



Figure 1 - *The Prisoners* by Adolph Gottlieb, 1947.

**Labyrinth of the Shadow: History and Alchemy in
Adolph Gottlieb's *The Prisoners***

Michael J. Landauer and Bruce Barnes

PART 1

***THE PRISONERS, 1947* by ADOLPH GOTTLIEB:
A Systematic Symbolic Interpretation**

by Michael J. Landauer

I first met this painting at the Waddington-Shiell Gallery in Toronto in 1979. Miriam Shiell had brought *The Prisoners* over for the season's opening show from Leslie Waddington's London Gallery. *The Prisoners* dominated its space and bowled me over with its larger than life presence. It brooded gloom, spat menace, radiated stubborn hope. I fell in love immediately.

In 1945 Gottlieb wrote in the *New York Times*, "Painting is the making of images. All painters strive for the image but some produce only effigies. This outcome is not determined by the degree of resemblance to natural objects; **rather it is by the invention of symbols transcending resemblance that imagery is made possible.** If the painter's conception is realized in the form of an image, we are confronted with a new natural object which has its own life, its own beauty and its own wisdom."¹

At about the same time, speaking rhetorically about his own art, Gottlieb said "If the origin of painting was the making of marks or poetic signs should we consider the painter an artisan-poet or is he the artisan-architect of a formal structure? Or both?"²

Gottlieb and Mark Rothko with Barnett Newman's assistance drafted a letter to Alden Jewell Art Editor at the NYT on June 7, 1943. They said, "No possible set of notes can explain our paintings. Their explanation must come out of a consummated experience between picture and onlooker. The appreciation of art is a true marriage of minds."³ I have been engaged for almost thirty years with this beguiling work, to consummate my experience with it.

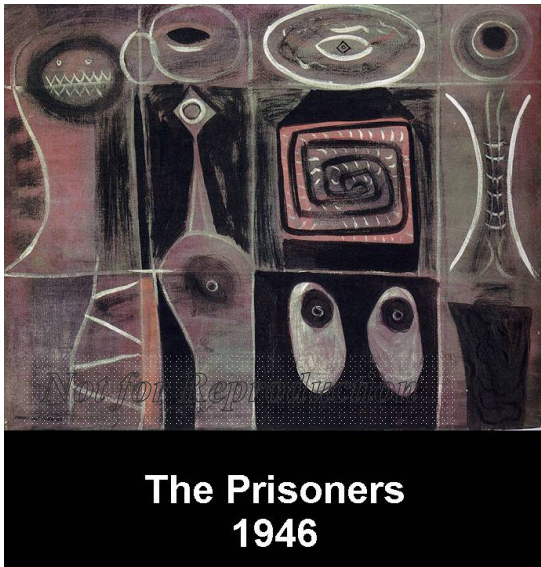
When I embarked on the quest for a systematic symbolic interpretation of *The Prisoners* in the early 1980s most art historians were of the view that the

proper subject matter of the abstract expressionist painter was the artist's psyche itself, and the more subjective aspects of the psyche at that. The highest and most advanced painting portrayed exalted feeling, which the artist expressed in pure form and color. The paintings did not refer to history, let alone with narrative structure.

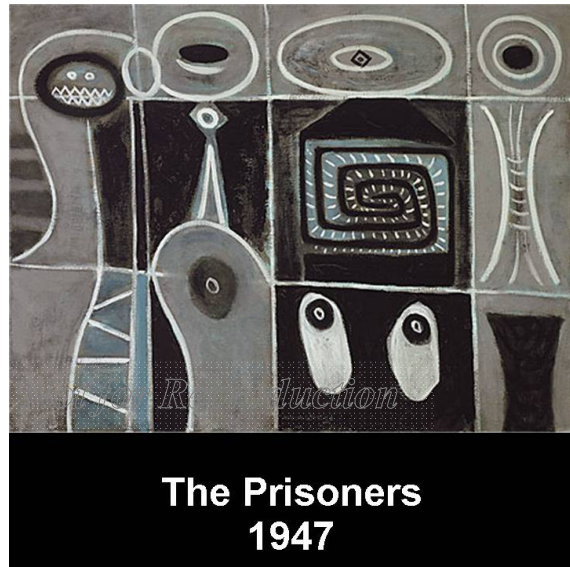
In 1988 Stephen Polcari published an article called "Adolph Gottlieb's Allegorical Epics of World War II".⁴ Polcari identified the pictographs as responses by Gottlieb to the crisis of western civilization he experienced around him in the Great Depression and the World War. He analyzed the modern intellectual currents Gottlieb utilized in exploring the crisis including evolutionary theory, cultural theory, mythology, symbolist literature, Jungian concepts and alchemy. Since Polcari wrote, it has become increasingly respectable to inquire into the social meanings that artists thought to embody in their work.

The Prisoners is unique in the pictograph series in three ways. Gottlieb painted one version of *The Prisoners* in 1946 and then a second in 1947. Sanford Hirsch, founding Director of the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation, states that this was the only time that Adolph Gottlieb returned to a finished pictograph in order to repaint it. *The Prisoners* is also unique, according to Hirsch, as the most explicit response by the artist to the horrors of World War II.⁵ Finally in my view *The Prisoners* is unique in that the symbolic structure of this work lends itself readily to a systematic interpretation. Whereas most pictographs, composed by free association, do not possess a clear narrative structure, *The Prisoners*, in my view of it, does. *The Prisoners* can be interpreted as a sweeping allegory of the

development and polarities of the human psyche in society. Adolph Gottlieb has created an epic painting of ideas, expressed in dense, layered, abstract symbols connected syntactically through the organization of Gottlieb's characteristic pictograph grid.



**The Prisoners
1946**



**The Prisoners
1947**

Of course, this is not the only interpretation available for *The Prisoners*. Another, by my colleague, Bruce Barnes, forms the second part of this article. Moreover, it is part of the genius of this work that exposing and analyzing a structure in the symbols does not lessen the painting's aesthetic and emotional immediacy, one of the defining qualities of an abstract expressionist canvas.

Let us now visit the canvas.

The Prisoners is organized into 4 columns and 3 rows. I leave any numerology to others.

The columns, reading generally from left to right, represent the development of psyche in society through time.

The first two columns- half the canvas- portray the evolution of the psyche from primordial roots up to the dawn of the modern era.

The third column symbolizes the breakdown of psyche and society in the modern era and notably in the just concluded second World War.

The final column paints a glimpse of Adolph Gottlieb's prognosis for the future of psyche and society.

The division of the painting into three horizontal bands refers, I believe, to the layers of the psyche, at any and all points in time. The bottom band represents instinctual and unconscious drives in the psyche. The mid range represents ego at work in the world and the upper band symbolizes the superego of value systems, culture and belief systems.

I will begin my detailed exploration of the composition with one of the cells of the painting that both fits the template I have described above and departs from it, but only in order to enrich and deepen the allegory.



Figure 4 *Bottom cell of The Prisoners, 1947*

horrified, terrified witness to something awful, perhaps the energetic drama playing out in the compartment above.

The bottom cell of the column representing present time contains two ellipses that loom brightly side by side out of inky blackness. These two luminous forms have always struck me as eyes. The person behind the eyes seems a lonely,

On close examination these ovals are oriented vertically not horizontally and have four not three parts. They are not literally human eyes. Dr. Victor Likwornik, a psychiatrist with Freudian training, sees the forms as primitive single-celled animal life, nucleus and all. This interpretation establishes these forms as the starting point for the evolution of life and psyche symbolized in the two columns to the left. Psyche emerges from a base of biological imperatives, the *prima materia*. In this cell the impenetrable blackness can stand for this biological and instinctual ground of the human psyche.

Jungian analysts perceive the luminous orbs to symbolize human consciousness, psyche's crown. For Jung, one task of individual consciousness is to assist the psyche in the hard work of individuation by acting as a second sight, lighting a candle as it were, in the dark unconscious to identify repressed archetypal drives. This difficult process of relative liberation is also aptly symbolized in this cell of Gottlieb's *The Prisoners*.

From the perspective of society, individual consciousness is often suppressed by authority, exiled as it were, because conscious individuals are seen as a threat to power in a society under stress. The placement of the haunted eyes of second sight under the fearful machine above suggests this interpretation of the relationship between individual and society. Adolph Gottlieb affixed his signature in this cell of the painting in 1947 but not in the 1946 version of *The Prisoners*. I will venture an explanation for this change later.

This same cell of *The Prisoners* symbolizes the most primitive stage of animal life and the highest stage of human development. Life ordains the interpenetration and co-existence of the ineffable and the material as well as the

interdependence of self and society. These conflicted and dynamic relationships are portrayed by the artist Adolph Gottlieb in this single marvelously layered and nuanced ideographic symbol at our chosen starting point in exploring *The Prisoners*.

I want to turn now to the first two columns of the painting. I will consider them as a whole and leave detailed examination of each symbol to the viewer's own further investigation. For me the first two columns of *The Prisoners* picture the development of the human psyche along two principal paths, the instinctual and the rational. A large blunt form thrusts up from behind and below the bright forms we have just inspected. It could be a club but it also intimates breast and phallus. The form bursts upwards almost obliterating the



Figure 5 *Left 2 columns of The Prisoners, 1947*

boundary between the lower and mid regions, the id and ego let us say. For me this form symbolizes the instinctual life force asserting itself at all costs. I believe this shape also symbolizes the development of the intuitive and emotional side of the human psyche.

Beside this symbol to its left a winding grey path snakes its way up from the base of the canvas through the entire height of the first column. At the top of

this path a black grimacing head presides. The shape is dinosaur like. This represents the path of intellectual development and the force of reason in the human psyche.

The paths of instinct and intellect are separate in the painting, even split, yet they are clearly related in an indeterminate way. The two aspects of the human psyche connect indirectly at the top of the canvas through their joint relationship with the first of three bright constellations running along the top



Figure 6 *Three constellations in The Prisoners, 1947.*

plane of *The Prisoners*. For me these three energetic constellations represent the superego of the psyche or, from a collective perspective, they represent culture - the realm of values, beliefs and norms. From a metaphysical perspective this is also where human faculties connect to the ground of our existence as a species.

The intellectual path connects to the formation of culture through the seductively smooth oval or egg shape joining the head to the orb. In the alchemical tradition the Philosopher's egg or stone is the seed of spiritual life. The instinctual/intuitive path connects to the early culture constellation through the graceful enigmatic figure perched atop it. This wand shape cuts through the inky blackness surrounding it to make contact with the upper sphere. In its diamond head is an eye or a mouth. This form can symbolize oracular



Figure 7 Wand shape in The Prisoners, 1947.

pronouncements however divined. It also resembles a robed magician or priestess.

Through their contrasting connections with the formation and spread of culture the two separate paths of intellect and instinct are joined in a closed system through time. The overall shape of the first two columns of *The Prisoners* resembles an ouroboros or snake biting its own tail. In mythology the ouroboros represents a closed cycle of development,

the marriage of the cthonian world and the celestial world, the dark and the light. It also represents the effort to transcend one level of existence to reach another.

The blue-green color appearing throughout the painting represents creative energy in nature and in the psyche. But it would be well to remember another reference to blue-green that was available to Adolph Gottlieb in 1947. William L. Laurence, a Pulitzer Prize winning science writer, accompanied the crew of 'The Great Artiste' when it dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki, August 9th, 1945. Mr. Laurence wrote in the *New York Times* on September 9th, "After the first blinding flash...we removed our glasses but the light still lingered on, a **bluish-green light** that illuminated the entire sky all around. A tremendous blast wave struck our ship and made it tremble from nose to tail."⁶ Creative energy can be devoted to death as readily as to life. Gottlieb, in choosing the blue-

green color, again brings opposites together in his symbolic allegory of the tensions at the core of human psyche and society.

The third pillar of the canvas portrays at the top a flattened ellipse, then a double spiral labyrinth, and below the eyes /cells that were our starting point. This column portrays the predicament of modern man. Modern culture is symbolized by the white constellation in the top cell, containing a small black diamond. This culture has reduced the role of darkness in its world view. Modern western man thought him self enlightened and progress inevitable. The Enlightenment banished the shadows of megalomania and depravity to the margin of imagination. Evil, if it existed at all, was in irrevocable retreat.



Figure 8 *Third column of The Prisoners, 1947.*

Culture is the bridge between psyche and society. The one-sidedness of Enlightenment thought invited compensating doctrines. Anti-social revolutionary movements arose, dedicated to atavistic strains in the subconscious of suppressed ethnic and class groups. The absolute black of the two lower cells in the modern column, more blackness than anywhere else in the painting, represent this revolt in the psyche and in society.

Adolph Hitler, the avatar of anti-modern irrationality, appears. Hitler reduces German Volk culture to a mélange of collective unconscious archetypes and in short order the German homeland to rubble. He also fixates his movement on identifying the vulnerable Jew as the German nemesis and formulates a killing machine to annihilate the Jewish people.

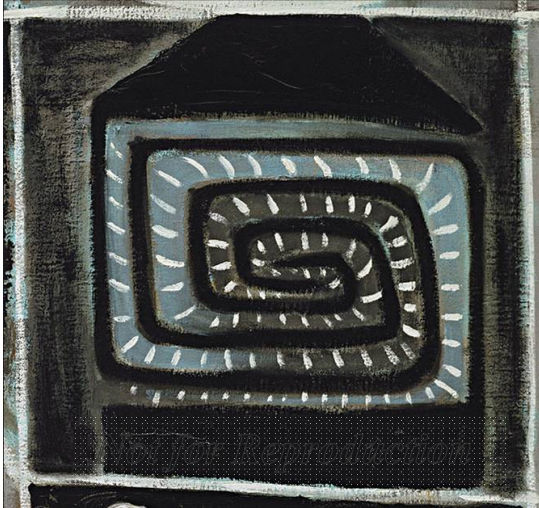


Figure 9 *Labyrinth in The Prisoners, 1947*

The furnace or labyrinth in the middle of the modern column pulsates, ingesting and spewing its contents of anonymous white ciphers, blue-green gas, and grey ash. Perhaps it might normally stand for any assembly-line in the industrial age. Now, however, this infernal machine is a labyrinth of the shadow. Modern man has mechanized

the production of death as much as he has widgets.

Victor Likwornik sees the myth of the Minotaur in the labyrinth. He sees the man-eating beast, having escaped the confines of King Minos' prison, taking up residence at the top left corner of Adolph Gottlieb's painting.

Adolph Gottlieb has signed his name at the bottom of this column as witness to the madness above, under the 'eyes in hiding', at least in the definitive 1947 painting of *The Prisoners*. As an artist he attests to the always tenuous position of advanced consciousness in society, its perennial vulnerability to repression, exile or liquidation. There was more reason in 1947 than in 1946 for the artist to feel threatened and I will soon hazard an explanation.

Come now and we will visit the elements of the final column, which I believe symbolizes Adolph Gottlieb's vision for the future of psyche and society. It is a hopeful prognosis but much less so here in 1947 than in the year earlier version.

This pillar is the most abstract of the symbol structures in *The Prisoners*. The ideological constellation is a synthesis of the contradictory statements in the ancient and modern eras. This post-war culture acknowledges the strength of negativity in the psyche and the associated threats to social cohesion.

The black vessel could well stand for the soul or the unconscious psyche. The contents of this black vase,



Figure 11 *Vessel in The Prisoners, 1947*

themselves black, are seething, vegetative, snaking forms. They seem tenuously

contained in the vessel. I see the black material as repressed material in the unconscious, and at the collective level as threats to social cohesion stemming from past history or brewing in the future. John Milton in *Paradise Lost* refers to an abyss of 'dark materials waiting to be formed'.



Figure 10 *Right column of The Prisoners, 1947*

A mysterious abstract white figure stands in the centre of Gottlieb's vision for the future. Its sides are two converging parabolas that form a channel. Two strands, sheathed together, course up through the channel. Finally the white apparition seems to strike a supplicating position.

From the perspective of the individual psyche this can be seen as the active ego. There are two dualities pictured. Perhaps male-female and instinctual-rational. These polarities need to be balanced and integrated in a dynamic process of give and take by a healthy ego for the sake of a healthy psyche.

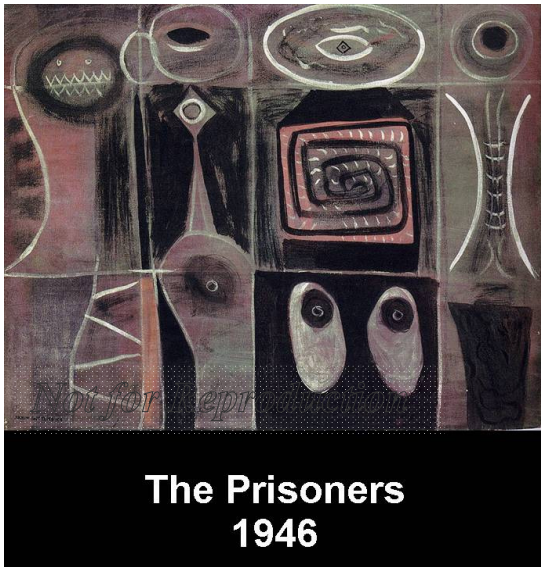
From the perspective of society the white figure can be seen as a sheath within a sheaf. As a sheath, perhaps of wires, it can represent the prosperity promised by science and education. As a sheaf it can symbolize the potential for social harmony and the joyous profusion of life.

A sheaf can also symbolize the gift of prophecy. The white figure seems to adopt a supplicating posture. Man is in control of extraordinary powers but has proven himself unequal to the responsibilities that come with power. The culture of the future seeks a balance between optimism and constructive prescriptions on one hand and recognition that the human psyche must have its dark recesses, and that society will reflect these shadows on the other. The best that a culture can expect to achieve is to sustain processes in society that will recognize and

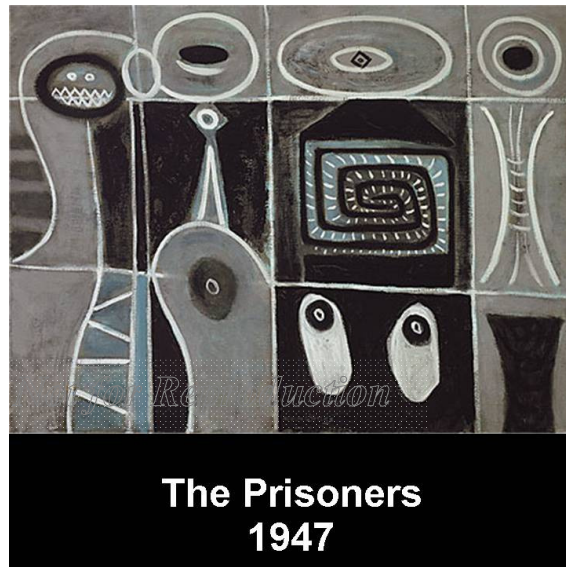


Figure 12 *White figure in The Prisoners, 1947*

monitor the darker impulses, harness them where possible, and check them where not. That is an American solution after all.



**The Prisoners
1946**



**The Prisoners
1947**

Let us briefly compare the 46 and 47 paintings. Gottlieb painted *Prisoners 1* in early 1946. The USA was celebrating the victorious conclusion of World War II. America was the strongest world power, expecting to lead the world from recovery to prosperity. The New York school of emerging, relatively young abstract artists, was expected to be at the cultural vanguard of the new American age. *Prisoners '46* reflects this optimism.

The '47 work is much larger, more definite and more intense. Its palette is starker- black, white, grey and blue-green. It pays more obvious homage to Picasso's *Guernica*. *Prisoners '47* is a grave painting, perhaps tinged with despair, in a way *Prisoners '46* is not.

In *The Prisoners, 1946* the boundary line between id and ego is blurred and the ego is actively processing material from the sub-conscious. The starkest,

most frustrating change in the 1947 painting is that this boundary is much more rigid and there are only trace elements of material from below rising to the ego level. The danger pictured is that we do not do the hard, conscious work at the level of the individual ego and in our social institutions of engaging with the shadow demons of our psyches. In that case the repressed and suppressed feelings will be sublimated into fantasy, may find ideological expression, and finally burst again into ferocious, widespread violence. Adolph Gottlieb seems to have become markedly more pessimistic about the likelihood of individuals and society dealing directly and effectively with shadow material in 1947 than he was in 1946. Gottlieb in *Prisoners '47* has put the cork back in the champagne bottle of post war exhilaration.



Figure 15 *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso, 1937

Why did Gottlieb decide in early 1947 to paint a second version of this finished pictograph, *The Prisoners*, 1946, the only time he revisited a pictograph in twelve years of work? What accounts for the change in the artist's outlook between early 1946 and early 1947?

Guernica was back in New York in 1946 and newly on display at MOMA. *Prisoners '46* was returned to the painter's studio from the Kootz Gallery on January 15, 1947.⁷ Perhaps this prompted Gottlieb to look anew at the canvas.

On March 5, 1946, in Fulton Missouri, Winston Churchill spoke at Westminster College. "From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic", Churchill intoned, "an iron curtain has descended across the continent." Churchill added "The dark ages may return, the Stone Age, on the gleaming wings of science".⁸ The cold war was on between the USA and the Soviet Union.

On October 4th 1946, The Advancing American Art Exhibition (AAA) opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in Manhattan. Gottlieb was represented by one piece, a conventional cubist portrait, not one of the more advanced pictographs for which he was by then widely recognized in sophisticated New York gallery circles. On October 6th the *New York Journal American*, a Hearst publication, ran a news article headlined "State Dept. Backs Red Art Show".⁹ It dismissed the exhibit as featuring "brush wielders who served on Communist fronts set up by Moscow" including in this group Gottlieb's



Figure 16 *New York Journal American* article.

friend and mentor Milton Avery. The clamor against abstract art grew dramatically in the months that followed culminating in the recall of the AAA exhibition from Prague in March, 1947. Meanwhile national magazines like *Look* and *Newsweek* joined the attack on abstract art. The halls of Congress resounded with strident epithets about unintelligible, un-American modern art painted by artists with foreign sounding names. Many traditional artists joined the chorus themselves.

In November 1946, the Republican Party gained control of Congress. Gottlieb was aware that the New Deal was dead and its exponents were being removed from office. A nativist, anti-intellectual movement was afoot, and it threatened the leading role that Gottlieb had envisioned for himself and his New York colleagues. In this atmosphere, as Gijs van Hensbergen points out in his book, *Guernica*, "It hardly mattered that artists like the radically abstract Barnett Newman (the same could have been said of Gottlieb) were vehement anti-Marxists and anti-Communists. In that poisoned climate of accusation and counter-accusation most artists were now tarred with the same brush."¹⁰

Gottlieb was a political fighter with the courage of his convictions. In May 1948, for example, he helped organize a Forum at the Museum of Modern Art to fight back against know nothing critics. Gottlieb said "The critics have failed to be connoisseurs, so they are trying to be commissars. With the cry of unintelligibility they attack whatever is not obvious."¹¹

It is my opinion then that when *The Prisoners '46* returned to Adolph Gottlieb's studio in January 1947, his outlook on the future for himself and the role of advanced American art had considerably soured. I believe he recognized

the uniqueness of *The Prisoners* and wanted to make a more definitive statement with it. In painting *The Prisoners, 1947*, Adolph Gottlieb aligned himself with Picasso on an anti-fascist platform, and amended his magisterial meditation on psyche in society by making the prognosis for the future less of Pangloss and more of Cassandra.

Footnotes

1. Letter to Edward Alden Jewell, NYT Art editor, New York Times (July 2, 1945). Copied from A&E Gottlieb Foundation files with permission.
2. From “Unintelligibility”, transcript of a talk by Adolph Gottlieb, dated 1948, 3, Reprinted from A&E Gottlieb Foundation files with permission.
3. Letter from Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko (with the assistance of Barnett Newman) to Edward Alden Jewell, NYT Art editor, dated June 7, 1943 (unpublished). Copied from A&E Gottlieb Foundation files with permission.
4. Stephen Polcari, “Adolph Gottlieb’s Allegorical Epics of World War II,” *Art Journal* (Fall, 1988): 202-207.
5. Sanford Hirsch, private communications, 2006.
6. William L. Laurence, “Atomic Bombing of Nagasaki Told by Flight Member,” *New York Times* (September 9, 1945).
- 7 Sanford Hirsch, private communication, 2007
8. “Winston Churchill Iron Curtain Speech,”
www.nationalcenter.org/ChurchillIronCurtain.html. Accessed February 5, 2008.

9. Howard Rushmore, "State Dept. Backs Red Art Show, New York Journal American (October 4, 1946): 6.
10. Gijs van Hensbergen, *Guernica, the Biography of a Twentieth-Century Icon* (London: Bloombury, 2004), 192.
11. "The Modern Artist Speaks", 3 page press release from Museum of Modern Art, release date May 6, 1948, 3. Copied from A&E Gottlieb Foundation files with permission.

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PART 2

The Alchemy of Adolph Gottlieb: Labyrinth of the Shadow

By Bruce Barnes

When Michael Landauer first invited me to see *The Prisoners* I knew nothing about Adolph Gottlieb and I came away from my first encounter with this painting awed, curious, and with a mounting unease.

Like it or not, I was suddenly involved in a tension between rational human consciousness and the primitive animal nature of the unconscious. It was the personal smack up against the transpersonal, and I was fast being pulled into

the protoplasmic muck of matter. There was the initial impact of black and white, and traces of aquamarine, but it was the ashen backdrop to everything that was most haunting. Thank God for the grid in which all of these elements were ordered. Thank God for something to hold on to.



Figure 1 Los as he Entered the Door of Death by William Blake.

Abstract and menacing, *The Prisoners* fairly shouts for a context. Where are we and how did we get here? And what part of what process are we involved in? I wondered what had been going on in Gottlieb's personal life when he painted this work and what it meant to him, and imagined him deftly playing analyst and turning the question back on me. You choose either to engage with *The Prisoners* or to walk on by, because

the real question is: Are you ready to explore and experience the dark chthonic aspects of human nature? Or to put it more subjectively: Am I ready to consider not only the evil without, but also the evil within? This is a very dangerous endeavour.

“When you look into the abyss, the abyss looks into you.”

Nietzsche

The elemental and autonomous nature of the psyche is often underestimated. It is easy to be fooled into thinking that if we understand something we can control it and manage it, but the powerful experience of the primordial brings with it the possibility of unconscious contagion. We are all prisoners of matter and vulnerable to becoming unwitting vehicles of its expression.

Adolph Gottlieb, the eldest of three, he had two younger sisters, was born in New York in 1903 into a comfortable Jewish home where he was expected to enter the family stationery supply business. But at an early age he became interested in art, which, he recalled, his parents “deplored”. He dropped out of High School at 16, went to a number of art and design schools, worked for his father and at 18 got a job on an ocean liner. He jumped ship when it docked in France and headed for Paris where he spent his time in the museums and galleries. He visited the Louvre almost daily to study the Old Masters. He was powerfully drawn to Rembrandt, and also to Delacroix, Courbet, Cézanne, Matisse, Picasso and Cubism.

He was eventually arrested for not having papers and taken to the American embassy. His parents were relieved to know where he was, his uncle, an attorney, arranged papers and he was sent some money. He then took off to Vienna, Berlin, Dresden, and Munich to further study the Old Masters and the German Expressionists.

His mother came over to Europe and he returned home, considering himself an artist, seeing the contemporary American art scene as provincial and continuing to resist his father’s wishes for him to join the family business. His

friends began to include painters Barnett Newman, Milton Avery and Mark Rothko.

By the mid 1930's he was back in Europe again, this time with his wife Esther, and again absorbing the art and political climate of those times. So it's interesting to note that Gottlieb's first visit to Europe was just after World War I and now he was there, albeit unknowingly, just ahead of the outbreak of World War II.

By the late 1930s, Gottlieb had reached an impasse in his work.



Figure 2 Adolph Gottlieb and Sculptures

While travelling he had been exposed to a broad range of influences, old and new – not only paintings, but also African tribal art, which he had begun to collect, to



Figure 3 Wasteland by Adolph Gottlieb

poetry (especially T.S. Eliot and *The Wasteland*) new theories about the unconscious, particularly Jung's, and about symbols, dreams

and mythology – all of which were to find expression in his art.

As Michael has mentioned above, Gottlieb painted *The Prisoners* in Brooklyn, in 1947, and it is one in a series, painted between 1941 and 1952 that he referred to as *pictographs*.

Gottlieb was particularly drawn to African sculptures, native American art, and also to pre-Renaissance Italian altarpieces, which appealed to him because of the systematic, almost comic book way they told Christ's story, from nativity to

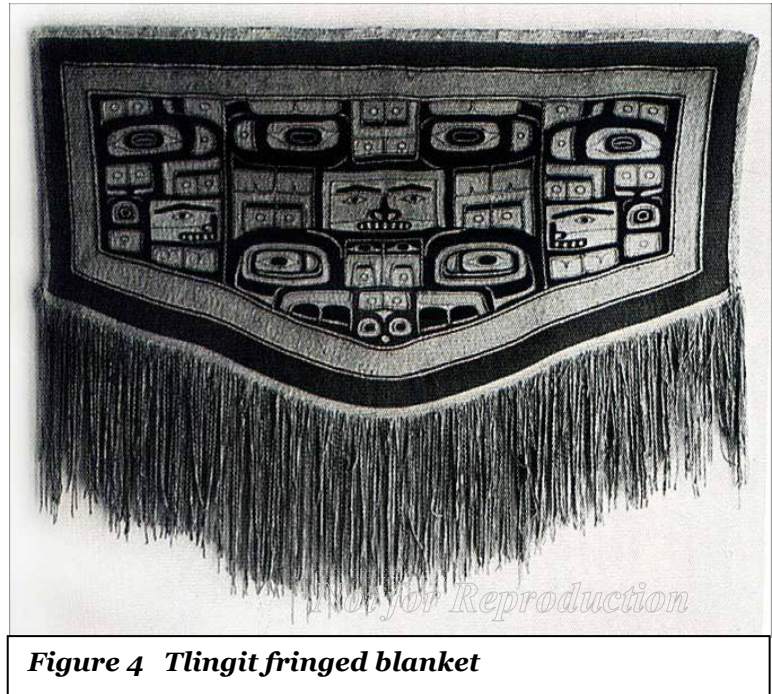


Figure 4 Tlingit fringed blanket

crucifixion and resurrection. But it was not the chronology of the altarpieces that

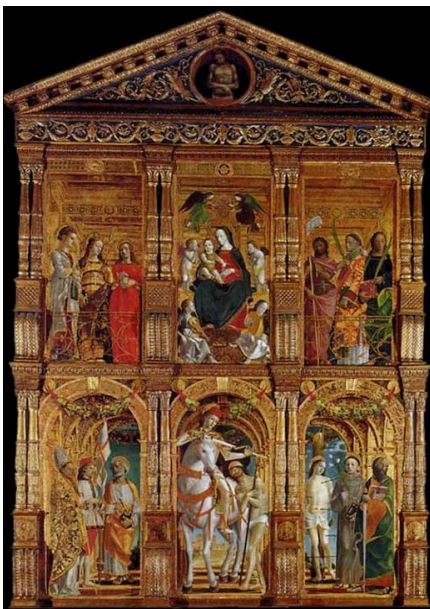


Figure 5 pre-Renaissance Italian Altarpiece

interested Gottlieb, it was their way of dividing things into sections – the rationality – that appealed to him. He recognized that using a grid or matrix would allow the viewer to experience simultaneously the multiplicity of images he wanted to include in his work.

He was studying Jung at this time and was interested in the concept of the collective

unconscious, but when he began to paint, he said it was no longer a concept, it was fact: “It just appeared”. He went on to explain, “I flattened out my canvas and made these roughly rectangular divisions, with lines going in four directions. And then I would free associate, putting whatever came to mind very freely within the different (shapes).”¹

GRID

The grid not only implies a will to develop an ordering system, but also a will to clarify, concentrate and penetrate to the essentials. These grid fields cultivated an objectivity that allowed Gottlieb a profound subjectivity, that is, an ability to experience the powerful forces of the unconscious -- the *prima materia* – and to not be overwhelmed by them. This experience can be one of beauty and revelation, but it can also reveal the grotesque and demonic side of human nature.

“The primordial experiences rend from top to bottom the curtain upon which is painted a picture of an ordered world, and allow a glimpse into the unfathomable abyss of the unborn and of things yet to be.”

C.G. Jung

For Gottlieb, the early 1940’s were a period of deep introversion and doubt and he began the series of pictographs with a number of paintings about *Oedipus*, *Theseus* and the *Minotaur*, and then moved from mythology into alchemy and paintings entitled, *Alchemist (Red Portrait)* and the *Alkahest of Paracelsus*.

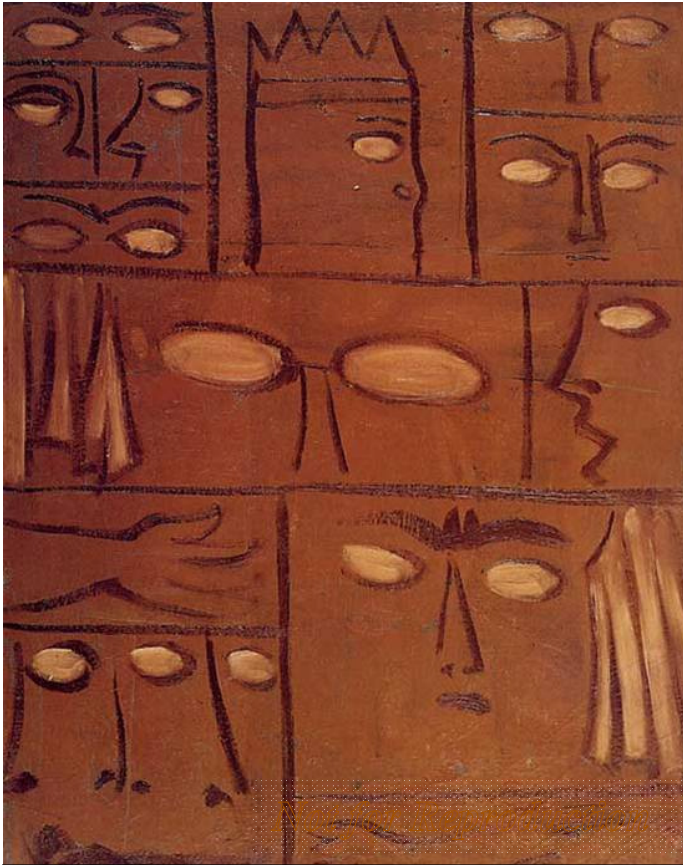


Figure 7 *Oedipus*



Figure 8 *Minotaur*



Figure 9 *Red Portrait*



Figure 10 *Alkahest of Paracelsus*

ALCHEMY

One way of exploring Gottlieb's pictographs is to view them as a series of stages that reflect those of both the alchemical process and the process of his own individuation. I am not suggesting that these paintings are 'therapeutic', but I do see them as Gottlieb's struggle to come to terms with the human condition and with his own humanity. In an interview toward the end of his life, he said that in the early 1940's the war cut off the European, and particularly the French, artistic influence for American artists.

"There was some kind of sense of crisis so that you had to, at least I felt I had to, dig into myself, find out what it was I wanted to express, what it was possible for me to express. I had to really come to grips with my painting problems which I couldn't separate from my personal problems."



Figure 11 *Alchemical Oedipus*

Paracelsus was a Renaissance physician and alchemist and the *Alkahest* is the universal solvent sought by all alchemists in their attempt to transmute base metals into gold or silver. Alchemists combined elements of medicine, magic, philosophy, theology and astrology into a system that anticipated the role that chemistry would play in modern medicine, and whose rich symbology informed the depth psychology of Carl Jung.

In 1926, when Jung first began to explore alchemy, he found that the images and motifs that appeared in his dreams and in the dreams and active imaginations of his patients also appeared in the alchemical texts. He realized that the alchemists, while working on the *prima materia* in their laboratories in their search to understand and illuminate matter, had projected their unconscious onto it. Jung proposed that the *prima materia* was their psychological material, and the process of transmutation that they described and so beautifully illustrated was, in fact, a reflection of their own psychological transformation. The process he called *individuation*.

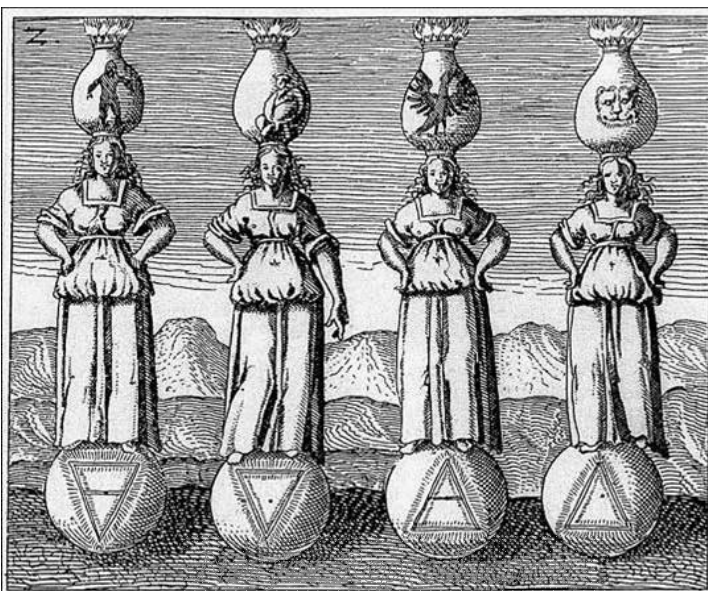


Figure 12 *Alchemical Four Sisters*

The alchemical process can be divided into four stages, each represented by a colour – the black or *Nigredo*; the white or *Albedo*; the yellow or *Citrinitas*; and the red or *Rubedo*. The process can also be broken down into seven Operations, the first

four of which are related to the elements: *Calcinatio* is the fire Operation; *Solutio*, the water; *Coagulatio*, the earth; and *Sublimatio*, the air. The remaining three Operations – *Mortificatio*, *Separatio*, and *Coniunctio* – refer respectively to darkness and death, the ability to discriminate, and the goal of the *opus*, the union of opposites

Shortly after painting *Nostalgia for Atlantis*, Gottlieb moved into the middle years of the series [1945-47], with *Expectation of Evil*, *Divisions of Darkness*, *Black Enigma*, *Recurrent Apparitions*, *Night Voyage* and *The Prisoners*.



Figure 13 *The Prisoners*

Here we find Gottlieb deep in the black and leaden greys of the *Nigredo* -- the realm of death, the shadow and evil. In terms of the various alchemical operations, this is the stage of *Mortificatio*, and the death of the old king.

Because the king represents a ruling principle of ego consciousness, the death of the king is a time of great psychological crisis, but from within the resulting chaos there comes an opportunity to develop a new governing principle. Also, a new ego awareness of death can constellate a new awareness of life. The alchemists proposed that it is in the blackness of the *Mortificatio* that the philosophers' stone – the supreme object of their art – is conceived. Capitalizing on this opportunity to build a new relationship with ourselves and with the world is, of course, easier said than done. To wrestle with one's personal shadow is to acknowledge both the repressed, unrecognized aspects of oneself and the dark and destructive aspects of one's nature.

The alchemists used a number of different vessels in their work and these vessels – variously known as alembic, coffin, egg, sphere, prison, and womb – are

particular to stages in the alchemical process. During the blackness of the putrefying *Mortificatio*, the vessel was represented as a coffin or prison.

THE PAINTING

In my attempt to experience and understand *The Prisoners* I quickly found that I could visualize each of the three horizontal levels and the four vertical columns, and explore their relationship. My involvement with the painting became increasingly active as I returned again and again to clarify details and make further connections. As Michael has noted in the first part of this article, the three horizontal levels can be seen as id, ego and self; body, mind, and spirit. The id or “all-or-nothing” instincts inhabit the bottom level, and the transpersonal influence of the self resides on the top level. The two are mediated by the humanizing ego energy of the middle level.

The grey, leaden background of *The Prisoners* feels like a cold, saturnine depression, and reminds me of the archetypal story of Job, in which the ego is defeated, but through perseverance develops a new relationship with these forces. This colour indicates a place of despair and mourning, where our old egocentricity has suffered defeat, and where we come to realize that we are confined by the limits of who we are. We may soar, have a grand perspective, but ultimately, we are inextricably bound to the earth.

To enter *The Prisoners*, it is necessary to pick a focal point and see where it takes you. I went to the more immediately recognizable: to the eyes in the mid right lowest level, to the one-eyed creature that had forced its way out of its

compartment in the lower mid left, to the monster with the teeth in the upper left corner and to the labyrinth at right of centre.

The labyrinth in *The Prisoners* is not a well-manicured hedge with all kinds of misleading options and dead-ends. Rather, it is two black serpentine shapes that lead directly to a dark centre. This is no puzzle, no tortuous cerebral chamber, but something more intestinal, that leads down into the very bowels of the unconscious.

Each viewer must ask, “Who is it or what is it that is at the centre of my labyrinth? What dark secret is imprisoned within me? What has been banished or repressed?” The more I looked at the two eyes in the dense black cell below the labyrinth, the more they haunted me and began, like a bad conscience, to escape the confines of their compartment to the point where I began to see the rest of the painting through these eyes. I was reminded of the Eye Goddess, Inanna, also known as Ishtar or Astarte, who, when her large eyes look down from the heavens, brings love, sexuality and fertility, but when she has fallen into the underworld, “the bull springs not upon the cow, the ass impregnates not the jenny, the man impregnates not the maiden.”

Inanna is connected to the “evening star”, Venus, who is also the “lady of the morning”, and significantly, visible just before sunrise. Venus is associated with the colour green, with fertility and procreation. In one alchemical text, the repressed Feminine says, “ I am alone among the hidden; nevertheless I rejoice in my heart, because I live privily, and refresh myself in myself...Under my blackness, I have hidden the fairest green.” Many alchemists added the greening, the *Viriditas*, to the four-step sequence of black, white, yellow and red.

The green of the *Viriditas* appears in the alembic after the black of the *Nigredo* and represents the fertilizing of the philosophers' stone. This is a critical moment because without the greening there can be no progress. In *The Prisoners*, the aqua-green is the blocked, cold, almost frozen moisture that alchemists called the "chaste bride".

One night I dreamt that I was standing in front of *The Prisoners* and as I looked at it in all its black and grey glory, dew seemed to arise from it and the painting began to oxidize. The aquamarine came to life and fairly lit up the canvas. The next day I discovered that I had only noticed the bolder placement and a few flecks of this color, but that the green was, in fact, just about everywhere: a hopeful omen.

In the top or Self section of the labyrinth column is an oval, or egg shape, in the centre, or yolk, of which is a black square with a black dot in it. It seemed that if I bent this top level back I would be able to see down and through this panel, down and through the labyrinth to understand its essence. The journey to the dark centre of the labyrinth, whichever way you go, involves travelling through passages of green delineated by strokes, or steps, of Ariadnian white. It doesn't matter which way you go, whether you ascend or descend, you have to be in touch with the green. You have to be in touch with the imprisoned, and in this instance, the repressed Feminine.

image of blind power – a singular brute instinctual force – with a phallic spike or horn with an eye atop it.

In Alchemy, this wild and mercurial energy is sometimes depicted as a unicorn, which can only be tamed in the lap of a virgin. That is, the energy needs to be contained in a reflective manner, and expressed in a related Feminine way, independent of the shadow masculine power drive. The eye atop the horn suggests a consciousness of the need to transform this undisciplined urge.

Knowing when unconscious or external forces can be controlled and adapted, and when they are too big for us to handle is a key stage of ego development. When Odysseus, driven by greed and power, is trapped by the giant Cyclops, it is only through guile and by driving a sharpened stake into the creature's eye to blind it that he is able to escape.

As I explored this pictograph, I kept returning to the mid level – the ego's testing ground, where we try to manage and to humanize the opposites of raw instinct and abstract overview. The ego position is ultimately where we lose our egocentricity, and realize that we are not



Figure 15 Alchemical Toad and Eagle

in control. We are all prisoners, held captive by the forces of heaven and earth -- prisoners of our fate, imprisoned in our bodies, in nature, in time. When the old ruling principle, the old mediating energy of the ego dies, then this “civilizing” mid plane is in chaos. Each of the four vertical columns seems to represent an aspect of this drama, an attempt at a new synthesis, as we struggle to develop a new ego – a new definition and relationship between spirit and matter, between the masculine and the feminine: a masculine that is not the old king’s, the father’s, and a new feminine that is not ‘married’ to the queen, the mother.

CONCLUSION

The period of this pictograph must have been a very difficult time for Gottlieb. The alchemical processes at work in *The Prisoners* reflect his coming through the blackest stage – the *Mortificatio*. The old ruling principle, the king or father, is dead and a new masculine is being defined, but is yet to be installed. The fiery libido of the old power and pleasure principles has been frustrated, and the gray ashes of despairing *Calcinatio* are everywhere. But the white of the *Albedo* is also powerfully present as Gottlieb uses his brush like a sword in acts of *Separatio* to cut through and incisively differentiate sections of *The Prisoners*, not only with the grid itself, but also with elements within it. The cold aqua-green, the *Solutio* of feeling, the greening *Viriditas*, offers hope for a new relationship to the feminine and a new queen.

In short, this is a picture of a dark, cold, cruel midlife winter, with only a hint of spring. It must be seen in the context of 1947, the year of its creation. In *The Prisoners*, Gottlieb challenges us to take a good look at our personal and archetypal shadows. The power of his abstraction is that he does not present us

with known symbols, but with original “forms” and we are left to experience them and fill them with our own shadow material and the collective shadow of our time.

When I was deep within Gottlieb’s labyrinth of the shadow, a friend sent me a newly-published book of photographs of the Lodz Ghetto and I was forced to look again at the horrors of the Holocaust: to look “at absolute evil” and to acknowledge this aspect of “human nature”.

The distance of sixty years helps to absorb the shock of the Holocaust, but it still can threaten one’s sanity, and I wondered what the impact of such evidence of human evil must have had on Gottlieb. Once more, I thought, “Thank God for the grid,” the containing alembic that enables us to enter this painting, experience the dark *materia*, and emerge, and which must surely have saved its creator’s life.



Figure 16 *Water, Air, Fire* by Adolph Gottlieb

The many pictographs Gottlieb created over the five years following *The Prisoners* continued to reflect the drama of his individuation process – *Sorceress; Pursuer and Pursued; Vigil; Water, Air, Fire; The Terrors of Tranquility* and *The Seer*. Then followed a series of very different works, known as his “Bursts”. In these paintings,

Gottlieb's multi-focal grid has been psychologically integrated and he now takes us into a world of polarities, of two opposing entities or forms. The "Burst" polarities are, again, unrecognizable symbols. Rather they are abstract forms whose relationship and tension communicate the depth of experience Gottlieb gained from his decade of creating the pictographs.

Through these "Bursts", Gottlieb enters the final stage of the Work, seeking to express the goal of the alchemical *opus* – the union of opposites. With the "Bursts", as with *The Prisoners*, we are compelled to engage with Gottlieb's beautiful and inspiring art, to again become fellow alchemists, to enter into the quest for a *Coniunctio* beyond opposites, and to experience the underlying unity of all things.

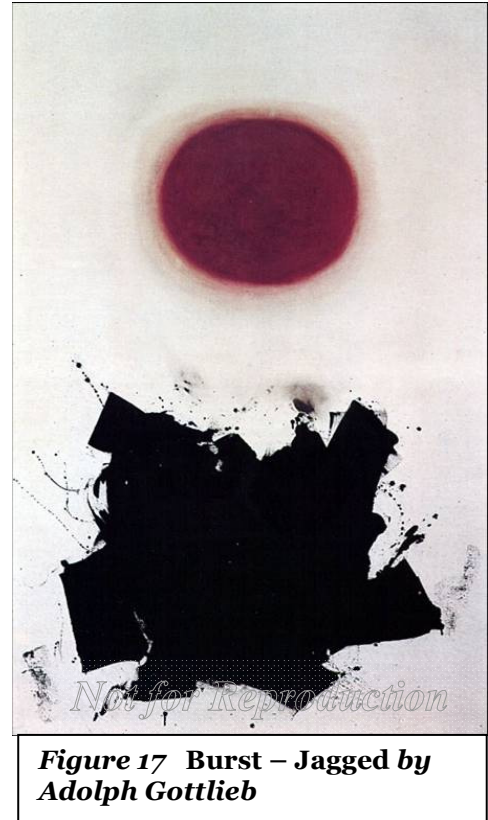


Figure 17 Burst – Jagged by Adolph Gottlieb

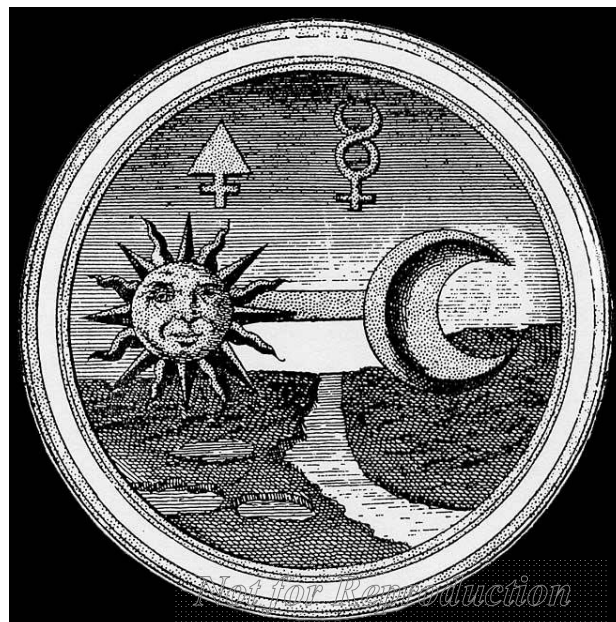


Figure 18 Alchemical Sun and Moon

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