

**The University of Art and Design Cluj-Napoca**

**Field: Visual and Decorative Arts**

**PhD Thesis Summary**

**The Honey and Honeycomb's Symbolism in the  
Religious and Secular Culture**

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Both nurture and beverage, such as the milk it is often associated with, the honey is, since ancient times, a symbol of richness and wealth, of the superior things' sweetness.

The ancient Greeks considered honey as inspiration giving nurture. It gave Pindar his poetical art's talent and Pythagoras scientific one. About the last one it is said that he has been eating only honey all of his life<sup>1</sup>. In its symbolic extent honey means knowledge, science and wisdom, and feasting on it is reserved to the exceptional people. When the ancient Greek beliefs say that honey is the symbol of death and life, of numbness and of a sharp eye, in fact, they talk about the key-phases of the initiation rituals: light and darkness, death and rebirth. Honey plays an important role in the initiation awakening to life, by its yellow golden colour being connected to the eternal cycle of the deaths and rebirths<sup>2</sup>. Its perfection and sweetness makes it a valuable offering, which may attract divine goodwill, symbol of protection and comfort.

For the inhabitants of Palestine, honey constituted a healthy nurture, abundant and not too expensive. Several times honey is recalled as nurture in the Holy Scripture as well. Jonathan finds wild honey in the forest and rejoice together with his people, tasting it and exulting: "and he put forth the end of the rod, which he had in his hand, and dipped it in a honeycomb: and he carried his hand to his mouth, and his eyes were enlightened" (The 1<sup>st</sup> book of Samuel otherwise called the 1<sup>st</sup> book of Kings, 14:27). Jeroboam sends to the prophet Ahias „ten loaves, and cracknels, and a pot of honey" (The 1<sup>st</sup> book of Kings otherwise called the 3<sup>rd</sup> book of Kings, 14:3) in order to find his future. Messiah, the Lord's anointed, prophet by Isaiah, „shall eat butter and honey," (Isaiah 7:15). Here the mixture between nurture and symbolic meaning is even more subtle, because milk was sometimes considered as the ideal food for children if it was mixed with honey in order to be sweeter and more flavoured. About John the Baptist, an ascetic character, St. Matthew says in his Holy Gospel that "his meat was locusts and wild honey" (The Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ according to St. Matthew, 3:4). Jesus Christ resurrected eats in front of His apostles "a broiled fish, and a honeycomb" (The Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ according to St. Luke, 24:42) in order to prove the reality of the resurrection.

The immortal honey of love from The Book of Solomon's Canticle of Canticles is intoxicating: „Thy lips, my spouse, are as a dropping honeycomb, honey and milk are under thy tongue" and „I have eaten the honeycomb with my honey, I have drunk my wine with my milk: eat, O friends, and drink, and be inebriated, my dearly beloved." (4:11 and 5:1).

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<sup>1</sup> See *Viețile filosofilor*, ed. Electronică, p. 96-97

<sup>2</sup> Preast Eduard-William Fărtan, *Mierea bunătaților divine*, in „Curierul Athenei" nr. 246 (1.12. 2006), p. 4

Alluring the honey's sweetness becomes dangerous when it impresses the deployed woman's flattery: „For the lips of a harlot are like a honeycomb dropping, and her throat is smoother than oil. But her end is bitter as wormwood” (The Book of Proverbs, 5:3-4).

The word honey is recalled 60 times in the Old Testament and more than a third of these refer to the Promised Land as a heavenly land where “milk and honey flows”. Without being especially fertile, Palestine is rich in honey. The expression though refers to the richness of the gifts God is giving to His people which stays within the sacred space of His love.

For its sweetness, honey is the symbol of the wisdom's taste - „Fat honey, my son, because it is good, and the honeycomb most sweet to thy throat: So also is the doctrine of wisdom to thy soul” (The Book of Proverbs 24:13-14) and of the divine judgment: „the judgments of the Lord are true, justified in themselves. More to be desired than gold and many precious stones: and sweeter than honey and the honeycomb” (The Book of Psalms 18: 10-11).

Honey also designates culture in general and religious culture in particular, the mystical knowledge and the spiritual goods, the revelation within initiation. The human being and society's happiness is build on the honey of knowledge. Due to a joyful translation in meaning and symbolism, in celebrating the sacred union between the woman and the man, the Transylvanian church gives the bride and the groom not wine, as the ritual asks, but honey.

Within the modern psychoanalytic thinking, honey will be understood as the result of an elaboration process and will become the symbol of the Self as the ultimate consequence of the own person's inner development. As well as honey reduces several scattered elements to the unity of a delicious fluid, the bride and the groom are invited to a sacred transformation.

In his book - Sociodynamique de la culture - Abraham Moles said: „An essential characteristic of the human being is to live in ambience that it has created for itself”<sup>3</sup>.

Myths and the symbolic charge of the different elements the human being came in contact with represent our starting point. Our analysis will concentrate on researching the apparition of the symbol and its importance in different cultures and civilizations' ways of thinking.

Honey, as a symbol, is present both in the sacred books of the Occident or of the Orient, and the mysterious way in which this “golden” liquid develops remains a fascinating secret, a metaphor of the mysticism. The bee's frantic activity during the process of gathering

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<sup>3</sup> Abraham Moles, Sociodynamique de la culture, Ed. Științifică, București, 1974, p.75

the pollen is similar to the spiritual searches of the human being over its entire life, living on the hope of obtaining the sweetness of the honey and the untold truth's light of knowledge.

Above the "every day chaos", the purpose of life is a supra-diurnal one, recognized or not, but omnipresent. The modern human being lost the talent of communicating with the divine. Our beginnings and our future is always unknown, but without knowing where we come from and where we go we will continue to swing, rootless, in an uncertain present. In this case honey can be associated with the beginnings, with the Garden of Eden with the blessed lands. Honey remains a sort of vestige of the privileged times when Jacob's ladder was still connecting the Heaven and the Earth. As written in the *Dictionary of symbols*, "according to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, God's teachings are as honey because they tend to clean and preserve..."<sup>4</sup>, honey being considered a symbol of the „religious culture, mystical knowledge, spiritual goods and the revelation within initiation”<sup>5</sup>.

The thesis „The Honey and Honeycomb's Symbolism in the Religious and Secular Culture” explores in its 4 chapters the symbolic meanings and the artistic relevance of these organic materials.

The 1<sup>st</sup> chapter, The Symbol and Its Interpretation, consists of a short incursion in the concept of symbol and its capacity to facilitate the communication within the field of arts and of religion. The symbolic communication is never restricted to a single level, it incorporates adjacent meanings, deep substrates, open or hermetic, revealed by interpretation. In many occasions, Mircea Eliade, renowned personality of the history of religion, illustrated the way in which symbolism may be identified within the majority of the religious acts, insisting on its subtle presence within the profane existence. Giving the fact that we also receive symbols from a Christian perspective, it is mandatory to analyse this concept from its origins, which are Greek-Roman. Christianity developed and spread in the Greek-Roman antiquity, borrowing certain artistic and cultural elements specific for this area. As Gabriel Liiceanu says, antiquity has the answer to the ordinary meaning of the word symbol - *sýmbolon*<sup>6</sup>. Regarding its definition, the word symbol develops different meanings generating „the performance of a semantic dispersion on a large scale”<sup>7</sup>.

Art history's inevitable trajectory imposed a gradual distancing from the ancient mimetism, artistic symbolism getting a special importance with the dawns of the Western Christianity. The Christian religion was based, similar to other previous religions, polytheist

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<sup>4</sup> Jean Chevalier, Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, Vol. 2, Editura Artemis, București, 1995, p. 302

<sup>5</sup> *Idem*

<sup>6</sup> Gabriel Liiceanu, *Om și simbol*, Editura Humanitas, București, 2005, p.13

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

or monotheist, on the suggestive power of the sign and symbol, making the unseen authentic faith possible. In art symbol is present as a irrefutable way to transpose the „unseen” into images.

The artistic symbol may get hermetic forms, exclusive ones unlike religious symbol whose meaning is preserved within traditional limits. “The essential thing is that there has been a development of a large cultural matrix having the main function diversifying the space of expressivity and the language codes.

But in the same time it is obvious that under the circumstances of a symbolic syncretism, the spontaneity of decoding the symbolic meanings is no longer possible”<sup>8</sup>. Therefore we are driven towards the problematic of the symbol and its meaning’s interpretation.

From a philosophical point of view the concept *interpretation* has numerous meanings. If we start with the premises that each language implies interpretation, than the most restrained meaning of the concept is that of a permanent de-codifying of the language. According to Nietzsche, though, we can only talk about interpretation there where there is a hidden meaning and not clear expressions. The need of understanding the meanings determined the thinkers over the centuries to theorize the problematic of interpretation because each text is a very good speaker but only when it is integrally comprehensible. Such as texts, the artistic images frequently have secondary meanings, different from those distinguishable at a glance.

If during the period before modernism (and we will refer here to the critical thinking involving romantic wave as the 1<sup>st</sup> stage of the artistic modernism) the symbols used in art were having an universal character, being easy to interpret, later the artists began to develop what was called “a personal mythology”, a series of own symbols whose interpretation was open, but in the same time hermetic. The viewer was free to identify the work of art using its own experiences, without having though the certainty of his interpretation’s validity, except when the author was verbally or in written presenting his purpose. This incertitude of the interpretation created a major break between the artist’s and the public’s conscience and generated extreme artistic attitudes – the elitist modernism or the pop art – without finding real solutions in “mending” the ratio between artist – work of art – public.

If the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter has a guiding role, meant to clarify the perspective of the symbol and its interpretation, the 2<sup>nd</sup> one, *Honey and Honeycomb’s Symbolism within the Context of*

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 51

*Different Cultures*, has a specific character. From a symbolic point of view, the honey and the honeycomb are frequently associated with the spiritual dimension, being present in the ancient Greek-Roman or Mesopotamian myths and rituals.

By the untouchable character of its material, honey was often considered as a symbol of the eternal life, and also sacred food, ritual offering, miraculous remedy or a substance used against evil spirits. Honey corresponds to the absolute “sweetness” both on the level of tasting and on a spiritual level, designating wisdom. The colour of the honey is yellow, also the colour of the sun associated with the gold’s brightness. From a semiotic point of view, we can identify within the meaning of honey the idea followed by Lucian Blaga and other philosophers connected with the initial moment of the creature’s birth, coming right out of the Creator’s hand.

In the Greek mythology the bee is the symbol of the soul and of the rebirth, and honey is a nurture destined to Gods and semi-gods. Candles as products indirectly made by bees deepen the symbolic charge also clarifying the relation between heaven and earth where the bee is a mediator. Therefore candles are seen as light symbols being present in many rituals and being meant to synthesize the symbols of the fire, flame, air and smoke. The candle’s symbolism includes both material and spiritual. Through fire wax melts and the flame arising afterwards evokes Christ’s dual existence, where the human character unifies with the divine. This symbolic association reminds the spiritual characters made by El Greco which all seem to be flames vibrating in the faith’s fire. Within the prayer the vertical ascension of the candle’s flame depicts the ascension towards the sky of the believers’ words. The burning candle is associated with different meanings in the world’s cultures and religions, but inside Christianity it becomes a 1<sup>st</sup> hand symbol reminding Christ’s Divine Light and faith.

In the Assyrian-Babylonian culture honey is both an offering to the Gods and a liquid with purifying qualities used in certain rituals. The honeycomb is the symbol of a panacea, being considered an efficient medicine the “doctors” were giving the sick people without any fear based on the fact that Gods were also using it. Although the honeycomb’s symbolism isn’t enough explored in the Mesopotamian culture, it is obvious that this had a purifying role reminding the Gods’ purity. Honey had also the power of transforming a profane space into a sacred one.

In the Greek-Roman culture honey is associated with the process of purification with benefic effects on a medical level. There was also a custom of smearing the newborns’ tongues with honey. This is where we can identify the mystery of the honey considered a

heavenly substance, extremely effective in purifying, conservation and regeneration, being superior to water due to its mystical properties.

The shaman literature, which had a great influence on the myths and rituals of certain people of Africa, imposed the vision of the honeycomb's sacredness without charging it with the symbolic load of the Mesopotamian civilization. Certain populations, such as Massai, whose predilection towards war was more obvious, gave the bee and the honeycomb the pitiless symbols of the revenging Gods. Other populations have seen in the honeycomb the symbol of the relation between the unseen Gods and the earth. Honey played a major role in the Egyptians lives also, both on a religious and economic level. „As long as in the name of the pharaoh ruling over the Lower Egypt the sign of the bee could be found, this meant that there was a close relation between this creature and the royal cult; more over in Sais, also in the Delta's area, there was a “fortress of the bee”, where they worshiped a local form of Osiris. According to certain hypotheses, the deceased people's bodies were kept in honey and according to a passage from P. Salt, the bee, producing honey which was so important to Gods, was created, such as honey, from Ra's tears. According to another ancient tradition, the honey was also associated with the benefic waters of the Nile river...”<sup>9</sup>.

Chapter 3, *Stances of the honey and honeycomb within the field of the visual arts* explores the aesthetic and plastic characters of these Medias. Although some artistic techniques using wax (such as painting in wax and encaustic) see this organic material only from the point o view of a technical mean; nowadays art invests wax and honey with new expressive qualities. In the traditional art honey could function as a symbol, as an object within the frame of a certain iconic configuration. Honey, along with wax, can be identified also at a more profound level, it being present in the work of art's “gastronomy”, being one of the main ingredients in primers, emulsions or colours. In its artistic stage honey becomes the prime material. Modernism will be the one to shake the traditional system of the art, spreading its fateful inheritance over posterity and generating an entire stream of tendencies based on extreme, anti-aesthetic concepts *less is more*<sup>10</sup> or *anything goes*<sup>11</sup>. The 1<sup>st</sup> consequence of these was the total abolition of the “limits”. The aesthetic object is no longer the result of certain complex processes, *materia prima* becoming the aesthetic object transgressing, by thinking, the limits of the material. Conceptual art and installation give the possibility of new

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<sup>9</sup> Miron Ciho, *Civilizația Egiptului greco-roman. Plutarh despre Isis și Osiris*, Editura Universității din București, București, 2000, pp. 204-205.

<sup>10</sup> Trad. din engl. „Mai puțin înseamnă mai mult”.

<sup>11</sup> Trad. din engl. „Orice merge”.

interpretation of the environment and of its elements. The artistic message itself becomes a work of art, becomes a symbol, a meta-reality.

*Land art* or *arte povera* uses natural components in order to become a work of art. The same happens with certain installations, not to mention other performances where aliments or other elements of natural origins are part of the props. If we should integrate the use of a primary organic material in a certain visual-artistic category, the most suitable would probably be the conceptual art. The organic material is by its essence subject of a continuous morphological and chemical mutation involving a slow, barely distinguishable movement. This movement is a priori inferred by the artist who uses this media. He stakes on this movement's existence, experiments it, speculates it generating a symbiosis between the organic material's rhythm and the human being's thinking.

Moreover, some artists do not resume their work to the use of certain organic products (in our case wax and honey), they also involve the artistic potential of the bees into the artistic process. Examples of such artists are: Agnetha Dyck, Tomas Gabzdil Libertiny or Garnett Puetz. The geometrical shape of the honeycombs is also a source of inspiration being use in the installations made by the architect Nader Tehrani or the Chinese artist Li Hongbo. Jasper Johns is one of the few contemporary artists using the encaustic technique in order to potentate the pictorial effect by differentiating each touch.

In order to show how the honey is functioning in the contemporary art both as a mean of work and as a symbol, I proposed a short incursion in the work of two renowned artists belonging to the field of conceptual art – Joseph Beuys and Marina Abramovic. Although both artists activate by presenting performances and installations based on body art, they differ by their attitude towards the public and the world they are living in. They both glide into the dramatic area, but while Beuys tried to find the salvation of the entire society, Abramovic seems to be more preoccupied with her own salvation. They both come from traumatic media – the Nazi Germany and the communist Yugoslavia – but while one is practicing the penitence of a nation's guilt, the other tries to escape the soul's and body's victimization. What is common for both of them is the spiritual dimension. I considered important to talk about these two artists because of the way they integrated the concept of honey in their entire artistic conception or in certain works from their creation.

Having the artistic liberty established by postmodernism and the contemporary art, I associated the concept with an aesthetic object integrated to the installation in order to make a project in which honey is both *materia prima* and processed, purified and sublimated material. The installation in itself, due to the concept sustaining it, is simultaneously the catalyst and

the effect of an “alchemical” process by which the artistic Self crosses the initiation path of faith gaining the true Christian knowledge, the light of love so sweetly given by the Word of the Lord.

The last chapter, *The honey and the honeycomb within the field of the personal creation*, is aiming this approach. Art has completely changed since the last century and it is still too early to predict the final effects of this mutation. What it is obvious though is the fact that the preoccupation towards the spiritual side and religion is not common now only to the sacred art. Together with the conceptual art and the contemporary art’s tendency to sway towards philosophy more than towards the practical side of the art, the majority of the laic art creations have spiritual accents. All this because one of the main problems of nowadays, reflected also in arts, is the human being’s identity’s incertitude.

The installation I propose is made of a glass cube “dressed” in honeycombs. In front of it 7 balloons filled with honey are installed. The key to interpret this work is a semiotic one, each element being a symbol with universal meanings – the cube, the honey, the honeycomb, glass and the number 7. The symbolic meanings of the honey and of the honeycomb were presented in the previous chapters. In each culture its sense is positive, denominating a process similar to the alchemical budding of the lead, transformed into a noble metal such as gold. There is a sensitive analogy between honey and the human soul, between the bee and the human being. The spirit within us, the light we aspire to working in this narrow world seem to be synthesized in the tiny universe of the beehive.

Therefore, by its components meaning, the installation becomes a “construction” searching for a spiritual connection between heaven and earth, a tangible image of the human being’s aspiration to re-establish the initial connection with the divinity. The symbols exist and they act. Similar to the ancient temples the installation is a gate between visible and invisible, a conceptual reconstruction of Jacob’s ladder. Honey, as the symbol of faith and light given by it crossed the entire installation uncovering its mystical meanings – one has to believe in order to see the truth and to understand that the world is not only about what our eyes can see. Only under these circumstances rebirth is possible, the seen and the unseen start to make sense and the parts can harmoniously be integrated into a superior whole.

According to what Beuys said many times in his declarations, the purpose of the modern human being is self-destruction cause mainly by his entire identification with the material world. Ignoring the spiritual dimension transforms the human being in a rootless creature with a fragmented identity. Within this context honey becomes the last memory of

the spirit's "golden age" aiming to always reminding us the greater purpose man was created for.