

MA'AT'S FEATHER AND THE ART OF TRANSFORMATION

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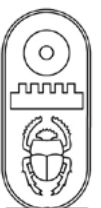


Anne Nordhaus-Bike, Ma'at's Feather, 2005.

Art provides a powerful way to connect with our inner selves. It communicates through symbols which constitute the language of the soul. This symbolic language speaks to us through art's physical qualities of color, form, composition, and medium. It also communicates through an artwork's content. In this way, form and content combine to express spiritual or mystical meaning, giving art a sense of mystery and inviting us to return again

and again for contemplation. Over time, art can reward us with new insights and touch our souls through beauty of form and meaning.

In ancient Egypt, the deity Ma'at personified the order that came out of primordial chaos. Her name, which means "truth," alludes to her vital role in the afterlife: after death, every person came face to face with Ma'at, who weighed the individual's heart (which housed the



soul) against a white feather. If the scales balanced, the person was allowed to make the journey to eternal paradise; if the heart was too heavy, the demon Ammit devoured it and the person had to stay in the underworld, suffering from a terrible restlessness.

The painting on the previous page, *Ma'at's Feather*, evokes this ancient story. The red background alludes to the heart that Ma'at must weigh as well as the spiritual fire and personal sacrifice that assist inner growth. Touches of gold indicate spiritual riches obtained from inner purity and heartfelt devotion. Here, the white feather floats in air and has turned almost completely purple, symbolizing a kind of spiritual achievement or royalty beyond simple purity; after reaching a pure state in order to balance the scales of Ma'at, a soul still faced a long journey and many trials before reaching paradise.

Ma'at's association with lightness—feathers symbolize birds as well as air and lightness—comes through in ancient Egyptian artists' depictions, which typically

show Ma'at either with an ostrich feather in her headpiece or with human arms filled with feathers that create wings. Her likeness indicates the lightness required to succeed at the afterlife's weighing.

Her symbols also associate Ma'at with communication, as birds tend to be talky beings that communicate through various calls and other sounds and fly high in the sky, bringing them closer to the heavens—literally and symbolically—and therefore making them privy to divine communication. Here on Earth, observing their colors and traits can give us clues to spiritual messages. For example, a robin's large red breast indicates a big heart and emotional warmth, and its perky, jaunty movements symbolize freshness, youth, and good cheer.

Ma'at's scales indicate her devotion to justice, balance, and purity, exemplified by the 42 Confessions of Ma'at from the *Book of Coming Forth by Day*. Her scales also link Ma'at to alchemy, which originated in ancient Egypt: the balance scale provided a useful instrument for alchemists and



A detail of one of the wall paintings in the Tomb of Nefertari showing Ma'at.



In a scene from the Book of Coming Forth by Day, the heart of Hunefer is weighed against the feather of Ma'at.

came to symbolize their Great Work's final success. Alchemy, or the Art of Transformation, purifies and balances natural forces to restore equilibrium on all planes.

This painting links Ma'at and ancient Egypt's mystical and alchemical practices with those of later cultures in the Western mystical tradition, particularly regarding communication, the mind and thought, and spiritual alchemy:

- Ma'at's husband, Thoth, associated with wisdom and writing, served as the scribe during the weighing process, recording the verdict for each person who faced Ma'at. Although ancient Egyptian scribes used reeds for writing, Roman and later scribes and writers used feathers (quills).
- During the Hellenistic era, Egypt's Thoth merged with the Greek deity Hermes, eventually evolving into Hermes Mercurius Trismegistus, or "Thrice-Great Hermes." This figure became associated with

Hermes from Greek tradition and Mercury from the Roman pantheon; he also is associated with the planet Mercury and with alchemical Mercury, also known as quicksilver.

- Both Hermes and Mercury carried associations with birds as well as inspired communication and higher thought. With wings on their feet and caps, they served as the speedy messengers of the deities.

During our time on Earth, our work consists in making our hearts light and pure enough to balance perfectly with a single feather. Using Mercury (thought), we can make progress toward that goal by refraining from negative thoughts and misuse of our minds and communication. At the same time, we can engage in constructive communication and positive thoughts. In addition, we can attune with Mercury's best expression by enjoying lighthearted pleasures that freshen our spirits and inspire our minds.

