

Coyote Capasso

Dr. Robert T. Rhode

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### Pagan Religious Art: Creating for the Gods

Walk down the grassy aisles of a Pagan market, and you may wonder if you have, in fact, accidentally found yourself in the art fair vended by geniuses and children.

Exquisite carvings of animals in bone are laid out on tables next to a pile of crudely and garishly painted wands wrapped in cheap ribbons. Masks created with obvious skill and delicacy are across the way from baskets of little sachets sewn with big, wobbly stitches. The diversity of the art you find is like nothing you can find anywhere else.

This variety of skill level and art forms is what makes the art of Neo-Pagans unique. Unlike many other religious art styles, Pagan art is brought together by two main tenets: creativity and enthusiasm. The artists draw inspiration from all cultures and all time periods, including American pop culture. This is not done from ignorance—not at all. Most artists value their knowledge of the culture that they are inspired by and are usually trying to recreate it in a way that honors that original culture. And the artists are not confined to sculpture, painting, and novel writing. They compose music, write poetry, make instruments, forge swords, build altars, sew and embroider ritual clothing, and perform the sacred theater of ritual.

Its art may be the one force that draws all the various paths of Paganism together. The creation of art is generally not reserved for the trained few; everyone creates:

“Pagans feel that creativity is central to one’s spiritual development and ability to contribute to society” (Magliocco 7). This is because the act of creating art is seen, in and of itself, as a sacred act. That work of art may end up being a ritual tool, a special gift to a friend, a part of a magical spell, or even a home for a god. It may be made as an act of devotion, as a method to work through a spiritual crisis, or as a sacrifice. In fact, Pagan art can be remarkably short lived. It may exist for a few days to only a few hours. One example is altars, which “are ephemeral art” (Magliocco 10). Many Pagans have permanent home altars, but many are also created only for one ritual, which may be over as quickly as a half-an-hour. Other works of art will be made to be destroyed during ritual as a gift to the Gods. A few years ago, a musician spent an untold amount of time crafting a beautiful harp which was never to be played – it was thrown into a sacred bonfire as a sacrifice.

A local Pagan, Robyn, who does not consider herself an artist yet dyes and spins wool to make yarn, etches glass, embroiders, sews, and makes jewelry on a frequent basis is familiar with creating sacrificial art. Asked why she does it, she said,

This type of artwork is highly sacred to me and is usually deeply personal. When I've done this, it has been when I have emotions and feelings that I can't seem to express in words and when I have needed to meditate deeply on a certain issue. I usually get in a quiet and sacred space, ask the Divine for guidance and just allow myself to draw or sketch without thinking about what I'm doing. I am often surprised at the outcome. Sometimes it is a way to share my thoughts with the Gods, other times I feel that it is the Gods sharing their thoughts with me through

inspiration. I find it interesting that the artwork I do when in this process usually turns out very different than my normal style or is often beyond my normal creative capacity. It is this that I think is the spiritual connection between me and my Gods and Goddesses and so it is always sacrificed to them because it is too personal to share with just anyone (Coy).

So this seemingly wasteful destruction of art is actually a powerful symbol of faith, an act by people showing that their art will be appreciated by their gods even when it no longer exists on this material plane.

Pagans can also create art that is quite permanent, expressed through tattooing and scarring. The act of making the tattoo can be the culmination of a spiritual trial or be a symbol of the kind of strength that people need in their life. Robyn is presently searching out an artist to scar her forehead with a symbol of the Moon as a sign of her devotion to her Goddess (Coy).

As a spiritual path that finds the visual so important, especially if it is colorful, flamboyant, and joyful, Pagan faith frees people to let out a side of themselves that is normally repressed in everyday society. Pagans that gather together outdo one another with their wild clothing. They wear ornate body paint, horns, sacred masks, feathers, and fox tails. Both men and women will dress in sarongs and flowing hippy skirts, and all will usually wear an impressive array of jewelry. Robyn has only been a Pagan for four years and sees these gatherings as an outlet. In her everyday life she is a reserved research scientist and wears very mundane clothing. A person would never look at her and imagine that on the weekends and at festivals her hair flows loose, she wears

embroidered skirts and very little up top, she puts on a jumble of necklaces and holy pendants, and she spins fire as a performance art.

Art is another strong outlet of a person's inner wildness and creativity that is normally discouraged in our dominant culture. To underscore this, much of the art is subversive in its themes. There is an overabundance of nudity, curvaceous female figures, lewd female figures (an example is the Sheila-na-gig), and well-endowed, horned male figures. There is also a desire to beautify everyday objects, like knives, staves, plates, and stones. If it can be enhanced with a carving, a bit of pretty thread, or some etching, it will probably be done.

Pagans do not have a large market for their art, so it is difficult to find examples of it in mainstream stores and markets. But Pagan artists can find loyal customers nonetheless. Many times, artists will deliberately cater to this, creating art that is sold or given to only known individuals. There is quite a bit of bartering and trading of art works. It is often seen as a sign of honor to receive one of these works from a respected Pagan. These gifts do not necessarily have to be of any great skill, either, as it is the energy and the thought that is put into it that matters more.

Despite not having their art placed in most galleries and stores, Pagan artists have a thriving market on the Internet through private websites, through Pagan bookstores, and through religious celebratory festivals. These markets, again, show a range of abilities and products. And since the most important element is the spirituality behind the creation and the significance to the buyer, it is not always the best that you buy. If one of the crudely painted wands in the basket is decorated with the feathers of a bird sacred to you and woodburned with runes that spell out the name of your God, that wand will probably

be the item that is bought, with great joy, while passing over the delicately carved  
statuettes created by masters.