

The Mandala as a Guide to a Loving Encounter with One's Own Soul

Luana Morelli De Luccia* 

Abstract

This article presents the analysis of a clinical case in which artistic resources were employed through the creation of mandalas. The inspiration for this therapeutic approach arose from the experience described by Carl Gustav Jung in his *Red Book*, where he recounts how the spontaneous drawing of mandalas significantly contributed to his process of psychological development. The patient, who already practiced mandala drawing as a form of personal expression and strongly identified herself with the principles of Analytical Psychology, accepted the proposal to create these images within the therapeutic setting in order to analyze them in light of Jungian theory. ■

Keywords: mandala; Analytical Psychology; individuation; complex; shadow; symbol.

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* Independent researcher. São Paulo, São Paulo. Brazil.
Clinical psychologist. Analyst member of the Sociedade Brasileira de Psicologia Analítica (SBrPA) and the International Association of Analytical Psychology (IAAP). E-mail: luana.morelli@me.com

A mandala como guia para o encontro amoroso com a própria alma

Resumo

Neste artigo, apresenta-se a análise de um caso clínico em que a confecção de mandalas foi utilizada como recurso. A inspiração para essa proposta terapêutica surgiu a partir da experiência descrita por Carl Gustav Jung em seu *Livro Vermelho*, onde ele relata como a criação espontânea e voluntária de mandalas favoreceu significativamente seu processo de desenvolvimento psíquico. A paciente, que já cultivava o hábito de desenhar mandalas como forma de expressão pessoal e que se identificava profundamente com os fundamentos da Psicologia Analítica, aceitou a proposta de fazer esses desenhos no setting terapêutico, a fim de analisá-los conjuntamente à luz da teoria junguiana. ■

Palavras-chave: mandala, Psicologia Analítica, individuação, complexo, sombra, símbolo.

La mandala como guia para el encuentro amoroso con la propia alma

Resumen

En este artículo se presenta el análisis de un caso clínico en el que se utilizaron recursos artísticos mediante la confección de mandalas. La inspiración para esta propuesta terapéutica surgió a partir de la experiencia descrita por Carl Gustav Jung en su *Libro Rojo*, donde relata cómo la creación espontánea de mandalas favoreció de manera significativa su proceso de desarrollo psíquico. La paciente, que ya cultivaba el hábito de dibujar mandalas como forma de expresión personal y se identificaba profundamente con los fundamentos de la Psicología Analítica, aceptó la propuesta de realizar estos dibujos en el *setting* terapéutico, con el fin de analizarlos conjuntamente a la luz de la teoría junguiana. ■

Palabras clave: mandala; Psicología Analítica; individuación; complejo; sombra; símbolo.

Introduction

This article discusses the journey of a patient who, for years, “kept moving in circles” without being able to attribute meaning to her own existence. The serial creation of twelve mandalas initiated a process of symbolization that allowed contact with unconscious contents, expanded consciousness, and enabled the patient to make choices more coherent with her inner truth rather than driven by external expectations.

Aim of the article

To illustrate, through a clinical case, how the production and analysis of mandalas can function as mediators between the conscious and the

unconscious, fostering self-regulation, shadow integration, and movements of *individuation* within a Jungian framework.

Jung and the mandalas

During a period of intense inner conflict, Jung began drawing mandalas — a practice recorded in *The Red Book (Liber Novus)* — and realized that these images restored a sense of order and center within him (Jung, 2009, p. 39). He later described the mandala as a representation of the *Self* and observed that its spontaneous or deliberate emergence tends to promote new centering and the dialogue between psychic opposites, between consciousness and the unconscious (Jung, 2013d, §§343–379). This understanding supports the

contemporary clinical use of mandalas as devices for containment and symbolic transformation.

In Brazil, psychiatrist Nise da Silveira introduced and systematized this use in therapeutic art studios within mental health settings. Observing the recurrence of circular forms in psychotic patients, she sought theoretical grounding in Jung's work and recognized in the mandala a symbol of totality (the *Self*) and its organizing effect on affective life (Silveira, 1992, pp. 45–47).

Method

Clinical design: single-case, longitudinal study (24 months). Twelve mandalas were created during this period.

Procedure: brief guided relaxation followed by the free filling-in of a blank circle, then the verbalization of personal associations, which supported the clinical discussion grounded in Jungian theory.

Analytic criteria

(I) Patient's voice (M.) — image, affects, associations;
(II) Author's clinical commentary (A.) — interpretive hypotheses, theoretical–symbolic articulation, and implications for the process. Ethical considerations: identifying information was omitted, and biographical details were discreetly altered to preserve anonymity.

Conceptual Notes (as applied in this case)

- Ego — Central complex of consciousness, responsible for the cohesion and continuity of personal identity (Jung, 2013b).
- Self — The center and totality of the psyche; the regulating principle guiding processes of self-regulation and *individuation* (Jung, 2013d).
- Persona — The *ego's* mode of social adaptation; when overly identified, it distances the subject from inner life (cf. Jung, 2015).
- Shadow — The set of rejected or unacknowledged aspects of the personality, whose integration is essential to *individuation* (Jung, 2015).
- Complex — An autonomous psychic nucleus, charged with strong affect, constellated by emotional experiences and linked to an *archetype* (Jung, 2013c).

- Anima and Animus — Functional systems mediating the relationship between *ego* and unconscious, experienced as inner images of the feminine and masculine (Jung, 2013d; von Franz, 1999).
- Transcendent Function — A process mediating between conscious and unconscious through symbolic production, allowing new syntheses and expansion of consciousness (Jung, 2015).
- Mandala — Archetypal image of center and totality, emerging or produced in moments of psychic disorganization, facilitating containment and inner reorganization (Jung, 2012a, 2013f, 2014, 2015).
- Active Imagination — Therapeutic method of dialoguing with inner images, through which the unconscious expresses itself symbolically, offering material for psychic transformation (Jung, 2012b).

Clinical Case Presentation

Brief profile: M. is a 50-year-old woman with objective achievements (family, career, health), yet experiencing persistent emptiness, oscillation between vanity and self-rejection, anxious–depressive symptoms, and psychosomatic complaints. She sought to please everyone, inhabiting the role of the “eternal good girl,” adapting to others' expectations in exchange for love or recognition — but at the cost of profound self-abandonment. Her initial request condensed a deep yearning: the desire to rediscover her own soul. This search, laden with suffering, defined the starting point of her analytic process.

1st Mandala — Flower in the Mirror



[M] *“In this drawing I see beauty and harmony, but also loneliness. I oscillate between feeling beautiful and perfect, and rejecting myself for being a fraud. That’s why there is loneliness — I avoid deeper contact so that no one sees my ugliness.”*

[A] The narcissistic line (the mirror-like reflection) functions as a defense in the face of a fragile self-esteem and prevents an encounter with the shadow. There is an identification with an idealized persona and somatization when the tension is not symbolized. The drawing, however, suggests a prospective function: the floral motif points to the possibility of renewal and growth emerging from the center.

2nd Mandala — Vase of Flowers/ Broken Circle



[M] After learning about a party she had not attended because she had not been included, the patient states: *“Flowers from a party to which I wasn’t invited. I hadn’t realized how much this affected me. I feel deeply rejected, excluded. It hurts and fills me with anger rage!”*

[A] In this mandala, the patient does not remain within the circle; she breaks it. The rupture of the circle indicates a moment of fragility in the mandala’s containing function, revealing a breach of psychic defenses.

As Jung points out, the mandala performs a protective and organizing function, similar to the walls of a house that safeguard its interior (Jung, 2014,

§§713–718). When this symbolic boundary is broken, unconscious contents that are not yet sufficiently recognized or integrated may spill outside the organizing space, provoking internal disorganization. Such dispersion approaches a state of dissociation, in which the ego temporarily loses its mediating capacity between consciousness and the unconscious, potentially leading to a “disintegration of personality.” In these moments, the movement of expanding consciousness, characteristic of the transcendent function, is interrupted, temporarily suspending the processes of integration and individuation (Jung, 2015, §§360–368).

In the drawing, however, the center remains intact. In symbolic terms, this indicates that even when ego organization is ruptured, the Self, the regulating center and totality of the psyche, remains preserved. It is from this nucleus that reorganization and reconstruction may emerge, gradually restoring inner balance, since the Self exerts a compensatory and unifying function (Jung, 2013d, §§43–67).

3rd Mandala — Fragmented Image



[M] *“I feel in pieces; my world has collapsed.”*

[A] As the process unfolded, M. reported feeling like her own mandala: “in ruins,” without foundation, fragmented. The image symbolically expresses an internal shock — the momentary loss of the psyche’s organizing function. Yet, as Jung emphasizes,

every process of transformation presupposes the dissolution or disintegration of a previous configuration, a necessary condition for the emergence of the new (Jung, 2012a).

As the ego gradually strengthened throughout the sessions, the bond with the father began to surface. The negative father complex manifested both in feelings of rejection or inadequacy and in a tendency to project idealized images onto male figures. As a result, her capacity for affective self-regulation was compromised: in the face of frustration, she reacted with intense emotional oscillation, insecurity, or a need for approval.

The broken mandala reflected the absence of a structuring inner father, leaving the ego vulnerable to psychic chaos (Jung, 2014, §§647–654). The therapeutic task thus involved rebuilding this internal paternal function, fostering greater ego stability and creating more favorable conditions for the unfolding of the individuation process.

This mandala therefore marks a turning point in M.'s analytic journey, signaling the beginning of the reconstruction of a new inner order after the structural disorganization associated with the negative father complex, an order capable of sustaining the tension of opposites without resorting to dissociation.

4th Mandala – Gathering the Pieces



[M] *“For me, pink evokes love; blue evokes protection — it seems to want to envelop the other figures.*

I truly feel as if I am gathering the pieces. I can see defined shapes in these drawings which, although they look like little monsters, do not frighten me; they try to relate to one another in a warm and loving dance.”

[A] The previously projected material begins to be recognized as belonging to the self. This marks the beginning of shadow integration and the re-formation of the psychic contour.

5th Mandala – Re-constructing



[M] *“This is how I see it: the eye, as a symbol, represents the faculty of consciousness to see and recognize reality — both external and internal; the fetus suggests birth; the sun, clarity; the boat, a crossing; the sea, vastness; black as the necessary withdrawal. It feels positive to me, as if I were reconnecting with an inner movement of forward motion that leads me somewhere, breaking the repetition of going in circles.”*

[A] Symbolic reorganization: transformation of object-directed libido into symbolic function; the symbol mediates inner and outer worlds. The ego, symbol relationship matures (neither inflated nor literalized).

At this stage of the analytic process, M. presents a more organized symbolic production. The image now consists of highly meaningful elements for her. At this point, the mandala, through symbols that are unique to her process — ceases to be merely a mirror of internal disorder and becomes a symbolic vessel

of transformation. It also functions as a compensatory structure, helping reorganize the fragile ego and reestablish its connection with the Self.

6th Mandala – The Tree of Life



[M] *“This is an image that has always accompanied me: the tree, with its roots in reality, in matter, and its crown in the sky, in spirituality. I feel like this tree — through the roots I seek the sap of concrete reality, and through the crown, spirituality. The center of the drawing gives me a sense of imprisonment, like a limited reflection — it copies, it does not create; it repeats, it lacks creativity, like an addictive ritual. The crown, however, represents liberation.”*

[A] Integration of sky and earth; individuation as a rooting in everyday life oriented by meaning. Transfers into concrete life become visible (study, work, relationships).

M.'s account reveals, through the symbol of the tree, a search for the integration of opposites: sky and earth, spirituality and concrete reality. This creative tension between poles and the aspiration toward transcendence constitute the foundation of the individuation process (Jung, 2014; von Franz, 2008, pp. 11–18). The roots point to reality and the crown to the transcendent, evoking a balance between instinct and spirituality. The center indicates complexes that still imprison, but the crown that expands

upward announces a new moment of reconciling opposites and reconnecting with the inner sap.

7th Mandala – The Empty Throne Awaits...



[M] *“Before, someone else was supposed to occupy this empty place; the gaze of the other, the presence of the other, the solutions of the other — always searching outside myself for something to fill my inner void. Now I understand that this task is mine, it belongs to my deepest self.”*

[A] Ethical turning point: assumption of one's own center. The throne symbolizes reintegration, not egoic grandiosity.

The mandala of the empty throne marks a turning point in M.'s individuation process, revealing that no external element could fill her inner emptiness. The throne, once destined for someone else, now represents her deepest self, indicating that self-realization depended on her own conscious attitudes — attitudes capable of freeing her from passivity and making her an active subject of her own story.

By placing herself on the throne, M. recognizes her symbolic centrality, not as an expression of ego inflation, but as a sacred act of psychic reintegration. It reflects a stance of profound humility and surrender characteristic of those who have accepted the call of the individuation process.

8th Mandala — In Search of Meaning (The Pearl)



[M] *“The roots converge toward the center in search of true meaning; the pearl, as treasure and reward, formed by the wound.”*

[A] Pain, when recognized and symbolized, becomes value; and the withdrawal of libido inward, understood here as a creative regressive movement, favors the emergence of new meaning. In this process, instinct and spirituality cease to operate as irreconcilable extremes and begin to form a more integrated dynamic, approaching the formation of the transcendent function.

This marks a conscious movement in M. to break away from peripheral distractions and reconnect with what is essential. It represents a change of direction: formerly oriented outward in search of answers in consumption, relationships, and ideals, her attention now turns inward, driven by an authentic impulse toward self-discovery.

In clinical practice, this shift in attitude was reflected in concrete choices: M. began to recognize the value of everyday life, finding gratification in her work routine and family bonds, not as duties, but as legitimate expressions of her individual destiny. By turning toward herself, she began to identify what truly fulfilled her: producing, acting, creating, sharing, and living with purpose.

9th Mandala — The Five-Pointed Star and the Guardian of the Center



[M] The patient states: *“I feel a need for center, for focus, and for feet on the ground. What draws my attention is the serpent — I am overtaken by ambivalent feelings; it protects and threatens, attracts and frightens, seduces and warns. How can I move through this without hurting myself, without letting myself be deceived by external appeals and temptations?”*

[A] Tension of opposites recognized and sustained; the serpent becomes transformative energy.

The snake (ARAS, 2010, p. 194), which “circles around,” can be understood as an image of primordial instinct and vital energy, carrying both creative and destructive power. The star (ARAS, 2010, p. 18), in turn, is a symbol of guidance and spiritual light, representing the pole of consciousness that seeks meaning and direction.

For Jung, the psyche tends to organize itself into pairs of opposites — light and shadow, spirit and instinct, good and evil — whose tension is not resolved by eliminating one of the poles, but by integrating them at a broader level of personality, a process he calls the transcendent function (Jung, 2015).

The path, therefore, is not to avoid conflict but to sustain it consciously, allowing psychic energy (libido) to circulate between the extremes without fixating on either one. From this perspective, M.’s question: *“How can I walk in these realms without hurting myself too much?”* Is the precise formulation of the task of individuation: to maintain a living dialogue

between opposing forces without one annihilating the other.

At this stage of the analysis, M. demonstrates a greater capacity for inner observation: she perceives her ambivalences, names her impulses, and endures the discomfort of the crossing. Even though the path is not linear and relapses occur frequently, the mandala attests that a psychic center has been found and is beginning to stabilize. The serpent encircling the star is no longer merely a threat, it can also be an ally in the process of transformation.

10th Mandala — Diving into Relationship (the Fish)



[M] *“Solitude is no longer enough for me; the more I deepen into myself, the more I can approach the other. It is a genuine desire that slowly awakens in me — it seems I am losing the fear of showing who I am.”*

[A] The fish marks a new availability for real relationships. Defenses become thresholds: the ego moves, connects, and shares.

Here we observe one of the most essential principles of Jungian psychology: a true encounter with the other can only occur from a solid foundation of contact with oneself (Jung, 2015).

The image of the fish carries strong symbolic ambivalence: in the Christian context, it is a symbol of Christ (Jung, 2013d, §§162–286); in alchemy, it represents the *lapis philosophorum* hidden in the waters (Jung,

2012a, §§94–121); in archaic traditions, it expresses both deep wisdom and instinctual chaos (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1994; ARAS, 2010, pp. 202–205).

Here, the fish represents the emergent content of the unconscious, something that, coming from the depths, offers itself to consciousness for integration.

At this moment, M.’s Self begins to manifest in a way that is more accessible and capable of being integrated. The fish, as a symbol of life gestating in the waters of the unconscious, announces a new phase, no longer centered on defense and the elaboration of wounds, but on sharing, expansion, and relationship. The pointed forms drawn by M., which previously functioned as defenses, are now understood by her as portals of entry and exit, indicating that the ego no longer needs to defend itself so rigidly.

This awareness marks an important shift: M. begins to realize that individuation is not isolation, but the discovery of authentic ways of relating, both as part and as whole.

11th Mandala — The Holy Grail



[M] *“Only love heals, and it begins with compassion for oneself. I feel a serene gratitude for life and for my sorrows. I sense a change in the quality of my relationship with myself: the rigidity and self-demand that once defined me are giving way to a more loving and understanding attitude. I am beginning to recognize my fragility as part of the human condition, not as a personal defect. I am learning to nourish myself.”*

[A] The Grail symbolizes the healing center and the union of opposites. The wound reveals itself as a pathway to the Self; experiential faith replaces idealizations.

M. recognized that, for a long time, she believed she loved herself, but now perceived that this had been an illusion. She emphasized that learning to look at herself with compassion and to reconcile with her own shadow aspects constituted a daily practice — a pact of inner friendship that was just beginning to take shape as a viable path, still in a process of learning and integration.

M. realizes that her long journey was not in vain. After so many detours, trials, and symbolic deserts, she now finds what she had truly been seeking: her most precious treasure, her deepest self, symbolized here by the holy chalice, the vessel of Christ's blood, an image of the healing totality.

Marie-Louise von Franz (1990) observes that authentic individuation processes often begin with a psychic wound that forces the ego to turn toward the unconscious in search of a central regulating function: the Self, understood as the totality of the psyche, greater than the ego, and the organizing principle of personality (Jung, 2014).

12th Mandala — The Key



[M] “The golden key with a pearl at the center may be the access to the inner temple. This mandala touches me deeply; it offers me the possibility of opening

something that has always been locked inside me. The pink background evokes tenderness and the essential feminine, while the colored layers around it evoke an open vagina — birth and revelation.”

[A] Active imagination: M. takes the key and opens the door. In the active imagination experience, M. describes the symbolic gesture of taking the key, opening the door, and finding her own soul seated upon the throne, culminating in an embrace and a song. This scene reveals a moment of rare symbolic depth, in which an encounter with the deepest core of being takes shape. The key and the door indicate conscious access to a psychic space that had previously been veiled, suggesting a willingness of the ego to cross the threshold separating ordinary consciousness from a more essential dimension of inner life.

The figure of the enthroned soul can be understood as a representation of the Self, the regulating center of the total psyche, which does not impose itself intrusively but appears as a silent, dignified, sovereign presence. The throne gives this image a status of symbolic authority, indicating that it is not an egoic fantasy but a dimension that transcends the ego and invites it into a more reverent and integrated relationship.

The embrace and the song that follow establish an affective experience of profound connection, indicating a movement of reconciliation between ego and Self. This scene may be understood as a symbolic expression of the *coniunctio*, in which the ego neither seeks to dominate nor to submit to, but to approach with a loving and receptive attitude. It marks a moment in which the separation between the seeker and the sought center dissolves, giving rise to an experience of unity, belonging, and mutual care.

More than a mere imaginative exercise, this experience signals a reconfiguration of the ego–Self axis, in which M. begins to recognize within herself a legitimate inner authority capable of guiding and sustaining her process. The reconnection with the center does not occur through rational imposition but through a symbolic experience infused with affect, integrating image, body, and emotion and enabling

a deeper psychological integration. She does not encounter an idealized other, but herself in her most essential dimension. The *coniunctio* here is not undifferentiated fusion but a conscious approach to that which had remained separate, inaugurating a more mature way of relating to herself and to life.

In *Mysterium Coniunctionis*, Jung describes the *coniunctio*, the union of psychic opposites, as a process analogous to *alchemical* work, in which the dissolution and synthesis of the *ego* with unconscious contents lead to renewal and wholeness. Thus, the *Self* manifests its healing power when the wounded psyche entrusts itself to the inner process, allowing this regulating center to emerge and restore lost integrity (Jung, 2012b).

Final Considerations

The sequence of twelve mandalas functioned as both map and mirror within M.'s therapeutic process: from momentary disintegration and dispersion to the re-formation of structure; from projection to *shadow* integration; from idealization to an ethical commitment to her own center. The case illustrates how imaginal work, when grounded in personal associations and clinical reflection, can promote *self*-regulation, the re-signification of suffering, and the opening toward relational life.

The transformation of *libido* from object-directed to a *symbolic function* in the work with mandalas contributed significantly to the patient's *individuation process*: by partially withdrawing energy from external objects, *libido* turned inward, activating archetypal images and fostering psychic reorganization, opening new possibilities for adaptation and the integration of consciousness (Jung, 2013a, 2013f).

In M.'s process, the formation of *symbols* was not merely a spontaneous product of the psyche but a

compensatory and restorative movement. After a period of rupture and fragmentation, during which the *ego* could not sustain the *tension of opposites*, her images began to reflect the psyche's attempt to re-establish an inner axis.

For symbolic experience to take effect, however, the *ego* had to be capable of welcoming emerging images without inflating them or dissolving into them. Symbolic transformation of *libido* occurred when the *ego* engaged the symbol as psychic reality rather than literalizing it externally, allowing energy to shift from outer objects to the field of inner images (cf. Jung, 2013a; 2013b). This movement required both a descent into the unconscious, an introverted gesture, and a return to conscious life with what had been found, in a process analogous to the mythical hero's journey, who descends into the underworld and returns transformed.

Thus, the *symbol* became a mediator between inner and outer worlds, between *ego* and *Self*. Integrated into consciousness, it reoriented the flow of *libido*, reconnecting M. with a more meaningful way of being. *Individuation* remains a guiding horizon, an unfinished and continuous process that, in M.'s case, became visible in more truthful everyday choices (Jung, 2014).

Idiosyncrasies of the Process.

It is recognized that Jungian clinical work is marked by the singularity of the *transference* and *countertransference* relationship. The symbolic readings presented in this study are therefore contextual: they emerge and are transformed within the analytic bond as a co-elaboration between patient and analyst. For this reason, they should not be generalized without due caution, as they reflect the specificity of the relational field from which they arose. ■

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Edited by: Rosana Rubini. <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6208-7200>

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