

THE STONE AS AN ARCHETYPAL SYMBOL OF SELF

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Our relationship with stone is ancient. We named the beginning of human history the Stone Age, used stones as our earliest tools and weapons, as the matter that housed us and the substance we heated to cook our food. It has been integral to our living as human beings but the relationship we have with stone is much more than a merely practical one. This older than life symbol has always fascinated us. It is ancestral and connects to us in a deeply elemental way that draws our awareness to deep time and poetic wisdom. It has what is known as a numinous quality and the reason it has that presence of divinity is because it is an archetypal symbol.

Archetypes, according to the founder of analytical psychology Carl Jung, are innate, invisible, primordial patterns or energies that reside in the collective unconscious. Jung believed these archetypes are universal and have always been with us. Archetypes themselves are without form and content but they manifest symbols which do have form and content. The archetypal symbol of the stone is, therefore, an outward representation in the conscious mind of invisible archetypal energies in the unconscious. We see this stone symbol speaking to us through myths and legends, in the megalithic landscape, in the holy stones of religions and magic, and in the illustrious philosophic stone of the alchemists.

The different ways we relate to stone teaches us about ourselves and our place in the world. In Arthurian legend, young Arthur pulling the sword from the stone is our destiny revealed. The spiritual markers and memorials we make from stone connect us with stone's everlasting nature. In the ancient Japanese art of *suishiki* we find the stillness of stone and an appreciation of beauty. What I want to speak to here, however, is the idea of the stone as a symbol of the self. A connection to our innermost centre.



It was the Jungian psychologist (and close colleague and friend of Carl Jung) Marie Louise Von Franz who called stones *images of the Self*. She described them as “complete, unchanging and lasting” and said that whilst a human being is in obvious ways very different from a stone that “man’s innermost centre is in a strange and special way akin to it”

She suggests that is because the stone symbolises an existence far removed from our ego-consciousness which is wrapped up in its emotions and discursive thinking. Instead, it symbolises a simple, deep experience of something eternal. When we are able to connect to this place we find that it is actually the most important kernel of ourselves.

Brassaï (Gyula Halász). Untitled (Pablo Picasso's *Stone Sculpture Round Head*, 1943)
Gelatin silver print © Estate Brassaï-RMN

This mysterious inner connection to the stone symbol is reflected in the way we incorporate it into our lives, even using it as an integral part of our language. We use descriptions and phrases like “set in stone”, “stone cold”, “heart of stone”, “leave no stone unturned”, “stone sober” and “stoney faced”. Then there is the way in which something within our inner Self draws us to hold stones, put them in our pockets, place them on our window cills, collect them. Marie Louise Von Franz recognised this saying, “Men have collected stones since the beginning of time and have apparently assumed that certain ones were the containers of the spirit of the life force with all its mystery”

There is a wonderful amplified example of humans being drawn to collect stones in the story of an Italian man called Luigi Lineri. Luigi is 87 years old and has been collecting stones for 60 years from along the Adige River in Verona. He doesn't alter the forms of the stones in anyway - he collects and arranges them in an associative and intuitive way led by something internal. He said that at first he thought a few stones would be enough, but then understood that in their thousands they give a sense of community.

What he has been doing has gained huge attention from people and this unique installation has been called “The Quest”. This name says a lot about people's fascination with his project. They identify in it a search for something sacred like the grail quest. This is, I believe, an unconscious recognition that in stone there is something divine of ourselves to be found.



Luigi Lineri. Photo: Colin Dutton

Luigi has beautiful words to share about his quest. He said, “There is a strong energy in this ‘cosmos’ made of stones and whoever touches them has to do so with the respect and right frame of mind... Each day I try to put the stones in order, to give a sense to each chapter of this poem.”

His intuitive connection to the idea of these stones as a cosmos and the respect and awe he has for them connects to what Marie Louise Von Franz was trying to explain about our Self connection to the eternal. There is something of Stone that we recognise as the deep part of ourselves and I think that is why we have also been drawn to impart an impression of ourselves into stone throughout history.

These wonderful images of vulva carvings were found at the La Ferrassie rock shelter in Dordogne, France. They date back to the Upper Palaeolithic era and some scholars believe that these carvings may have been intended as symbols of regeneration. The vulva represents the womb giving new life, emphasizing the importance and reverence that ancient societies may have placed on the female reproductive system and its role in the continuation of life.



La Ferrassie, Aurignancian carvings of vulvas in stone. Photo: Don Hitchcock

We have continued to make impressions of the human in stone. We see these in countless famous artworks by well-known artists such as Auguste Rodin and Barbara Hepworth and also in anonymous creations such as this beautiful image of a female face carved into an ammonite fossil that was found in Great Bedwyn and can be viewed in Wiltshire Museum, Devizes.



The act of creating representations of ourselves in stone is a way of connecting with the deep, archetypal aspect of the Self in the psyche. By creating something that is enduring and timeless, we are tapping into a part of ourselves that transcends our individual experiences and connects us with something greater.

Ammonite Carved face. Late Iron Age. Wiltshire Museum, Devizes.