

THESIS

EARTH • AIR • FIRE • WATER

Submitted by

Christine C. Wire

Department of Art

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 1995

N  
740  
157  
175  
THESIS

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

December 1, 1994

WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER  
OUR SUPERVISION BY CHRISTINE C. WIRE ENTITLED EARTH •  
AIR • FIRE • WATER BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS.

Committee on Graduate Work

[REDACTED]

Adviser

*[Signature]*

Department Head

*[Signature]*

## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

EARTH • AIR • FIRE • WATER

This thesis represents a fusion of my personal belief system and creative expression. Based on the chalice form I have created one piece for each of the four elements; earth, air, fire, water. The chalices are designed to be used in personal rituals and exhibited together in a sacred space. The foundation for the design for both the pieces and the installation are based on the circle. The circle has been used from ancient times as a symbol rich in meaning; from the cycles of life, death, and rebirth to a symbol of wholeness and perfection. By using the circle and other archaic symbols I draw from an ancient totemic language. Through this symbolic language, I hope to reconnect to the ancient traditions and to the universe.

Christine C. Wire  
Art Department  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, CO 80523  
Spring 1995

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For George

Thank you for your unending love and support. You are my friend and co-pilot through this life and beyond.

For Deb and Dan

Not many people can boast that they are friends with their parents. I have that privilege and I am thankful for it. I love you.

For My Committee:

Carol Mitchell

I will always be grateful for your constant enthusiasm and positive energy.

Tom Lundberg

Thank you for your thought provoking questions which helped me to refine my direction.

Pat Coronel

I will always appreciate your intuitive insight to my work.

Susan Silberberg-Peirce

Thank you for not only being a teacher and mentor but also for being a true friend.

Nilda Getty

I will always be thankful for your wisdom and guidance.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. THESIS STATEMENT . . . . .	1
II. SYMBOLISM . . . . .	1
A. THE CIRCLE . . . . .	.1
B. THE CHALICE . . . . .	2
C. THE FOUR ELEMENTS . . . . .	3
III. THE WORK . . . . .	5
A. AIR . . . . .	5
1. SYMBOLISM . . . . .	5
2. THE AIR CHALICE . . . . .	5
B. FIRE . . . . .	.7
1. SYMBOLISM . . . . .	.7
2. THE FIRE CHALICE . . . . .	7
C. WATER . . . . .	10
1. SYMBOLISM . . . . .	.10
2. THE WATER CHALICE . . . . .	10
D. EARTH . . . . .	13
1. SYMBOLISM . . . . .	13
2. THE EARTH CHALICE . . . . .	13
IV. THE INSTALLATION . . . . .	15
V. CONCLUSION . . . . .	.15
VI. BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	17

## LIST OF PLATES

Air Chalice . . . . .	6
Fire Chalice . . . . .	9
Water Chalice . . . . .	12
Earth Chalice . . . . .	14
Earth Chalice (inside view) . . . . .	15

## I. Thesis Statement

In this body of work, I have created four ritual objects which reflect my spiritual beliefs. They are designed to be used in personal rituals on festival days and exhibited as a group in a sacred space. Based on the chalice form, I have created one piece that corresponds to each of the four elements. The designs of all the pieces use the geometrical form of the circle as the foundation. I have hand-crafted this set of chalices because it is my spiritual way of honoring the universe; it is my visual attempt to show the interrelationship within the web of life and the natural coexistence of all things. Archaic symbolism triggers ancient memories, universal to all humanity. I want my message to be open to everyone. This body of work is the physical manifestation of the collaboration between my spiritual and artistic life.

## II. Symbolism

### A. The Circle

The circle is the most important and most widespread geometric symbol from any culture in any time period. To the Platonists and the Neoplatonists, the circle is the ultimate, perfect form. As Jung observed, "the square, representing the lowest of the composite and factorial numbers, symbolizes the pluralist state of man who has not achieved inner unity (perfection) while the circle would correspond to the ultimate state of Oneness" (Jung, p. 241).

I was moved the first time I read Black Elk Speaks because what he said about the circle hit such a powerful cord inside of me. This was what I could believe in and see to be true all around me. In the words of the Native American visionary, Black Elk, of the Oglala Sioux:

"You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the

World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. In the old days when we were a strong and happy people, our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished. The flowering tree was the living center of the hoop, and the circle of the four corners nourished it. The east gave peace and light, the south gave warmth, the west gave rain, the north with its cold and mighty wind gave strength and endurance. This knowledge came to us from the outer world with our religion. Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a [person] is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves. Our teepees are round like the nests of birds, and these were always set in a circle, the nation's hoop, a nest of many nests, where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children."

In wiccan thought the circle represents the Goddess, the spiritual aspects of nature, fertility, infinity, and eternity. It also symbolizes the Earth itself.

#### B. The Chalice

The symbolism of the cup or chalice is complex and has an interesting history. It begins as the matriarchal image of the womb vessel and then passes on to the patriarchal replacement of the blood filled chalice of resurrection. The female had life-giving moon-blood. The cup remained and the blood was not from the female anymore, but from the male. Eventually the cup of blood became a cup of wine because human sacrifice

was distasteful and animal sacrifice too expensive. Wine is the blood of the earth.

To medieval pagans, witches, alchemists, and mystics, the cup is the universal symbol of the mother element, water. It is identified with the waters of the sea (womb) that gave birth to the land and all that live on it.

### C. The Four Elements

In many earth centered religions, it is customary to begin any ritual by invoking the four elements. These are not scientific elements as in the periodic table. They are the four classical pseudo elements that ancient people(s) worldwide used to consider the universal building blocks of matter: earth, air, fire, and water.

Why use such an ancient concept in today's society? Myths and symbols run deep in our psyche. To use the same images that are thousands of years old ties us to the past and gives us a firm ground on which to grow spiritually.

In addition to the belief that all things are made from or come from earth, air, fire and water, there is another thread that ties together the four elements. Each represents a traditional way of disposing of the dead. The deceased can be buried in the earth, set adrift on the water or buried at sea, cremated by fire, or exposed to carrion birds of the air (in the tradition of the Native Americans or the Minoans). Besides cannibalism, which is tabu in many traditional cultures, these are the only possible methods of dealing with a corpse.

In each case, returning the dead to an "element" symbolizes the chain of events that will make rebirth possible. Our Neolithic ancestors believed that they would be literally born again out of the same matter (substances, essence, material) that received them after death. The dead were thought of as living

within the universal womb waiting to be born again. In this way, spirits-in-waiting became "elementals," which used to mean ancestors. Invoking the four elements at the beginning of a ceremony is invoking the spirits of one's ancestors. It is a reminder of all that has come before us. The elements are where all things come from and to where all things return. The cycle is complete.

The four elements have always been associated with the four directions, the four "corners" of the earth, the four seasons, the four quarters of the year (the two equinox and the two solstices), the four phases in a persons life, the four suits of the Tarot and many other fourfold symbolism. The four suits of the Tarot deck were element signs whose shuffling was supposed to reflect creation: wands (fire), swords (air), cups (water), and pentacles (earth). Fire and air are associated with masculine qualities and water and earth have feminine connotations. This belief goes back to Agrippa who said, "only Earth and Water bring forth a living soul" (Walker, 1988, p. 14).

The Native Americans believe that Spider Woman initiated creation by spinning her two threads to cross at the center of the world, dividing all things into quarters. Stoic philosophers had a similar creation myth of a Mother Goddess who created life from the four elements. She was the "origin of everything and the guardian of the mysteries" (Walker, 1990, p. 7).

The four elemental symbols are found in the four hands of Kali, who invented the sound of the Sanskrit letters and from these created the primal mantras that brought the universe into being. These sounds were classified as La, earth; Va, water; Ya, air; and Ra, fire. She mingled the four elements to create life from flesh (earth), blood (water), breath (air), and fire (vital heat). This theory persisted all the way into the medieval European medicine with its insistence on mixtures of the four "elemental humors" of the body.

### III. The Work

#### A. Air - East

##### 1. Symbolism

The sun rises in the east. It is from this direction I begin. The east corresponds to the element air, spring time, dawn, spirit, and to pale airy colors like white, silver and violet. Animals of the air are the eagle, hawks, and butterflies. Air rules the mind and all mental, intuitive and psychic work, knowledge and abstract theory. Its symbols are clouds, stars, feathers, and smoke. The air will speak to you on a windswept hill, sand dunes, at the boundary where land meets water on a windy beach. These are the places I sat and meditated to help me see the design for the air chalice.

##### 2. The Air Chalice

The air chalice is made of silver and fine silver wires. I used only wire in the construction of this piece because I wanted it as light and elusive as air itself. Nothing can be held in this vessel except air. The stem has hundreds of silver stars like the airy night sky. The twisting and turning of the wires that define the cup's shape suggest winds and tornadoes. It is the tallest piece in the set and this upward movement emphasizes that it is rising in the air. The ritual purpose of this chalice is to hold incense. Smoke intermingling with the wire creates a similar visual effect.



*Air Chalice,*  
filigree stars, forged and constructed fine and sterling silver,  
13" x 5 1/2" x 5 1/2"

## B. Fire - South

### 1. Symbolism

The south corresponds to the element fire, to noon and the heat of the sun, summer, and to fiery hues of reds, oranges, crimson and gold. Animals of fire are lions, horses, dragons and salamanders. Fire rules the spirit, energy, will, healing, destroying and purification. Symbols for fire are bonfires, hearth fires, candle flames, the sun, and the concept of the torch of enlightenment. One can talk to fire in the desert, beside an active volcano or by staring into flames. An altered state of consciousness can easily be obtained by staring into the flames of a fire as I did when designing the fire chalice.

### 2. The Fire Chalice

Every step of the process in the construction of this chalice involved the element of fire. The shape of the chalice is a cone that opens at the top representing a cone of power. A tremendous amount of heat was needed to close the seam on the main body of the cup. The base has a circle of flames that was enameled, then covered with a layer of red flame raku glaze and fired using a raku reduction process. The still glowing ring, was taken from the kiln and placed in a pile of shredded newspaper. The newspaper combusted immediately and dramatically shot flames three feet high up into the air. The next step was to cover the ring and deprive it of air so that a reduction atmosphere was established. The rainbow colors that are on the surface of the fire ring are the result of a successful reduction. While I was taking the piece from the kiln I chanted Hesta, Vesta, Pele, Bridget..... These are the names of Goddesses of Fire and I invoked their help for the success of the chalice.

The surface finish utilizes a heat patina. It is obtained by using a loose flame on the surface and gently lapping the heat across the copper until the colors begin to appear. Focus is essential

because overheating will loose all the color turning the copper a muddy color. In this step, fire again played a key role.

The most exciting aspect is that actual fire itself is used in the piece. There is a reservoir on the inside lip at the top rim that holds fuel, either liquid sterno fuel© or alcohol. When this is lit, there is a real flame that circles the rim of the chalice and visually plays with the pierced flames of the vessels rim. The flames are part of the ritual. The vessel acts as a cauldron and a secret message is lit by the flame and put into the main part of the cup and left to burn. The burning of the message takes it to the spirits above that can help make the wish or desire come into being.



*Fire Chalice,*  
constructed and formed copper, raku enamel, sterno© fuel,  
heat patina, 10" x 7" x 7"

## C. Water - West

### 1. Symbolism

The west corresponds to the element water. It is associated with twilight, autumn, and the colors blue, blue-green, grey, deep purple, indigo and black. Animals of the water are seals, otters, whales and especially porpoises and dolphins. From the west comes the courage to face our deepest feelings and the power to dare. Water rules our intuition and the unconscious mind. Water can take us back to the womb or the primordial birth of the human species. Water can be loud and powerful and roar from twenty five foot waves that pound the sand, or the plunge of a hundred foot waterfall, or the splash and pounding of white water rapids. The voice of water can also be quiet and serene like from a spring, the babble of a brook, the hush or stillness of a pond or lake. The quiet reflective waters are the waters of my piece.

### 2. The Water Chalice

The water chalice is the quiet contemplative waters of a still lake during the night. There are two parts to this chalice, the bowl and the stand. The bowl is made of fine silver that has been enameled on the inside with dark blues and greys to suggest the appearance of a night sky. The constellations of the northern hemisphere (with Polaris, the north star, positioned almost at the direct center) are mapped out on the inside of the bowl. The stars glowing when lit from below, were executed with a plique-a-jour process of enameling.

The bowl is filled with salt water. There are several reasons that I chose to do this. First, I wanted to incorporate the element of water itself into the piece. I also wanted to look into the bowl and have the appearance of looking at the reflection of a night sky mirroring from a pool of water. Salt water is used as a symbolic cleansing of the mind and spirit before beginning a ritual. The chalice has a ritual purpose for the practice of divination. It can be used like a crystal ball by gazing into its

inky depths until images begin to appear to the subconscious mind.

The moon has the strongest influence on the waters of the earth. The bowl part of the chalice rests in a stand that defines the shape of a crescent moon. Three legs hold the bowl, and to me, represent the waxing, waning and full moon cycles.



*Water Chalice,*  
raised and plique-a-jour enameled fine silver bowl, sterling  
silver formed and constructed stand, liver of sulfur patina,  
6 3/4" x 8 1/2" x 6 1/2"

## D. Earth - North

### 1. Symbolism

North corresponds to the earth. The time of day is associated with the north is mysterious midnight, and the season is winter. The colors of the earth are brown, black, and green like the green of vegetation. Animals of the earth are cows, bulls, bison, snakes and stags. These animals have an ancient significance to humans because they were the ones represented on the caves found in Lascaux. In the northern hemisphere the sun never arcs across the northernmost part of the sky; for this reason it is the direction of mystery, the unseen. From the north comes the power to keep silent, to listen, to keep secrets. Symbols for Mother Earth are rocks, stones, crystals, nuts, flowers, bones, and metals bearing ores. Rocks are the physical representation of the formation of the earth when geologic forces created the land we live on today. Mountains, caves and caverns are all great places to talk to the earth.

### 2. The Earth Chalice

The earth chalice is the only covered cup in the set. The contents are hidden to relate to the mysteries, the secrets of this element. The vessel part is a sphere with a lid, completing the form to represent our planet. In this container I have placed pieces of earth that are sacred to me. Inside is sand from Hawaii, rocks from hikes I have taken, crystals, and other special stones that are all gifts from the earth. The cup sits low because I wanted it to have a grounded earth feel. It is made of copper to bestow a warm feeling. The sphere (earth) sits on four legs that represent the four corners of the world. The finish is a heat patina, but, unlike the fire chalice. the colors are blue and terra cotta to mimic the look of the earth from space. The circle and sphere forms repeat to give a sense of balance and stability. Making this the shortest of the four pieces is an attempt to keep it earth centered.



*Earth Chalice,*  
raised and constructed copper, quartz crystal, gifts and found  
objects, heat patina, 6" x 4 1/2" x 4 1/2"



*Earth Chalice*  
(inside view)

#### IV. The Environment (The Installation) : Creating a Sacred Space

The presentation of these chalices is just as important as the individual pieces themselves. Viewing the body of work has to take place in a sacred space. To accomplish this I have constructed a room inside the gallery that is installed by suspending four walls from the ceiling. The corners remain parted to allow four openings from which one enters the room. The viewer can enter the space from any direction. No one way is better or more important than any other, just as no one philosophy is better or more important than any other.

Each chalice sits on a round pedestal with a suspended archway that frames the piece. The arch is a doorway that separates the secular from the sacred. It is used as such in churches, shrines, and other holy places to define a sacred space.

#### V. Conclusion

"As scientific understanding has grown, so our world has become dehumanized. Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos, because he is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional "unconscious identity" with natural phenomena. These have slowly lost their symbolic implications. Thunder is no longer the voice of an angry god, nor is lightening his avenging missile. No river contains a spirit, no tree is the life principle of a man, no snake the embodiment of wisdom, no mountain cave the home of a great demon. No voice now speaks to man from stones, plants, and animals, nor does he speak to them believing they can hear. His contact with nature has gone, and with it has gone the profound emotional energy that this symbolic connection supplied. "

This quote from Carl Jung describes exactly why I created this body of work. The art that has come is a reaction to our present society. Nothing in today's world is meaningful for a spiritual way of life. The work is my attempt to reconnect to a world unconnected. In my work and in my life I am striving to feel part of the cosmos and connected to nature. I see Gods and Goddesses in the sky and in the river. I speak to stones, plants and animals and wait patiently for their response. Through my art, I hope to conjure up a symbolic language which is understood by all who view it. Through this language, I hope to rekindle a spiritual spark that helps the onlooker redefine their connections to the ancient traditions and to the universe.

## VI. Bibliography

- Adler, Margot, Drawing Down The Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess Worshipers and Other Pagans in America Today, Beacon Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 1986.
- Beidermann, Hans, Dictionary of Symbolism, Facts on File, New York, New York, 1989.
- Cabot, Laurie, Power of the Witch: The Earth, The Moon, and the Magical Path to Enlightenment, Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., New York, New York 1989.
- Cirlot, J.E., A Dictionary of Symbols, Barnes and Noble Books, New York, New York, 1971.
- Cunningham, Scott, Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner, Llewellyn Publications, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1988.
- Harding, Esther, Woman's Mysteries, Ancient and Modern: A Psychological Interpretation of the Feminine Principle as Portrayed in Myth, Story and Dreams Patheon Books Inc., New York, New York, 1955.
- Jung, Carl, Man and His Symbols, Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1964, p. 95.
- Mountainwater, Shekhinah, Ariadne's Thread: Workbook of Goddess Magic, The Crossing Press, Freedom, California, 1991.
- Neihardt, John G., Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1988, p. 164.

Staal, Julius D.W., Patterns in the Sky: Myths and Legends of the Stars, The Mac Donald & Woodward Publishing Co., Blacksburg, Virginia, 1988.

Starhawk, The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess, Harper and Row Publishing, San Francisco, California, 1979

Walker, Barbara G., The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols and Sacred Objects, Harper and Row Publishing, San Francisco, California, 1988.

Walker, Barbara G., Woman's Rituals: A Sourcebook, Harper and Row Publishing, San Francisco, California, 1990.