



the Shape *of our* Beliefs

ANCESTRAL BODIES

The pregnancy or the fatness of a woman or an animal was considered to be as holy as the pregnancy of the earth before her flowering in the spring. Each protuberance in nature, be it a mound, a hill, on a menhir or on a female body - belly, buttocks, breasts, knees - was sacred."

- Marija Gimbutas

OBJECTIVE

Explore the topic of the female body + self-image and its relation to historical accountability + ancestral wisdom, through the lens of symbolism.

Consider the ancient belief systems that relate the female body to the landscape, the sacred aspect of this and its impact throughout time, right through to the contemporary experience.

Undertake a creative exercise that draws upon the images of ancestral imagery as a reflection of the holy nature of women's bodies.

Participate in a community event - to address that which is missing from the overculture.

MATERIALS

- Compasses + straight edge.
- Pencil, outliner pen, paint, markers or other media to colour - use your favourite mandala-making media.
- If using paint, fresh water in a jar, to clean your brush/es + paper towel.
- Paper suitable for your colouring media, optimal size 9 x 12" or at least A4.
- Tracing paper (optional - for those not confident in drawing skills.)
- Download the associated printable PDFs (optional - for those not confident in drawing skills or wish to save time.)
- Reference the [Shape the Cosmos](#) Pinterest Board.

WOUNDED BODIES = A WOUNDED CULTURE

“Where there is a wound on the psyches and bodies of women, there is a corresponding wound at the same site in the culture itself, and finally on Nature herself ... Although a woman may not be able to stop the dissection of culture and lands overnight, she can stop doing so to her own body.” - Dr Clarissa Pinkola Estes

For most of us, body acceptance or body positivity is an easy concept to buy into. It is, however, much harder to practice - certainly with any consistency.

The female body has been subject to varying levels of violence, disregard, objectification, adoration and deification for all of known history.

This is not only perpetrated by men, but also women - and by our own selves upon our own self.

It's a BIG wound to heal and such a complex subject, with many ramifications.

Contemporary Experience

If we look at the subject in general, we can identify our own personal complexes (and perhaps those of our nearest and dearest) around physical abilities, strength, functionality, health and appearance.

There's the greater societal complex - a cultural phenomenon that ebbs and flows as all of culture does - which feeds our present experience (and also affects the future) in the form of symbolism and imagery, fashion and fads, accessibility and participation in society.

And in this day and age we still bear witness to many atrocities being committed against humanity in the form of extreme violence exacted upon the female body.

Look to the last couple of thousand years of historical records from most periods of society and we shall uncover horror stories about the mistreatment of women by means of their bodies.

Of course, this physical and psychological violence is not perpetrated against women alone and the experience of non cis-gendered women must also be included as part of our contemporary narrative, but there is a particular type of violence carried out against the female body that is very telling in terms of the world we are currently living in.

We can see this play out also in the wanton destruction of the earth - and particularly in sacred places.

Many indigenous peoples are fighting to protect their land and their way of life : just one of the current protests that's gaining attention is taking place in Hawaii at Mauna Kea, where there is a proposed building of a giant telescope on their sacred mountain.

Just a couple of years ago, protests against an oil pipeline through the Standing Rock Sioux reservation in North Dakota made headlines, although the protest was ultimately in vain, and the pipeline has been operational for a couple of years.

It's worth mentioning here that it's not all bad news - some protests are successful. Here in Scotland, there was a successful protest against a proposed super-quarry on Mount Roineabhal on the Isle of Harris.

Although not a recognised 'sacred site' at the time of the (longest running) enquiry (in Scottish history,) much of the case put forward in the public enquiry rested upon a spiritually-based theological testimony.

This victory aside, in a world where we are part of nature, there is a relationship in place which is so badly damaged it's difficult to comprehend the scale of the injury, loss, destruction and devastation.

ANCESTRAL BODIES

Prehistoric archaeological evidence describes a worldview that seems to be contrary to this experience, with the female body being used as a symbol for the mythologies and belief systems of humans, certainly across the Old European traditions, for many millennia.

Even here in Scotland, where all formal education ignores Her existence, the female figure formed the basis of our origin stories and She is woven into our earliest mythologies, our place names and ritual activities - although ask most folk who live here and they wouldn't recognise this, believing that there is none outside of the most recent Christian heritage.

The oldest and most prolific archaeological figurines are symbolic female bodies.

Marija Gimbutas' work on Old Europe and its 'Language of the Goddess' is truly a revelation to those of us who were deprived of an education that reflected the feminine principle and associated symbols (outside of the classical/patriarchal pantheon of the Greeks.)

Body and land have always been linked, that is the truth. And the particular relationship of the feminine aspect and the land is built in already.

It is from the land that we hear the language of our soul - this applies to both men, women and all genders in between.

It is a human experience and it seems somehow right to me that when we dig into the soil we find not only evidence of 'big men doing big things' but we find the female body in abundance.

This is our inspiration for today's creative exercise : we'll link our contemporary experience to our ancestral history, 'the truth' as far as we can tell, going by the archaeological, mythological, folkloric and cultural evidence.

RELATING THE PERSONAL + CONTEMPORARY TO THE ANCIENT

So, we may be able to connect what happens internally (personally) with what happens externally (collectively.)

On a personal level, there's no denying that there are actions we can take to help ourselves experience better bodily health. In my experience, this ebbs and flows ...

In my time I've been a regular runner, gym attendee, daily walker. I've practiced daily yoga sessions, been a vegetarian, organic, vegan, clean-eating teetotal.

AND I've been almost the complete opposite of those. It isn't these types of issues that this work addresses - it's the narrative we tell ourselves, based on the shape of our beliefs.

The way we think about and treat our bodies, and those of others we both know and don't can involve a great deal of harm. The harm doesn't have to be overt to be impactful. As well as outright abuse and neglect, we might also be more guilty of disregard and disassociation of it - of Her.

She's our home on this earth. To mistreat her in the sense of being out of good relationship with her is an act of deep disrespect. Disrespect for ourselves, the earth from which we are sculpted. It's also a deep forgetting of our Ancestors - one of the greatest disrespects.

One of the things I feel when I look at the ancient 'goddess' figurines is that all of their shapes and sizes are an accurate reflection of the womenfolk I know.

This is important, because the Greek concept of beauty has become so normalised, it's difficult to remember that bodies are as varied as the landscape.

In this exercise, we'll bring to focus an awareness that spending time in a narrative that speaks of disrespect towards our bodies is not only a great disservice to ourselves - and our own being, but helps prop up a system that actively violates women and the earth in exchange for profit for the few.

We will use ancient imagery as an inspiration to honour all that is holy about ALL female bodies and create mandalas together, in circle, allowing us to contemplate our participation in and resistance to the overculture.

CREATIVE EXERCISE FIRST STEPS

There is one and a half hours scheduled for creative time. The more complex your design, the longer it'll take. If you're happy to complete the mandala afterwards, then spend time building it with as much detail as you wish during our time together. If you wish to complete it during this session, keep your design simple.

Firstly, take a look at the Shape the Cosmos Pinterest board. Here you'll see a range of ancient artefacts, most often referred to as 'Goddess' figures.

Spend some time observing all of the shapes. Even where they are obviously damaged, they represent a realistic diversity of body shapes and types - far from the Greek ideal!

The idea is that we'll each build a mandala design to include some of these Ancestral figures.

You can simply be inspired by them, or you can copy them directly.

To help you do this, I've prepared a couple of print-outs of some of my favourite figurines, in outline form - a smaller + a medium to suit your preferred mandala size.

If you prefer to trace these figures, that will be your next step.

I like to build a mandala grid into which I can insert the figures.

I've created 8 outlines to include in an 8-point mandala grid. This may feel too complex for you, particularly if you wish to complete your mandala in this session. You may wish to build a 4-point or 6-point grid instead.

AND you don't need to use a grid at all - freestyle is absolutely an option.

The aim is to create a piece of art that honours our Ancestors, transmits their wisdom and all of their innate intelligence around the female body, Her holyness and relationship to the land.

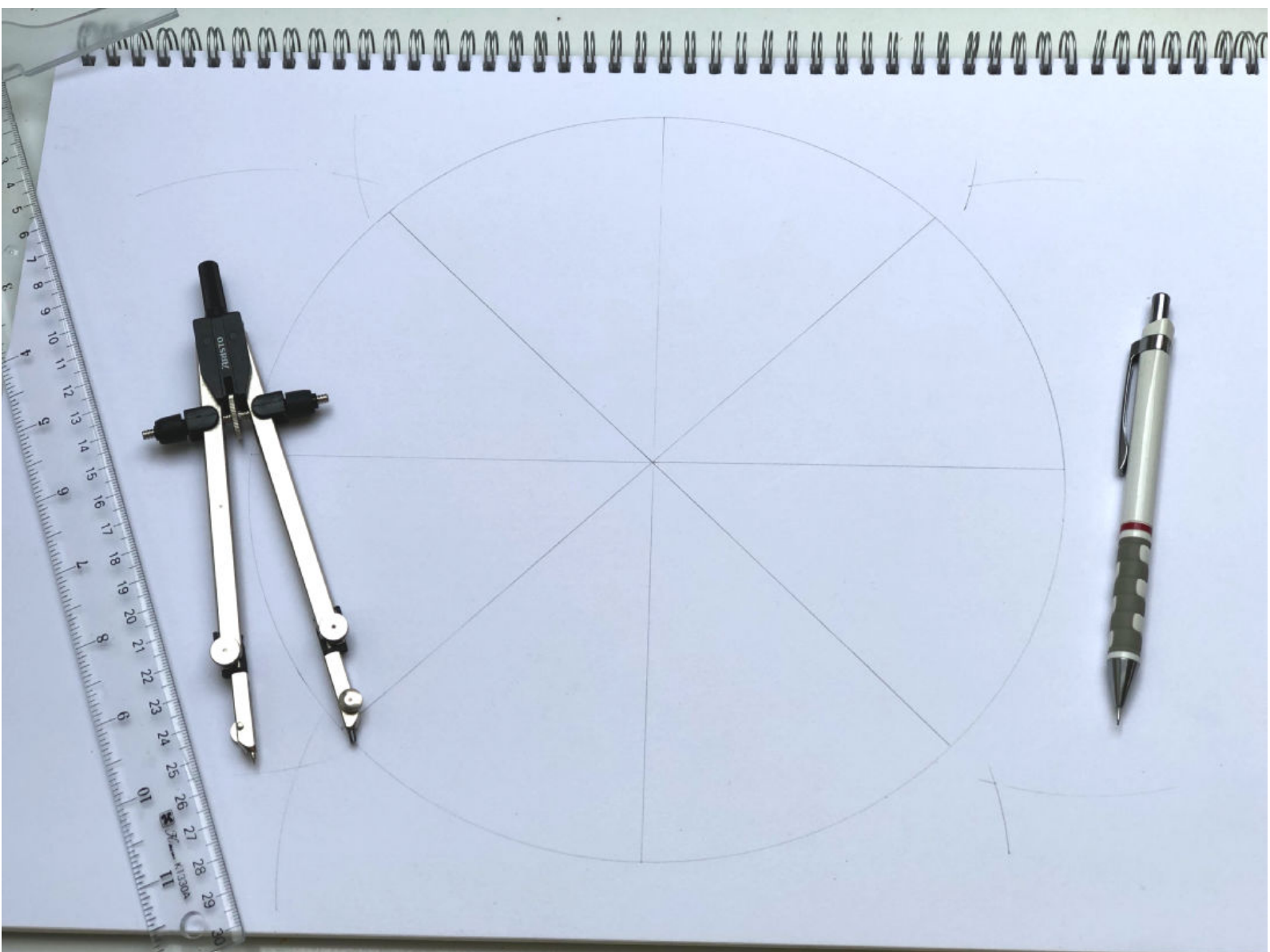
In doing so, we are reminded that our bodies are holy, no matter their appearance or capabilities. I don't mean holy in that we must only treat them as temples - remember, we are human and far from perfect. We are messy, dirty and what feeds us, what provides us with spiritual and physical nutrition may be very different from the accepted 'best practice.'

I mean holy, as in whole, real and worthy - a proper companion, a proper home for our current existence. What a wonder! What a marvel!

Colour your mandala as you wish. Allow your body to react to the information I stirred up in the introduction. Allow that to permeate the feeling behind your mandala, which will play out in your design, style and colours.

CREATIVE EXERCISE

Create a Mandala Grid

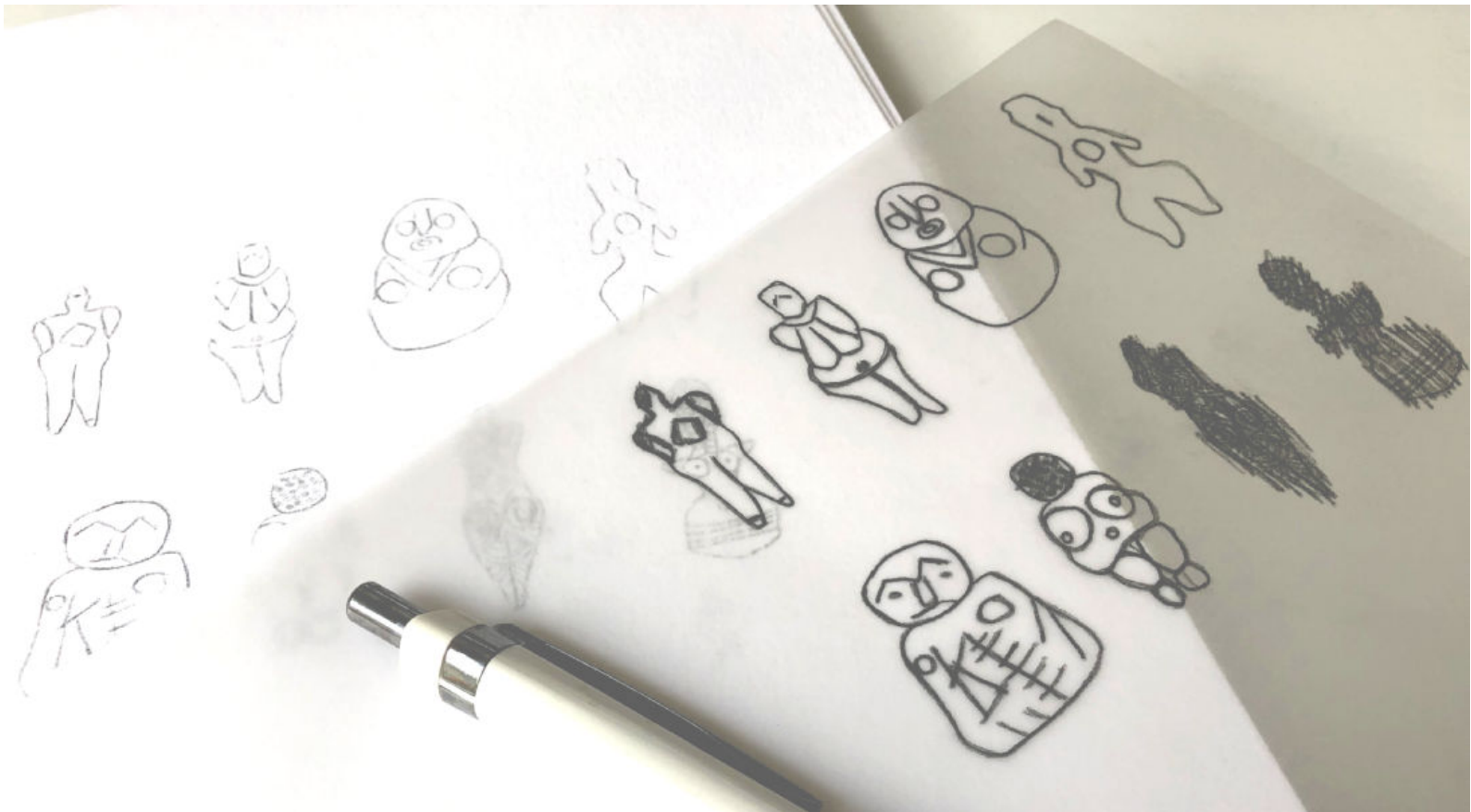


1. Lightly draw a vertical line through the centre of your page.

2. Place the point of your compasses on the centre of the line and trace a circle which will be large enough to contain your ancestral bodies outlines.
3. In order to create a grid with 4 equal sections, use your compasses to describe two intersecting arcs on the outside of your circle from the top and bottom points, on both the left-hand and right-hand sides.
4. Connect both points through the centre to make a cross.
5. If you want to create an 8-point grid, repeat the previous actions - create 2 intersecting arcs from each point, e.g. 12 o'clock + 3 o'clock ; 3 o'clock + 6 o'clock ; 6 o'clock + 9 o'clock and 9 o'clock + 12 o'clock.
6. Trace a line from the centre point to where each of the 2 arcs meet 4 times to create 8 equal sections.

CREATIVE EXERCISE

Insert figures + create additional details



If you haven't already, trace your chosen ancestral bodies onto your tracing paper.

Use these to see where you want to position them within your mandala. Use smaller or larger depending on your preference.

Trace these onto your mandala.

Create additional circles/concentric rings - use these as guides to add new shapes, or use the gridlines themselves as part of the design.

If you wish, outline the figures + insert internal details with an outliner pen, coloured pencil or paint.



Make it as detailed as you like, bearing in mind our time limitations. The decoration is a meditation, almost.

Erase the pencil outlines before colouring in the figures and the background.



CLOSING THE CIRCLE

Once your circle is complete, bring your practice to a close in whatever way feels right for you.

I'd like to invite you to take a moment to thank your Ancestors for their assistance in our exercise, to each other for your willingness to join in community to create and to yourself for showing up.

Thank you for your participation!

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