciplines; our realized search for something greater than us, and the basic premise of mathematics surrounding us. This idea is something that transcends barriers and has remained over eons, cropping up again and again in what we consider civilization Is it math that confers spirituality or spirituality that incites math?

REFERENCES
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