

World Tree, Rosa Mundi, Ship as World Artistic Discourses: Mythological Roots and Representation in Arts

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Abstract

The paper deals with the analyses of such artistic discourses as World Tree, Rosa Mundi and Ship regarded as major concepts of the world culture as a whole and the Western-European in particular, and altogether making a triad of universal components of arts. Images, symbols, motives, these concepts appeared in various forms of art millenniums ago and are still up to date having being transformed into full scope discourses that are widely represented in painting, music, literature and cinema. The article reveals the etymology of these discourses and shows basic meanings of the images laying in their basis.

Keywords

Artistic discourses, World Tree, Rosa Mundi, Ship

The experience of a scientific research of the world cultural heritage based on the analyses of a centuries-long history of works of art leads to the conclusion according to which there exist universal artistic images among which there are such popular symbols as World Tree, Rosa Mundi and Ship. Being key images of the world culture as a whole and the Western-European in particular, they lay at the basis of a dominant majority of various works of art. Staying up to date and popular in every epoch they give birth to new transformations that are represented in the best examples of literature, painting, sculpture, architecture, music and cinematograph thus forming a triad of world artistic discourses that constitute the world culture since ancient times up to the present day.

The discourse of World Tree that embodies a universal concept of the world and is fixed almost everywhere in various forms of art seems to be dominant in the suggested triad. Its most famous variants are "Tree of Life", "Tree of Heaven", "Tree of Fertility» and "Tree of Knowledge". At the same time only two of its artistic embodiments, the Old Testament Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and the Norse world tree – Ash Yggdrasil have taken a special place in the world culture. Among numerous cultural and historical variants of World Tree (various transformations and isofunctional images included) "world mountain", "temple", "staircase" and "cross" are the most significant in the context of the world art.

Now, let's look at the deep roots of this ancient discourse.

World Tree or arbor mundi also known as a cosmic tree is traditionally regarded as an embodiment of a universal concept of the world that is more widely spread in the world art in comparison with other mythopoetic images. Tree as one of the triad's components is registered almost everywhere and is represented in both in its pure form and in numerous cultural and historical variants. The image of World Tree, first of all, helps to create a global picture of the world space putting together its binary oppositions. In the Norse mythology, for example, the Ash Yggdrasil mirrors a vertical cosmic projection of the universe according to which its three levels are interconnected: the heaven (Asgard) on which gods live and a paradise for dead warriors is located (valhalla); the earth (Midgard) inhabited by people; and the underworld world – the kingdom of deadmen (hel). At the roots of this tree goddess of destiny (Nornes) and a cosmic snake (Nidhogg) live. On the crown of the Ash a wise eagle sits and a squirrel-prophet runs along the trunk.

In the Egyptian mythology, a gigantic golden tree functions as the Axis of the Earth: its top touches the sky, precious stones grow at its branches and goddess Nut sits there. According to the ancient Indian mythology at the centre of the Universe a sacred fig grows. In ancient China people worshiped the cult of World Tree in the image of a grandiose mulberry at the top of which a cock and ten suns live.

In pagan religions of the Aryans there was a belief according to which there were three skies located one above another: 1. The kingdom of air and clouds; 2. The bright blue sky; 3. The kingdom of eternal light from which according to this belief an evergreen fig spread its branches covering under its blessing shade souls of saints and gods. World Tree of the Slavs grows at the suburbs of the Universe, in Lukomorje; its trunk – a road to other worlds, the path gods follow. In «The Tale of Igor's Campaign» Bayan travels along the Tree transforming into a mouse (correlates to the earth), an eagle (correlates to the heaven) and a wolf (correlates to the underworld). The Slavonic tradition connects the image of the arbor mundi with an oak. There is a parable according to which there exist two oaks that grow in the middle of the world ocean; two doves sit at their branches – having come down they took some sand and stone from the sea bottom and thus made the earth, the sky and the planets.

The etymology of Tree as a key mythopoetic image that embodies the universal concept of the world originates from the epoch of the Bronze Era (Europe, Middle East) and is richly illustrated with verbal texts, works of applied art, architectural monuments and objects of sculpture as well as ancient rites and games. The image of World Tree played a special part in the formation of ancient peoples' beliefs connected with basic principles of the world structure. In rock carvings of the Upper Paleolithic there were no clear binary oppositions (sky –

earth, water – fire, earth – underworld, etc.) that demonstrated the way people of that epoch perceived the universe as a total chaos. As the Bronze Era sat in a more clear-cut idea of the Universe structure the dominance of which was the tree, began its formation in ancient peoples' minds. In the ninth chapter of the Golden Bough "The Worship of Trees" Frazer gives a considerable list of boundless forests that once covered the earth: the Hercynian forest eastward from the Rhine, the great forest of Anderida in the south-east of England, the dreaded Ciminian forest that divided Rome from central Etruria in IV century B.C., beautiful woods of pine, oak, and other trees on the slopes of the high Arcadian mountains in Greece, etc.

The image of World Tree played an organizing part in the formation of mythological beliefs of ancient peoples that touched upon not only basic principles of the Universe structure but also people themselves, stages of their lives and events connected with them. The structure of arbor mundi allowed to distinguish principal zones of the universe (dimensional and temporal): sky – earth – underworld, past – present – future; genealogy: ancestors – current generation – descendants; anatomic features of a man: a head, a body, feet; three kinds of elements: fire, earth, water. A vertical division of the tree allowed to correlate a particular kind of animals with every part of it: branches – birds, a trunk – the hoofed, roots – snakes, frogs, mice, fantastic animals of a chthonian type, etc. All the three tiers of the tree (the roots, the trunk and the crown) were also closely connected with the idea of conception and fertility.

A horizontal structure of the arbor mundi unlike a vertical one symbolizing a mythological sphere correlates with different rites and their participants. In a horizontal projection a key element is a trunk on two sides of which images of animals and human beings are depicted symmetrically. Such a projection introduces notions of four cardinal points, seasons of the year and times of the day. Together with a vertical structure it turns into a universal, entire model of culture. The scheme of World Tree is also connected with the introduction of mythopoetic numeric constants such as the three – an image of an absolute ideal of every action/process (beginning, development, end); the four – an embodiment of a static integrity; the seven – a sum of two previous constants, an image of synthesis of static and dynamic aspects of the universe.

Numerous variants of World Tree can be represented in three major groups in accordance with the functions performed:

- I. *Cosmogonical* – the Tree of Life, the Tree of Centre and the Tree of Fertility;
- II. *Chthonic* – the Tree of Death, the Tree of Evil, the Tree of Underworld and the Tree of Descent;

III. *Transcendental* – The Tree of Heaven, the Tree of Knowledge, the Mystical Tree, the Shamanistic Tree and the Tree of Ascend.

There also exist a lot of transformations and isofunctional images that can be nominally divided into two groups: abstract (the Axis of the Earth, World Pillar, World Mountain and World Man) and structural (Temple, Triumphal Arch, Column, Obelisk, Throne, Staircase, Cross and Chain).

As for the discourse of **Rosa Mundi** it has no less significant culturological meaning. And again, to get a clear picture of its etymology, let's look at the "mythological roots" of this discourse.

Widely spread in different mythopoetic traditions, Rose is an obligatory component of a religious-mythological system that functions in different ways. Its allegorical meanings vary from "unity", "divine love", "mercy" "paradise" "the joys of paradise" to "pleasure", "wisdom", "secret" and even "pride". In Greece, Rome, China and some German-speaking countries Rose was associated with death often transforming into the flower of the underworld, meanwhile more constant meanings of this mythopoetic image that are deeply rooted in the world culture are "love" and "secret". Such images as "Rose tree", "Rose garden", "Chaplet of roses", "Rose on the cross", etc. that are closely connected with this concept have acquired a significant symbolic meaning in numerous works of art.

Rose functions as one of the most important mythopoetic images that takes the leading part in so called "flower code". In some mythological systems Rose is associated with the sun, the star and the goddess of love and beauty. In the context of other mythological systems Rose is a symbol of death and is connected with funerals and the underworld.

According to Zolotnitskiy the very first mentions of Rose go back to ancient Hindu myths. The status of Rose was so great that in accordance with a traditional custom anyone who brought a rose to the tsar could ask him to grant his any wish. Rose also served as the main décor of temples; the road along which governors followed was covered with them; statues of gods were decorated; the tribute imposed by the governor was paid in roses too. In the houses of the Indian nobility the canals dug along the park paths were filled with roses' petals, and their smell always stayed in the air. The legend says that the most beautiful woman in the entire world – Lakshmi, a wife of Vishnu, the goddess of beauty was born from the rose that accounted for 108 big petals and 1608 small ones – since that time Rose has been worshiped as a sacred flower, a symbol of secret and beauty. In Egyptian mythology Rose was associated with Isis and functioned as a symbol of innocent love without any hint at sensual passion.

The analyses of symbolic meanings of Rose demonstrates important transformations that this mythopoetic image experienced during the period of its

existence. For example, in Ancient Rome people believed that the flower originated from the tears of Venus. According to Greek and Roman traditions Rose served, on the one hand, as an attribute of joy and festival (dining-rooms were decorated with roses, the chaplets of winners were ornamented too, roses were put at the feet of statues of gods); on the other hand, Rose was a symbol of grief and sorrow (petals of roses covered tombs and mortuary urns, rose was a flower traditionally worn during the morning days as a symbol of temporality of life, besides people believed that the rose's smell prevented from the decay of remains). The bud of a rose was considered to be a symbol of eternity that's why its image could be often seen on Greek tombstones. Warriors believed that roses brought courage to them, and every time preparing for the upcoming struggle they changed their helmets on chaplets of roses. Together with Rome's decay Rose transformed into the symbol of debauchery, small passions, sensual love, and carnal pleasures, having lost its previous role of a the flowers' queen: in Nero's dining-room the ceiling and the walls of which could be turned with the help of a special mechanism depicting four seasons of the year, guests witnessed the rain of roses' petals, and during one of Emperor Elagabalus' banquets several patricians suffocated from the flowers' smell in which the Roman governor's guests just wallowed. Probably, at the same time there appeared a Latin saying that later on became so popular – *sub rosa dictum*, i.e. told under the rose that means left in secret. This saying originates from the tradition to fix an artificial white rose on the ceiling – the only look at it could restrict the heated heads of drunk dinner companions able to compromise themselves in the face of the Emperor.

According to Arabian beliefs Rose is a symbol of masculine beauty; Islamic tradition turns this flower into a symbol of cosmic power. In Muslim world there is an image of a white rose – the sweat on the face of prophet Muhammad that appeared on his face during his ascension to heaven. In accordance with this belief Rose has a purgatory power and is a sacred flower in the Muslim culture. A red rose is regarded to be the symbol of the prophet's blood and is also connected with his sons Hassan and Hussein who are usually called "eyes" or "roses" of Muhammad. In the context of the Jewish cabala Rose is an image of unity. In Christianity this flower acquires the meaning of mercy, divine love, martyrdom and victory; in the Middle Ages Rose replaced lily having become a symbol of divine joy and also a symbol of the world that is eternally changing and discovering new edges. In Catholicism prayer-beads and a special pray became known as "Rosarium" correlating to the reflexion on three "fives" – five "joyful", five "mournful" and five "glorious" mysteries of the Mother of God's life. She is usually associated with rose or has it as her main attribute – according to a medieval legend the Mother of God was once picking up buds of roses that flew

from the monk's lips who was praying to her – having made a garland she crowned her head with those buds.

One of the most complete lists of Rose's symbolic meanings can be described in the following way:

- I. *Sensual* – joy, love, pleasure, bliss;
- II. *Qualitative* – beauty, perfection, grace, splendor, odor, wisdom;
- III. *Emotive* – praise, glory, pride, fire and fury;
- IV. *Sacral*: pray, meditation, secret, mystery, silence.

Various Rose's colours as well as its numerous transformations (a chaplet, a garden, a rose-knot, a rose tree, etc.) in their turn bear a certain symbolic meaning. For example, a red rose is a traditional Christian symbol of the earth, while a white rose symbolizes virginity, spirituality, silence, an abstract idea, etc. A golden rose is a symbol of church, the divine blessing and joy, while a silver flower is a dwelling of Brahma. The rose's thorn serves as a symbol of suffering, death and even sin. A rose on the cross is a traditional symbol of Jesus Christ's death; a cross with a five-petal rose is a symbol of resurrection and joy; a rose in the centre of a cross symbolizes the initial world unity. A rose-knot in Muslim culture defines seven names of Allah, while in Buddhism it is a symbol of triple truth (knowledge, law, and a way of order); it is also connected with the image of the Universe. A garland of roses is an angel's chaplet, a blessed soul, divine joy; at the same time, it is an attribute of Cupid and St Cecilia. A similar image – a chaplet of roses, symbolizes a reward for virtue. A rose tree means a refuge, while a rose garden is a symbol of new Jerusalem.

The biggest popularity was acquired by the emblem of a secret Rose-Cross brotherhood that had a St Andrew cross with four roses at corners as their emblem. Rose was a symbol of divine light of the Universe and the cross meant a world of sorrows. Thus, roses that grew from the cross became symbols of resurrection, and numerous petals were symbols of initiations established in the Order.

What concerns **Ship** as one of the triad's components, it deserves special attention. Analyses of the mythopoetic image of Ship highlights the existence of a full-bodied interdiscourse in the framework of which Ship functions in three major discourses: Noah's Ark, Flying Dutchman and Ship of Fools. These images formed centuries ago and being widely represented in various forms of arts created in different historical periods of time have definitely turned into independent discourses that altogether form the interdiscourse of Ship – one of the most popular images within centuries and one of the most in-demand in the arts of the modern epoch.

What serves as an evident fact proving that Ship along with World Tree and Rosa Mundi makes part of the world artistic discourses triad is that no matter what "role" it takes in this or that work of art it is realized on a subconscious level by every person and does not need any detailed explanation of its metaphorical meaning. However, Ship stands out the triad being an interdiscourse, all the three components of which are equally well-known and widely spread in different works of art. Going into details of their etymology evokes some curiosity.

If we follow the chronology of these discourses appearance in the world culture, we should first regard the discourse of *Noah's Ark*. What lies at its roots is a ship of Ziusudra – the main character of a famous Sumerian and Akkadian myth that tells about the salvation of a mankind on the board of an ark. The next transformation comes from the Babylonian myth of Atrachasis' ship, that in its turn, was later on transformed in the context of the Judaistic mythology, in the parable of the Great Deluge and Noah's Ark. The life-line of this parable about the mankind saving boat continued in the framework of Greek and Roman mythology – in the myth of Deucalion, very popular in ancient times and fixed in various manuscripts of that epoch. However, with the spread of Christianity it was the Old Testament myth that turned out to be the most competitive and long-lasting and finally resulted in its gradual transfer into a full-scale discourse. As for the classical metaphorical meaning that reveals the idea of the mythopoetic image – the basis of a new discourse, it is that of salvation granted to holy people who stand apart from sinful deeds. One of the most intricate artistic embodiments of this discourse has been recently created in Spain – a popular 43 series *El Barco* first shown in 2011.

The formation of the *Flying Dutchman* discourse is closely connected with the ancient legend of Charon who guides his boat to the underworld as well as with two glorious heroes that became known due to Apollonius of Rhodes and Homer and their legendary books: *Argonautica* and *Odyssey* respectively. One more component that played a significant role in the formation of a new discourse was the infernal vessel from the Norse mythology – *Naglfar*, a ship made of deadmen's nails. The images mentioned above laid at the basis of a new discourse that asserted itself to the full extent only in the literature of Romanticism though first bright examples of that new image were created in the time of major geographical discoveries when the story of a ghost ship and a damned crew headed by a cursed captain on its board appeared first in folklore and then in numerous literary works. The legend of the *Flying Dutchman* became an allegorical story about a man who is punished by Heaven for being too proud to resign himself to God's will; it became a symbol of a purgatory for sinners who are too arrogant to repent and can only beg for mercy and forgiveness in order to

die with peace. This discourse has recently found its bright continuation in the novel by an American writer Charlotte Rogan "Lifeboat", published in 2012.

The third discourse – that of the *Ship of Fools* originates from two chef-d'oeuvres of the Renaissance epoch: the poem by Sebastian Brant and the canvas by Hieronymus Bosch both entitled "Ship of Fools". Partially it owes its further development to Francois Rabelais' Gargantua and Pantagruel – in particular, to the last two books of this saga in which the most absurd naval journey in search of the Divine Bottle is masterfully described by the author. The Ship of Fools, a symbol of a state/society that floats on the sea of trouble and uncertainty, has lately been enriched with a bright novel by an English writer Gregory Norminton, published in 2005.

Conclusion

Obviously, the review of the world artistic discourses triad made within the framework of the given article suggests only a brief picture of what stands behind. The topic suggested deserves some profound research that will figure out all the aspects of those discourses that formed the world culture of the present day and will surely make the basis of the culture of a new era.

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