Fig. 1
Anonymous, Tataouine area, Tunisia, c. 1920-50. Knotted rug with primary 'nameless motif'. Wool, 156 x 128 cm.

The 'Nameless Motif': On the Cross-Cultural Iconography of an Energetic Form

Paul Vandenbroeck[*]

As I strolled through a quiet Tuscan townlet on a late summer's afternoon in 1973, in the days before the rural hinterland was changed for ever by the tourist invasion, I was struck by the sight of an elderly lady sitting at a table by the entrance to her house. Displayed on the tabletop were various home-made items of lace and textile that she was offering for sale. As a student of the history of art, I was all too familiar with canonised Art, with capital A, but entirely ignorant about domestically crafted textiles. Yet I stopped in my tracks, captivated as I was by an ungraspable aesthetics that was quite alien to me, as it was light years away from the universe of male-dominated Renaissance art. There was one piece, featuring both abstract and stylised patterns, that I found particularly attractive – despite myself. When I enquired about the price, the woman asked: 'Are you married?'. I told her I was not. 'Then I cannot sell this piece to you', she said. I stood there dumbfound, unable to comprehend why this should be the case, and tried to assure her that I found the piece genuinely beautiful. Speaking in the local dialect, slowly and clearly for my benefit, she said she believed me, but that that was not the point. She simply could not sell to me, as the motifs displayed were intended exclusively for married couples. I resigned to her rejection of my offer to buy, though reluctantly, as a foreigner would. My true feelings were beyond words, but I quickly suppressed them. With northern 'bruttezza', I continued along my way. It was only decades later that I came to recognise the main motif in the piece of textile as an example of what I refer to in the present text as the 'nameless motif'.

* KMSKAntwerpen/IMMRC-KULeuven

Fig. 2
Anonymous, Rehamna tribal confederation, Morocco, c. 1920-50. Knotted rug with primary 'nameless motifs'. Wool, 280 x 150 cm. Coll. R. Hersberger, Muttenz (Basel).

In the compartmentalised approach that prevails in the history of art, no attempt whatsoever is made at cross-cultural research into distinct artistic traditions, since the latter are tacitly assumed to be entirely unrelated.

Similarly, no cross-gendered research is conducted into possible formal and content-related connections between artistic media that are typically male or female dominated. Cross-culturally speaking, weaving and textile art are situated on the feminine side of the artistic spectrum (except for strands that can be commodified and incorporated into the prevailing economic system, for then they tend to be appropriated by men, as the examples of tapestry art in the West and the design of knotted carpets in the East illustrate). Painting and sculpting, on the other hand, are cross-culturally attested as male art forms. In terms of aesthetics, metaphorisation, medium and function, these male and female artistic idioms diverge quite considerably, so that the question arises whether it makes any sense at all to devote an embracing study to such heterogeneous traditions.

Yet, that is precisely what the present article sets out to do. The starting point is a commonly observed motif, characterised by a *hard-to-define formal articulation, often featuring blots with bulges and indentations, extrusions as well as intrusions.* It is a motif that appears in countless works of art, be it centrally or peripherally, and yet it has remained nameless in the history of art. In some local traditions, it is known under a designation that does not refer to the pictorial essence, but rather evokes an associative network or cloud.

Our focus extends to both European and non-European artistic production. Starting from domestic weaving on the feminine side, we switch to other traditions, and to the male-dominated Western artistic modes. It should be noted from the outset that the approach taken is far from deliberate; it grew rather associatively, as connections 'transpired' in the course of two decades of research into Western figurative art and 'Eastern' textile art. This process gradually led to the insight that a single 'complex' can find expression in both an abstract and a figurative way, in different media, through different genders.

Why is it that, in Western art after the Renaissance, motifs such as cartouche, medallion, shell and the like remained predominant for so many centuries? They are encountered mainly in architectural sculpture, graphic art, weaving and the so-called decorative arts, right

up to the tradition of gold leather wall decoration and innumerable designs for wallpaper. Yet the very extensive (theoretical) discourse on early-modern art makes no mention of such shapes and patterns; no explanation whatsoever is forthcoming. For that matter, in cases where discourse *does* provide an 'explanation', it usually consists in a *post factum* rationalisation that is unable to penetrate to the subconscious and therefore unutterable origins[1].

Why is it that one of the most prominent motifs in traditional domestic weaving art – attested in, among other places, the Maghreb, the Mediterranean world and Iran – consists in an ovaloid, circular or irregular shape, quite often with protuberances, extending in sharp or nodular extrusions? This type of textile art, unlike the aforementioned modes of artistic expression, was never encapsulated in a verbal discourse or theory of art; it existed by the grace of an inter-subjective, inter-generational, highly 'charged' artistic practice. Again, though, no direct 'explanation' is forthcoming.

The first group of artistic genres was the work of men; the second that of women. Hence the two are never studied in conjunction. Moreover, as artistic 'disciplines', they are premised on often radically different affective, semantic and aesthetic principles. Consequently, any connections that may exist between them have remained largely hidden. It is worth noting, though, that 'connections' is not the same as 'influences'. Indeed, the urban artistic production centres in the West did *not* influence the anonymous female weavers in the rural Maghreb or vice versa. At least, not before a number of Modernist *architects* of the 1920s developed a fascination with the white Berber carpets from northern Morocco. And yet, if one serially studies works of art from these divergent disciplines and traditions, there is no escaping the possibility that some of these representations – or at least their psychic prototypes – are *related*. Such kinship did not come about through processes of influencing, but through similarities in terms of the underlying *affective patterns*. The latter notion should not be understood as an art historical concept. Yet, in order to understand how artistic movements, genres and serial production come about, we must take due account of such collective, unconscious and transcultural patterns.

1 This holds equally for the figurative iconography. In art history, the predominant perspective is voluntaristic and personalistic. In other words, the artist (or the patron) is deemed to decide what is portrayed. In certain cases this is unquestionably true, hence renderings of exceptional themes and compositions can indeed be the result of ad hoc decision-making. But even then there are subconscious processes that come into play; influences that the individuals in question are unaware of and through which they participate in the collective forces that drive culture. This is particularly true in relation to themes and motifs that were commonplace. See Paul VANDENBROECK, review of H.J. Raupp, Bauernsatiren, in *Simiolus* (Utrecht), 18, 1988, pp. 69-74. Reindert FALKENBURG'S critique of our Bosch study (see *Oud Holland*, 103, 1989, pp. 169-173) is based on such voluntaristic and personalistic premises: it builds on the perception of Bosch as a genius and a unique artist who must not be 'profaned' to the level of someone who is affected by collective and subconscious processes – as if such impulses were 'inferior'. It would moreover appear that this position puts forward a rather crude either/or dichotomy: an artist is either a genius or a hackworker. Yet, there is no denying that even a genius is inevitably nourished by the humus of the society and culture to which they belong. This by no means stands in the way of their unicity. Man is a social animal; solipsism is a phallocentric fallacy.

With a view to unravelling the meanings of the motif, we must moreover explore indirect and contextual clues. And the context is broader than each of the aforementioned artistic disciplines separately; it extends beyond the traditional boundaries of geographical and cultural entities. But let us begin with an analytical diversion in our *cross-gendered* and *cross-cultural* approach. The starting point of our journey of exploration lies in the southern Mediterranean.

The 'nameless motif' in domestic weaving art from the Maghreb and the Mediterranean world

The female-dominated art of domestic weaving in Northern Africa was traditionally characterised by two dominant styles: an ordered geometric style and an idiosyncratic free style (which were for that matter often combined). In both styles, form is of the utmost importance.

In the free style, the predominant form is that of an irregular blot, often (though not always) with protrusions. The contours of the irregular form are often repeated in different concentric lines. The centre of the form commonly 'houses' a smaller motif: a spot, dot or diamond, or an irregular, more or less almond-shaped figure, quite often red or black and sometimes divided into parts.

This motif is central to the decorative patterns of innumerable carpets. Sometimes it is duplicated or reiterated in often quite different versions forming a 'chain' or procession[2].

The innumerable examples may be reduced to three 'basic' variants:
- a regular or irregular form with concentric repetition;
- a regular or irregular form with extrusions and, as the case may be, intrusions;
- a regular or irregular form with two pairs of external and internal protrusions.

The protrusionless variant in weaving has been interpreted by some Western authors as a sexual symbol (of the vulva). In our view, however, this 'reading' is erroneous[3], in spite of the striking similarities with motifs that already appeared in prehistoric cave paintings and rock carvings and that *are* most likely to be interpreted in this way. From prehistoric times, a stylised vulvar shape symbolised the

2 Two important examples: Prosper Ricard, *Corpus du tapis marocain. 4. Tapis divers*, Paris, Geuthner, 1923, pl. XXXV & XLIII (both carpets are now lost, destroyed by moths; announcement by the conservator, July 1997); Alfred Saulniers, *Splendid isolation: tribal weavings of the Ait Bou Ichaouen nomads*, in *Hali*, n° 110, 2000, pp. 106-113, ill. 7; Alfred & Suzanne Saulniers, *Ait Bou Ichaouen: weavings of a nomadic Berber tribe*, s.l., Fenestra Book, 2003.

3 We wish to distance ourselves from the views of Bruno Barbatti, who refers repeatedly to our study *Azetta. Berbervrouwen en hun kunst*, Ghent-Amsterdam, Ludion, 2000, to substantiate his pansexual interpretation of various motifs in Berber weaving as vulvar symbols, including at the 2001 ICOC conference in Marrakech, on various Internet sites, and in his book *Berber carpets of Morocco: The symbols, origin and meaning*, Courbevoie, ACR, 2008. As we already argued in *Azetta*, the matrixial field does not coincide with the 'feminine', and certainly not with feminine sexuality. Apparently contemporary authors continue to be affected by the compulsion for pansexual identification, which is traceable to Antiquity, e.g. in the below-discussed 'translation' of the 'nameless motif' to the figure of the Medusa/Gorgo, and in the transposition of a highly complex and *non-linear* affective pattern into a narrative (myth of Perseus etc). A similar 'identification' occurs in Louis Dubreuil, *Irregular and ancient Berber motives, their link with other cultures*, in http://www.turkotek.com/salon

Mother Goddess, or the female procreative force. A 30,000-year-old example of such signs are the Aurignacian cave drawings at Abri Blanchard in Dordogne (France). However, assuming that the cross-cultural observation that painting is dominated by the male gender also applies in prehistoric art, these representations were most probably created by men. Other examples can be found at Neolithic sites such as Çatal Hüyük in southern Anatolia, in present-day Turkey, where some shrines were devoted to birthing. The paintings at these shrines are red, beige, orange, yellow, white and black – a similar palette as that in the Moroccan Haouz carpets in the 'spontaneous' or 'free' style. Striking patterns are the yellow-white circles surrounded by red and with a red centre. Under these circles runs a beige horizontal with a red outline. The two patterns are crossed by undulating white lines. These forms are in any case not to be seen as mere corporeal representations. They would appear rather to be a kind of ideogram of corporeal energy, comparable to the Hindu concept of *kundalini Shakti*, a kind of latent energy that forms of the human body. Arguably the clearest example is an Anatolian statuette of the snake goddess (ca. 6000-5500 BC)[4]. The waving parallel lines surround the midriff and the vertical axis of the body.

Fig. 3
Anonymous, Rehamna tribal confederation, Morocco, c. 1900 or older. Knotted rug with primary 'nameless motifs'. Formerly author's collection (stolen).

The variant with the extrusions is articulated in the 'controlled' iconography as a diamond, a hexagonal or an octagonal, in innumerable variations. This form is modulated according to similar principles: the outlines may be repeated concentrically, or they may contain a smaller form; there may be pointed extrusions and/or intrusions.

A third 'type' consists in a pattern with outward and inward-pointing 'hooks', a form that is cross-culturally attested as the 'birth symbol'[5].

So what exactly is the meaning of this motif? Certainly it is so ubiquitous and occupies such a central place in innumerable textile artefacts that it must have been highly significant.[6]

Similar shapes appear in prehistoric rock paintings in the Mediterranean and in the Sahara. Their meaning, though, remains elusive. Some archaeologists refer to them as *medusas*[7]. Invariably, the form is circular, with concentric bands of a varying width, arranged around a centre. Some have wiry extensions, others have feet-like features and even a 'head'. A number of paintings feature figures with medusas for

4 Marija Gimbutas, *The language of the goddess*, New York, Thames & Hudson, 2001, p. 127, fig. 203.

5 Max Allen, *The birth symbol in traditional women's art from Eurasia and the Western Pacific*, Toronto, Textile Museum, 1981. The value of this booklet cannot be overstated.

6 Examples in *From the Far West*, exhib. cat., Washington, Textile Museum, 1980, p. 164, n° 80 ('Oulad Bou Seb'a from the 'Oudaya-Museum in Rabat, inv. no. 1968-7-60); p. 158, n° 73 (ibid, Flint Coll.)

7 Alfred Muzzolini, *L'art rupestre préhistorique des massifs centraux sahariens,* (*Cambridge monographs in African archeology*, 16. BAR *International Series*, 318), s.l., 1986, p. 138.

Fig. 4
Anonymous, Tataouine area, Tunisia, c. 1950. Knotted rug with spiky 'nameless motif'. Wool, 330 x 170 cm. Formerly author's collection (stolen).

heads[8]. All of these expressions are hard to define. Their basic shape is circular, with extrusions; the predominant colours are red or black. Vague, deviant or even monstrous creatures are quite common in the prehistoric art of the Mediterranean and the Sahara. Sometimes they have recognisable animal or human-like features[9], other examples are not unlike hook-limbed octopi, arachnids or insects. Invariably, though, their appearance is somewhat uncanny, *unheimlich*.

However, there is also a geometrically composed variant of this basic form in prehistoric art. Examples that come to mind are the rock carving in Anakom (Aïr, Niger) dating from what is known in French as the *période équidienne* (2000-1000 AD): it features a figure with a compartmentalised, diamond-shaped lower body with inward and outward spikes[10]. In Tunisian embroidery, one encounters similar figures, with raised arms that are characteristic of the *jelwa* wedding ceremony up to the present day[11]. Hence there would appear to be a connection with motifs in textile art.

Textile art: 'naming' the nameless motif

In rural weaving art from the Maghreb (and, among other places, Iran[12]), the aforementioned motifs are nameless. However, similar shapes also appear in *urban* Moroccan weaving, where they are given various names, providing clues about the meaning or significance.

8 Jean-Loïc Le Quellec, *Symbolisme et art rupestre au Sahara*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1993, pp. 525-530; Muzzolini 1986, p. 140.
9 Lya Dams, *Les peintures rupestres du Levant espagnol,* Paris, Picard, s.d., p. 222.
10 Henri-J. Hugot, *Sahara. Art rupestre*, s.l., Les Éditions de l'Amateur, 1999, pl. 59.
11 *Noces tissées, noces brodées. Parures et costumes féminins de Tunisie*, exhibt. cat., Paris, Musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, 1995, p. 39, ill. 17.
12 George Bornet, *Gabbeh. The Georges D. Bornet collection*, 3 vols., s.l., 1986-1995.

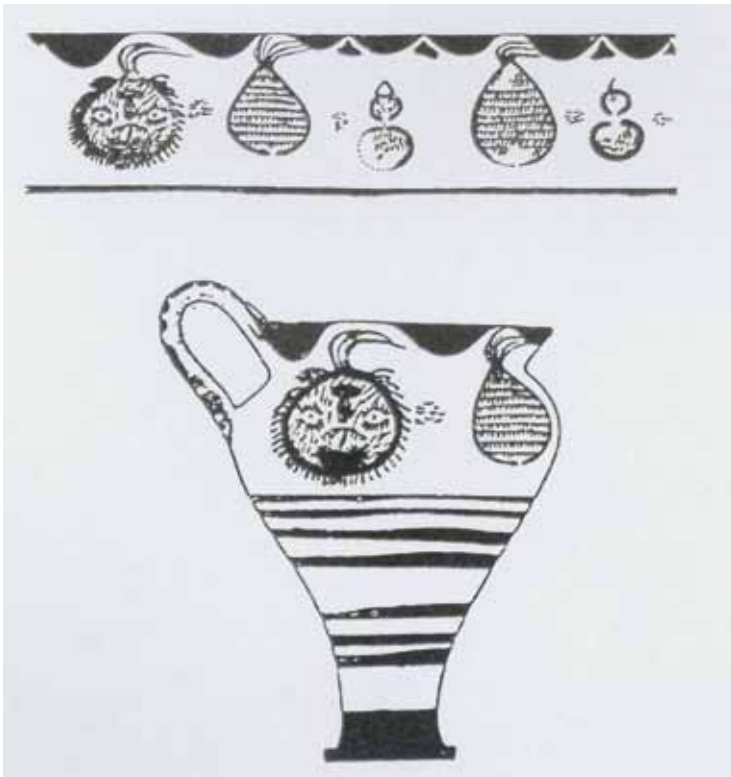

Fig. 5
Anonymous, Minoan culture, ca 1450 BC. 'Primitive' *Gorgon*. Knossos (Crete).

Fig. 6
Anonymous, China, c. 3000-2000 BC. *T'ao t'ieh* masks.

In carpet art from Rabat, it appears as a medallion known as 'large imprint at the centre of a prickly pastry' or as 'ball at the centre of a prickly pastry'.[13] Although these names may seem rather peculiar, they actually make a lot of sense. The centre consists of a cross in an octagonal or an eight-lobed flower. The centre is a dot within a rectangle; at right angles with the sides, four lines form a cross.[14] 'Imprint' and 'ball' appear in a multi-lobed 'pastry' with 'spikes'. All of these elements have a specific meaning.

The *imprint* (*hamza*) in a soft material represents an act of making, creating. It is an old metaphor for the formation of unborn life.

The motif of the *ball* (*kourra*) is reminiscent of a ball game (known as *kourra* in Arabic and as *takourt* in Berber) that used to be played in a region stretching from Libya to Morocco. The game was part of the rites of spring and it was also played in times of drought. In Southern Morocco, one team would consist of women, the other of men. More generally, though, in the vast region stretching from the Moroccan Riff to Kabylia, it was played by women and girls. The game is remi-

13 Ricard 1923, vol. 1, pl. XI, n° 27-28: Kourra, and vol. IV, p. 18, fig. 25: *kourra menezzela fi halwa mechouka* (sphere at the centre of a thorny pastry), and fig. 24: *hamza kebira fi halwa mechouka* (large imprint in thorny pastry). See also: Gérard Boëly, *From Anatolia to the Maghreb. Algerian & Moroccan aesthetics*, in *Hali*, n° 107, 1999, p. 97, ill. 2.

14 In weaving from Rabat, this became the *dar grouna* motif, the meaning of which is ambivalent. *Grouna* derives from the root *qa-ra-na,* 'to connect'. The noun *qarn* (pl. *qouroun*) means 'horn', 'protrusion',

Fig. 6
Anonymous, Peru, Nazca culture, c. 100 BC – c. 400 AD. Lady with nameless motif as uterine *gorgon*.

Fig. 7
Anonymous, Peru, Nazca culture, c. 100 BC – c. 400 AD. Lady with nameless motif as uterine *gorgon*.

but also 'generation'. The motif consists in an octogonal containing a diamond. Both shapes are hooked. The diamond is divided into four (four smaller diamonds with a dot, or four equal-sized triangles) or it contains four smaller elements. In the 'house' variant (*dar grouna*), a 'stem' extends from the octogonal, flanked by two smaller extensions ending in a diamond [Ricard 1923, pl. IV, n° 10]. In the literal sense, *dar grouna* means 'house with extensions/branches'; figuratively, it denotes a 'house' from which came forth subsequent generations. The *dar* is also a 'head'. At its centre, there is a diamond with four recurring hooks: the birth symbol, vertically and horizontally integrated. These hooks are *sernina*, jewellery that is attached to the plaits at young girls' temples. *Dar grouna* is a stylised representation of the 'spontaneous' sphere-with-hooks/extrusions motif. On the one hand, it is a head with extrusions (plaits with jewellery), horns, while on the other it evokes certain uterine aspects.

15 Léonce Joleaud, *Gravures rupestres et rites de l'eau en Afrique du Nord,* in *Journal de la Société des Africanistes*, 2, 1933, pp. 241-243.

16 Mourad Yelles-Chaouche, *Le hawfi. Poésie féminine et tradition orale au Maghreb*, Algiers, Office des Publications Universitaires, 1990.

17 Paul Vandenbroeck, *Capturing nameless energies, experiencing matrixial paradoxes. Syncretist sacred sites on the Canary Islands*, in *Loci sacri. Understanding sacred sites*, (*KADOC studies on religion, culture and society*, 9), Leuven, Leuven University Press, 2012.

niscent of an ancient rite that was already described by Herodotus in the 5th century BC: he recounts how two teams of young women would engage annually in a potentially lethal battle with sticks and stones in honour of a goddess equated with Athena. This Athena-like goddess was a 'daughter of the water' and she entered into matrimony with the god Amon. Still according to Herodotus (IV, 189), the women would be dressed in a garment of red goatskin, known as the *aegis*[15], with fringes, or *hawfi*[16]. The significance of ball, fringes and goatskin will become apparent in due course.

The pastry motif was very popular in North African weaving. It was also referred to as *maqrouth* and consisted in a compartmentalised diamond, often bordered by protrusions or hooks. The literal meaning of *maqrouth* is 'nibble' and it is also the name of a diamond-shaped honey-filled pastry with a jagged edge. The same motif, i.e. the jagged diamond, is known in Anatolian weaving as *baklava*, which likewise is the name of a sweet pastry with a serrated edge. Three aspects are important here: sweetness, baking, and jagged edge.

Sweetness (*halwa*) refers to the beehive, the belly, the creative force. Baking is associated with pregnancy, as the womb was likened to an oven. The jaggedness is an ancient motif associated with the womb, that has been retained in the Mary cult in sites such as Virgen de la Peña (= 'Virgin of the jagged rock') or Montserrat (= 'serrated mountain')[17].

In Anatolia, the motif is known as *körebenin dogru yolu*, 'woven in the manner of how a blind woman should weave'.[18] Bron nodig In other words, the manner in which a woman would give shape to 'something' *beyond the visual*, *from the inside out*, to create that what is not visible (for the weaver is 'blind'). This ties in with the notion that the diamond is an 'articulation' of the *matrix* (a subsymbolic image of 'feminine' essence) and that its various forms correspond with different expressions or perceptions of the uterine/matrixial force.

The jagged diamond is a universal motif in weaving; it is arguably the most basic element, giving rise to a plethora of more complex motifs[19].

'In her abdomen … throbbed the little hedgehog of her womb'[20]. The prickly sphere

The sphere with protrusions also appears as a real object in European popular culture. In many rural churches, spiky spheres used to serve as ex-votos. They symbolised the womb and would be offered in gratitude by those who had been cured of an ailment or condition connected with the uterus, pregnancy or childbirth[21]. Ex-votos represented the ailing organ or body part and they would be offered to the saint invoked for a cure. The 'sphere' could also be egg-shaped or elongated. Sometimes it had a stem-like extremity. The spikes on the outer shell could be long or short, and quite often such objects would be painted red. They not only served as votive offerings, but would also be placed in tombs. However, the symbol of the 'hedgehog' went back thousands of years. There are examples of stylised earthenware hedgehogs, quite often with a human face, dating from the 6th or the 5th millennium BC and originating in Eastern European Neolithic cultures such as Gumelnitsa, Karanovo, Vinca and Cucuteni. Invariably, the 'hedgehog' is represented as a sphere, a flattened sphere or a snout with a thorny garland. The protrusions may be spiky or not. The hedgehog – like the toad – is an ancient, prehistoric even, emanation of the Great Goddess. Much later, representations of the hedgehog came to be devoted to the goddess Artemis, Greek 'descendant' of the 'Mistress of the Animals' (*potnia theron*). The origin of the hedgehog symbolism may even predate the Neolithic. Among the cave paintings at Font-de-Gaume and La Pileta (near Gibraltar), there are examples of uterus-like spiked 'creatures'[22]. Although in

18 James Mellaart, Belkis Balpinar & Udo Hirsch, *The goddess of Anatolia*, vol. 4, Milano, 1990, p. 54.

19 *Hali*, n° 60, 1990, p. 154: Alcaraz (N.Y., Sotheby's, 24.09.91, 147 x 76 cm). Spectacular variants of the same ideogram are the 'sunburst medallion' on Chelaberd and Kazak rugs, as well as related patterns on Anatolian *yastik* (*Hali*, n° 75, 1994, p. 57). An extremely formalised version of the motif appears prominently in Central Asian weaving. Its iconography was organised around an abstract motif that was referred to as *göl* ('pond, lake') or *gül* ('rose'). It consists in a square, an octogonal or a more complicated shape with abstract patterns (V. Moschkova, *Die Teppiche der Völker Mittelasiens*, Hamburg, 1974).

20 Quote from the South African story 'Kikuyu' by Etienne van Heerden (Amsterdam, Meulenhoff, 1998).

21 Karl Weinhold, *Votiv-Gebärmütter,* in *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde,* 10, 1900; Wilhelm Hein, *Die Opfer-Bärmutter als Stachelkugel,* in *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde,* 10, 1900, pp. 420-426; Rudolf Kriss, *Das Gebärmuttervotiv: Ein Beitrag zur Volkskunde nebst einer Einleitung über Arten und Bedeutung der deutschen Opfergebräuche der Gegenwart,* Augsburg, Filser, 1929; Erwin Richter, *Einwirkung medico-astrologischen Volksdenkens auf Entstehung und Formung des Bärmutterkrötenopfers der Männer im geistlichen Heilbrauch,* in *Volksmedizin: Probleme und Forschungsgeschichte,* e.d. Elfriede Grabner, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1967, pp. 372-398 (toad as a masculine ex-voto for stomach cramps, by analogy with female uterine votive offerings).

22 Gimbutas 2001, pp. 256-258.

the latter case there is no definitive proof of a link with the uterine hedgehog, the similarity is striking. If connected, the tradition of the motif stretches back to at least 10 000 BC. Be that as it may, the sub-symbolic association certainly dates back to prehistory: some prehistoric tombs contain sea urchins (echinids) as offerings[23]. They served the same purpose as the ex-votos in the shape of spiky spheres in Central European churches, i.e. they were symbols of the uterus. They were placed in tombs as an incantation for rebirth. Fossil sea urchins were referred to in Central European cultures as 'soul stones'. Apparently, there is a strong cross-cultural association between the image of a spiky sphere and the notion of the soul. The Australian aborigines saw the former as an embodiment of their ancestors. So the sphere with protrusions not only evokes the uterus, but may also represent the soul or ancestry. In this sense, these notions belonged to the same 'register'.

Let us return now to the topic of Berber textiles, where the image of medallions with hooks or spikes – stylised representations of the 'crude', amorphous sphere – is also referred to as '*sea spider*' (*rotala*), '*mother crab*' (*hanna qoris*) and 'ball' (*kourra*).[24] In Kabylian weaving, one variant of the birth symbol is known as *tiferagast*, the '*crab*'.[25] The porcupine, it transpires, was not the only creature to be perceived as strangely analogous to the uterus; so too were the spider, crab and octopus. In Kabylia, snakes and octopi are very popular motifs in interior wall paintings by women.[26] The snake stands for 'subterranean' fertility, while the octopus (*aqunidh*) symbolises the female reproductive organs.[27] These associations go back a long way in time. There are well-known examples of Byzantine amulets featuring octopi and porcupine-like forms as uterine symbols[28], but the origins of the motif lie even further: the octopus type already appears on Mycenaean painted vases from the 16th to the 12th centuries BC.[29] These octopi were typically depicted unrealistically. Above or under the two enormous eyes, one frequently encounters a sphere with a sometimes multiple border, as in the aforementioned North African carpets. All around, tentacles stretch out in different directions. Likewise, the octopi that appear on Cycladian earthenware are not true to nature. The essential features are the eyes, the gaze, the tentacles, the 'fissure' through the centre of the creature. On Minoic-Cretan earthenware, one finds yet other variations on the basic motif, e.g. an 'eye' with various concentric bands and a thorny garland.[30]

23 Otto Abel, *Vorzeitliche Seeigel in Mythus, Brauchtum und Volksglauben,* in *Nachrichten von der Gesellschaft der Wissenschaft zu Göttingen, Fachgruppe Religionswissenschaft,* I, Göttingen, 1939, p. 67.

24 Ricard 1923, p. 31, fig. 66; p. 21, fig. 31.

25 Jean Servier, *Tradition et civilisation berbères. Les portes de l'année*, Monaco, Éditions du Rocher, 1985, pl. pp. 334 & 335.

26 Mohand Abouda, *Axxam*, [Paris?], 1985.

27 Servier 1985, p. 73. On stone or bone neolithic amulets (?) modelled after a (stilised) octopus, see the rather fanciful, but well-illustrated study by Louis Siret, *Les Cassitérides et l'empire colonial des Phéniciens,* in *L'anthropologie*, 20, 1909, pp. 283 ff. See also: Jacques Schnier, *Morphology of a symbol: the octopus*, in *American imago*, 13, 1956, pp. 3-31.

28 A.A. Barb, *Diva Matrix: A faked gnostic intaglio in the possession of P.P. Rubens and the iconology of a symbol*, in *Journal of the Courtauld and Warburg Institute*, 16, 1953, pp. 193-238, n° 55.

29 *The Mycenean World. Five centuries of early Greek culture, 1600-1100 BC,* Athens, 1988, n° 102, 122: Arne Furumark, *Mycenean pottery. I. Analysis and classification, (Acta Instituti Atheniensis Regni Sueciae*, Series in 4°, XX, I), Stockholm, 1972, pl. 21.

30 Vase from Zakro: Stylianos Alexiou et al., *La Crète antique*, Paris, Hachette, 1967, ill. p. 185; *The prehistoric Cyclades. Contributions to a workshop on Cycladic chronology*, ed. J. Macgillivray & R. Barber, Edinburgh, University/ Dept. Of Classical Archeology, 1984, pp. 213 & 168.

Sometimes in ancient Greek art, the octopus becomes a giant web with birds, hedgehogs, goats, sea urchins, crabs and scorpions. The body of the octopus is *crater-like*, a huge vase holding the water of life. Moreover, most of the aforementioned creatures serve as uterine symbols. Indeed, symbolic duplication or multiplication is itself an attested classical stylistic device.

Ancient amulets provide an abundance of iconographic evidence to support the above interpretation. Contemporary scholars tend to ignore such archaeological artefacts on account of their often abstruse, 'bizarre' aspects. Yet they are very important sources of information that offer insight into the ancient perception of the role of magic in daily life and into an incredibly complex and – to modern eyes – quite chaotic and 'sinister' worldview[31]. As we have seen, the 'uterine' forms in weaving are multifarious and variable: they would appear to have the ability to expand or to shrink, to open up or to close, to ascend or to descend. In authentic weaving, they are rarely static. This ties in with the universal popular perception of the uterus as a more or less independent entity inside the body, with the uncanny ability to move at will, driven by unfathomable impulses and oblivious to the other organs.[32] Byzantine amulets commonly invoke the uterus (*husteona*), 'the dark one' that 'coils and hisses like a snake' and 'roars like a lion'. Ancient amulet gems and incantations likewise beseech the *metra* to 'return to its place'. This is suggestive of a belief in the independence and obstinacy of the uterus, an entity that was perceived to roam like a wild animal, causing pain and suffocation (*globus hystericus*)[33], as in a hysteria-induced panic. The uterus was said to be able to 'bite' and to 'stab', right up to the throat.[34] It was furthermore associated with a 'coiling' action, which explains why coiled shells appear as uterine symbols in cultures around the world.

The ancient pictorial representations discussed here are vase paintings, gems, seals, sculptures and the like. Such artefacts were typically produced by men. This Mediterranean 'uterine' iconography was incorporated into the prevailing laws of figuration in male artistic production and religious thought. That is not to say, though, that its content was created by men. In fact, they may have designed an iconography according to their own principles, but using building blocks provided by female traditions. Indeed, the *content* of these artistic products in Antiquity had its origin on the female side of society. The *feminine* modes of expression for the underlying ideas included dance and textile art.

Fig. 9
Anonymous, Feraghan, Iran, 19th century. Knotted rug with 'nameless motif' and smiling 'spiky' ladies. Wool, 250 x 110 cm.

31 A pioneer in this research field: Campbell Bonner, *Studies in magical amulets, chiefly Graeco-Egyptian, (University of Michigan Studies. Humanistic Series, 49)*, Ann Arbor, 1950.

32 On the 'own life' of the uterus, see Giulio Bonfante, *Sull' animismo delle parti del corpo* in *indoeuropeo,* in *Ricerche linguistiche,* 4, 1958, pp. 19-28; F. Pradel, *Zur Vorstellung von der Hystera,* in *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 12, 1909, p. 151.

33 See Barb 1953, passim, and note 23; Barb 1953, p. 195. Many of these amulets were worn by women as a means of protection against the dangers of pregnancy. They were commonly made of red haematite, also known as 'bloodstone', which was believed to provide protection against haemorrhaging. The images on such amulets ioften relate to the reproductive organs. One commonly encounters various symbols or signs representing the uterus, which in several examples is referred to as the 'divine uterus'.

34 Kriss 1929, p. 43.

35 *Hali*, n° 103, 1999, p. 37.

Fig. 10
Anonymous, Van, Armenia, 19th century. Kilim with female figuur with three nameless motifs. Wool, 164 x 110 cm.

Sometimes, in weaving art, the an-iconic nameless motif becomes a human face; this personalization may be due to the fact that these carpets had been designed by men, but maybe the female weavers have re-directed their abstract motif towards figuration. Here, the 'spiky sphere' becomes a face, as in a few Iranian carpets. A 19th-century carpet from Feraghan has a central composition of a rose fringed by a network of twigs, which is in turn encompassed by a black circle with extensions. On the interior side, these are hook-shaped; on the exterior they are triangular. On both sides, there is a female head, hairs pierced by the characteristic extensions and a forked 'tongue' protruding from the mouth, like the dividing hooks in the 'birth symbol'. The heads and central shape are similarly fringed by spiky forms in a symbolic duplication.[35] In other textiles (e.g. Sarab, North-Western Iran) the 'hooked sphere' is not unlike a multi-legged insect with an eerie face.[36]

A key mythical figure: the Medusa or Gorgo

However, in ancient Mediterranean earthenware art, we already find analogous transitions from forms such a the prehistoric 'medusa' and the 'sphere with protrusions' to a face. *In Greek ceramics, this face would gradually develop into the Gorgo or Medusa type.* Although this mythical figure is associated primarily with Greek art from the 6th and 5th centuries BC onwards, it actually appears in innumerable variants in an area stretching from Spain to Scythia.[37] The myth surrounding this figure went as follows.

In a faraway land, there lived three hideous sisters. Two of these Gorgons, as they were called, were immortal. The third, whose name was Medusa, had a horrible visage that turned those who cast eyes on it to stone. The halfgod Perseus, however, held up a reflective[38] shield that he had received from Athena, so that Medusa saw her own reflection and was petrified, after which he[39] was able to kill her. He cut off her head and subsequently donated it to Athena as an ultimate weapon against all enemies.

In Greek art, Medusa is represented as an independent figure, detached from the myth. This is indicative of her significance in Mediterranean culture. Medusa appears as a winged female or occasionally

36 *Hali*, n° 78, 1994-95, p. 106.
37 Nelson Glueck, *Deities and dolphins. The story of the Nabataeans*, New York, Farrar, 1965, passim.
38 Konrad Ziegler, *Das Spiegelmotiv im Gorgo-Mythus*, in *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 24, 1925.
39 J. Croon, *The mask of the underworld demon: some remarks on the Perseus-Gorgon story*, in *Journal of Hellenic studies*, 75, 1955, pp. 9-16.

as a bird with a grotesquely grinning human head. Her distinctive features include a pair of bulging eyes, an open mouth with hideous teeth and an extruded tongue, and vipers for hair. Athena, for her part, is often represented holding her shield, the *aegis*, featuring the Gorgon head[40]. So what is the meaning of all this and where lies the connection with Berber weaving?

The prehistory of the *Gorgo* is quite revealing about her being. For example, her image appears on earthenware from around 1500 BC. On a rhyton from the Cyclades, a sea Gorgon already takes the form of a concentric eye with a spiked rim[41]. And on a vase from the Phylakopi III culture on Melos, she appears as a huge head with staring eyes and a broad teeth-baring grin. Her body is like a swirl with claw feet and a triangular wing. In other instances, she has bee or insect wings, and sometimes an equally insect-like head with protrusions[42]. Even more telling is a painting on a late-Minoic vase from Knossos. Here, the *Gorgo* appears as a spotted sphere with spiky extensions, similarly staring gaze, a crude mouth and a protrusion atop. In pre-classical art, she is depicted as a spiky or hairy sphere. In ceramics, this *gorgo* is sometimes flanked by a droplet-shaped form with 'hair' and a symbol resembling a figure eight. These ancient examples of the *Gorgo* are akin to a variety of articulations found in Berber textiles.

The fact that the '*Gorgo* complex' was already in evidence in female textile art during Antiquity is confirmed in the tragedy of *Ion* by Euripides (480-406), where reference is made to a piece of textile with a central image of a Gorgon with snakes for hair, as in Athena's *aegis*. When the heroin Creusa casts eyes on the image, she exclaims: 'Oh ancient virgin, oh labour of my loom …'

The following characteristics of the Gorgon motif are of particular interest to us:[43]

1. originally an 'amorphous' ball with hairy extensions;
2. regularly placed, sometimes erect, curly fringes resembling volutes or hooks, often complemented with a prickly or spiky beard;
3. two or more, sometimes intertwined, serpents referring to her chthonic (healing and fertilising) nature;
4. extruded tongue;
5. staring / evil eye / lethal gaze;
6. toothed mouth, wide open or grinning; ingurgitation (*g-r-g*).

Fig. 11
Anonymous, Sidi Bou Zid,Tunisia, ca 1950. Kilim with nameless motif with a face. Wool, 240 x 180 cm.

40 E.g. *Athena promachos*, Roman copy after a Greek original from c. 460 BC, Madrid, Museo del Prado, n° E-24; Athena on a *kulix* from Vulci, c. 500-470 BC, Vatican Museum, Museo Etrusco, n° 39565.

41 *The prehistoric Cyclades. Contributions to a workshop on Cycledic chronology*, ed. J. A. Macgillivray & R. Barber, Edinburgh, University/Department of Classical Archaeology, 1984, p. 168, ill. C.

42 Gimbutas 2001, pp. 207-8, fig. 328.

43 A.D. Napier, *Masks, transformation and paradox*, Berkeley/London, University of California Press, (1986), pp. 93-96, 103, 110, 116.

In all likelihood, the Gorgon was originally *not* perceived as a human-like figure. Its origins probably lie in a frightening, rather more *amorphous phantasm* that was only subsequently identified with a human figure that fitted into an anthropomorphous, 'male-inspired' symbolic mental framework.

The *Gorgo* was originally a phantasmagorical image associated with the dark, frightening aspects of the female reproductive power, sexuality or uterine nature.[44] She was a perpetually changing, shifting or transgressing presence; a 'dark' and nightmarish apparition *without form or substance*. In the course of time she came to be 'codified' as a hideous woman with serpents for hair (= the protrusions), bulging eyes and extruded tongue. Her lethal gaze was an incarnation of the **evil eye**.

The Evil Eye and the phallic gaze

This piercing, penetrating, threatening gaze is the 'evil eye'[45], a notion that was very prominent in North African culture (and, for that matter, in all other Mediterranean civilisations[46]).

The notion of the evil eye is hard to describe, and it has given rise to rather elaborate and superfluous theories in the literature.[47] The essence consists in the conviction that the human gaze can be 'malevolent', negatively charged, destructive. Individuals with the evil eye were believed

to be brimming with malice that could be discharged via the gaze, causing illness, insanity, poverty, infertility and even death. The evil eye could strike at random, unintentionally and unwittingly. Hence, it was assumed that feelings of envy and malice could be harboured at a *subconscious* level.[48]

From a psychoanalytical perspective, attention has already been drawn to the mechanism of projection as an explanation for the belief in the evil eye. According to this view, primeval man lacked any sense of self-criticism. The own negative impulses were unconsciously rejected and projected onto an imagined or real Other.[49] Hence, as long as one bears suppressed negative feelings, that Other will exude an element of threat, which can only be warded off through magic. This perception gives rise to a vigilant 'panic-room' mentality, a preoccupation with protecting oneself against perceived exterior threats,

44 Beatrice MARBEAU-CLEIRENS, *Les mères imaginées. Horreur et vénération, (Confluents psychanalytiques)*, Paris, 1988, pp. 121-123; Denise PAULME, *La mère dévorante,* Paris, 1976.

45 The older literature: Frederick ELWORTHY, *The evil eye*, London, 1895 (reprint: Secaucus NJ, Citadel Press, 1982); R. SALILLAS, *La fascinación en España*, Madrid, 1905; Siegfried SELIGMANN, *Der böse Blick und Verwandtes*, 2 vols., Berlin, 1910; ID., *Die Zauberkraft des Auges und das Berufen,* Hamburg, 1922; ID., *Die magischen Heil- und Schutzmittel gegen den bösen Blick,* Stuttgart, 1927; C. MALONEY, *The evil eye,* New York, Columbia U.P., 1976; Thomas HAUSCHILD, *Der böse Blick. Ideengeschichtliche und sozial-psychologische Untersuchungen, (Beiträge zur Ethnomedizin, 7)*, Hamburg, 1979; *The evil eye. A folklore casebook*, ed. Alan DUNDES, New York, 1986; Alan DUNDES, *Wet and dry, the evil eye*, in ID., *Interpreting culture*, London-Bloomington, 1980, pp. 93-133; Will VAN DER VEN, *De geloofsvoorstelling van het boze oog,* Nijmegen, KUN, 1983; *The evil eye: a casebook,* ed. Alan DUNDES, London, 1992.

46 On the evil eye in 'higher' Italian art, see S. CALLISEN, *The evil eye in Italian art,* in *Art Bulletin,* 19, 1937, pp. 450-462. One of the first scholars to conduct a systematic study of popular imagery was Giuseppe BELLUCCI, in his *Amuleti italiani contemporanei*, Perugia, 1898; ID., *Gli amuleti*, Perugia, 1908; *Collection d'amulettes italiennes envoyée à l'Exposition universelle de Paris,* Perugia 1889. See also Thomas HAUSCHILD, *Abwehrmagie und Geschlechtssymbolik im mittelmeerischen Volksglauben,* in *Baessler-Archiv,* 28, 1980, pp. 73-104, and in *Curare*, 7, 1984, pp. 205-222; ID., *Der böse Blick. Ideengeschichtliche und sozialpsychologische Untersuchungen,* Berlin, 1982.

47 GIMBUTAS 2001, p. 208; NAPIER 1986, pp. 92-93.

48 Anthony GALT, *The evil eye as synthetic image and its meanings on the Island of Pantelleria,* in *American Ethnologist,* 9, 1982, pp. 164-181.

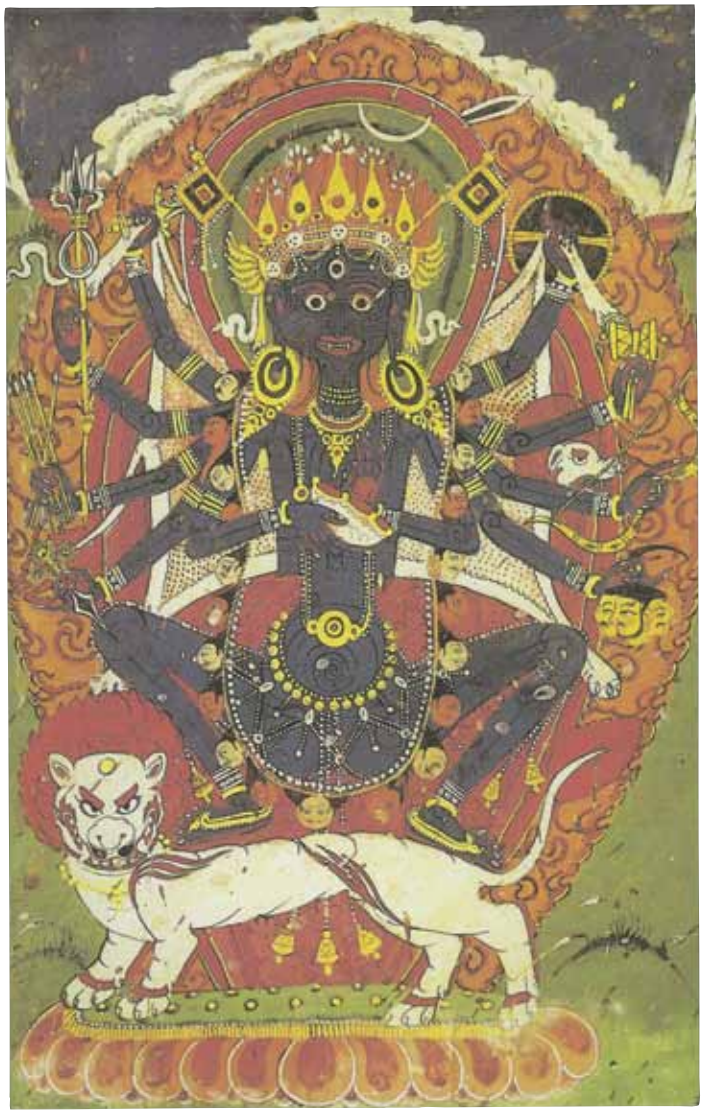

Fig. 12
Anonymous, Nepal, 17th century. The goddess Kali as embodiment of the world's energies. Gouache on paper.

Fig. 13
Anonymous, Etruscan, 6th century BC. Gorgons. Clay tablette from Cerveteri.

whereby the suspicion and distrust is bestowed upon the Other. This attitude induces an obsession with self-defence. A final element at the basis of the belief in the evil eye is the realisation that the gaze of Others can unintentionally cause unease or even anxiety.

Possible protective measures included: covering up the gaze, e.g. with a veil; distracting it, e.g. through bold colour schemes, shapes or objects; warding it off, deflecting it with specific motifs, signs, gestures or otherwise.

49 M. Caroll, *On the psychological origins of the evil eye: a Kleinian view,* in *Journal of psychoanalytic anthropology*, 7, 1984, pp. 171-187.

The evil eye was already a collective obsession in the Antique societies of North Africa, as evidenced by the many mosaics[50] from the Berbero-Punico-Roman culture from Libya to Morocco[51]. Many of the motifs and even entire scenes have a latent apotropaic quality[52]. The ancient evil-repelling mosaics belong to a Mediterranean tradition, but they do not tie in entirely with the Berber culture. They differ in terms of what is deemed expressible. Often the apotropaic signs are made unrecognisable through a naturalist rendering: abstract spikes and thorns may, for example, become concrete acanthus or ivy leaves.[53] This way, the approaching possessor of the evil eye may be outwitted: the new, realistic 'translation' of apotropaic symbols makes them unrecognisable, so that the evil eye is warded off should its gaze unwittingly cross the disguised protective sign.

But why were the *Medusa* and other types of her kind considered to ward off evil? Some 'primitive' *Gorgos*, like the Celtic *sheela-na-gigs* or large medieval grotesque sculptures, are represented with open legs[54], a posture that hints at an essential aspect, as the *Gorgo*'s grin is a duplication of her 'dangerous' sexual organ.[55] The *Gorgo* is characterised by a multiple primitive reversal of cause and consequence. According to the Baubo myth and similar myths originating in other cultures, the exposure of the *vulva* wards off evil and makes kindness reappear. All of these aspects coincide in the *Gorgo*: her lethal gaze is the evil eye, her mouth is the fierce *vagina dentata*. (These figurative *Gorgos* were, after all, made by men, whose phantasms were grafted on an ideogram designed by women, as will become apparent in due course.) This image, which we know from European and other myths, was sometimes rendered quite literally on Roman mosaics from North Africa.[56] They also induced a sense of fascination (literally a 'bond') that 'enticed' the gaze. (Hence sexual organs – external signs of human reproduction – served as a *fascinum* against the forces of evil: even the most evil eye *had* to look and consequently could be distracted from a potential victim[57].) This would make the viewer – and hence the glaring evil eye – laugh spontaneously, so that the spell was broken. This effect is at the centre of the Mediterranean myth of Baubo[58], for which there are parallels in the most diverse of cultures. The goddess of the harvest, Demeter, inconsolable after her daughter Persephone's abduction to the underworld, was made to smile again by the jesting old lady Baubo, who exposed herself during a grotesque dance, thereby indirectly restoring fertility and earthly hap-

50 On ancient mosaics in Tunisia, see Taher GHALIA, *Hergla et les mosaïques des basiliques chrétiennes de Tunisie*, Tunis, Institut National du Patrimoine, 1998, with further bibliography. On non-Christian mosaics: Margaret ALEXANDER, *Corpus des mosaïques de Tunisie. I. Région de Ghar el Melh,* Tunis, 1976; Cathérine BALMELLE et al., *Recherches franco-tunisiennes sur la mosaïque de l'Afrique antique, I. Xenia,* Roma, 1990; François BARATTE, *Les mosaïques trouvées sous la Basilique I (Collection de l'Ecole française de Rome, XVII, I),* Roma, 1974; Cécile DULIÈRE, *Utique: les mosaïques in situ en dehors des insulae I-II-III, (Corpus des mosaïques de Tunisie, I, 2),* Tunis, 1974; Paul GAUCKLER, *Afrique proconsulaire, (Inventaire des mosaïques, 2),* Paris, 1910; Suzanne GOZLAN et al., *La Maison du Triomphe de Neptune à Acholla. I. Les mosaïques,* Roma, 1992; Klaus SCHMELZEISEN, *Römische Mosaiken aus Africa Proconsularis. Studien zu Ornamenten, Datierungen und Werkstätten,* Frankfurt a.M/ Bern, 1992.

51 W. HILDBURGH, *Apotropaism in Greek vase-paintings,* in *Folklore,* 57, 1946, pp. 154-178 & 58, 1947, pp. 208-225, on the following motifs: eyes, mammals (lion, stag, goat, ram, boar), birds, composite monsters, as well as hunt-related motifs (hare hunt, fox hunt) and battle; Peter ESCHWEILER, *Bildzauber im alten Ägypten. Die Verwendung von Bildern und Gegenständen in magischen Handlungen nach den Texten des Mittleren und Neuen Reiches, (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, 137),* Göttingen, 1995.

52 Even circus scenes, the factions of circus artists and the four seasons belong to this category. Louis POINSSOT, *Deux mosaïques de Tunisie à sujets prophylactiques*, in *Monuments et mémoires publiés par l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres. Fondation Eugène Piot* (Paris), 34, 1934, pp. 145-151.

53 Suzanne GERMAIN, *Les mosaïques de Timgad, (Études d'antiquités africaines),* Paris, CNRS, 1973, figs. 39, 40, 44, 56, 57, 139.

piness. However, Baubo was ugly, and her name, which appears in many cultures and variants, also denotes a spectre that can assume a variety of forms. On Sardinia, the Babau was a spirit that rose from the depths of the earth to possess people; she was associated with a spider and with the souls of the deceased.[59] There is a parallel to be drawn here with the fundamentally dual character of the *Gorgo*[60], the personification of the *metra* with her unfathomable forces.

So why did the 'dangerous' exteriorisation of the female genitals induce laughter? *What was the nature of the association between 'nightmarish amorphous being', 'dangerous gaze / evil eye', 'biting / devouring'* and *'uterus'?* Why was the *vulva* considered in archaic society to have an apotropaic quality that could neutralise the evil eye?

There would appear to be two possible explanations: because of her participation in an arcane generative force and, even though this may seem sexist and slightly odd to modern ears, on account of her 'cheering' nature. In contemporary Western society, sexuality has degenerated into a pastime, a compulsive source of pleasure. In archaic society, on the other hand, sexuality was never separated from the possibility of procreation, the mystery of which was held by women. Both were tangible human incarnations of the creative force of nature and even the universe. Because of the implied participation in the mystery of creation, archaic man's attitude towards sexuality was one of diffidence. His reticence was due to an awareness of an ungraspable potential, whose life-giving function was perceived as 'good'. It was a positive force that could keep evil at bay.

The *Gorgo* adorned numerous Ancient *tombs* and *sarcophagi,* as can be seen in Etruscan and Roman examples. She may have served the purpose of providing protection to the deceased soul or perhaps she symbolised rebirth. The same holds for other symbols appearing in a similar context: amphora, *omphalos* or navel or matrixial container, Amazonian shield, *bukranion*, flowers. All these uterine symbols[61] appear in funerary art as signs of the coming rebirth.[62]

Due to the association of the *Gorgo* with the gaze, her image also commonly appeared in mirrors[63] – not unlike dragons in Chinese mirrors[64].

54 Jörgen ANDERSEN, *The witch on the wall. Medieval erotic sculpture in the British Isles,* Kopenhagen, Rosenkilde & Bagger, (1977); Patrizia CASTELLI, *Il doppio significato, L'ostensione della vulva nel Medioevo,* in *Il gesto nel rito e nel cerimoniale dal mondo antico ad oggi,* ed. Sergio BERTELLI & Monica CENTANNI, *(Laboratorio di storia, 9), (Quaderni del Castello di Gargonza),* Firenze, Ponte alle Grazie, 1995, p. 199 ff. For a *Gorgo* in this posture, see the chariot of Castel San Mariano, Perugia, c. 500 BC. NAPIER 1986, p. 96.

55 On the analogy between mouth and vulva, see Giulia SISSA, *Le corps virginal. La virginité féminine en Grèce ancienne,* Paris, Vrin, 1987.

56 Suzanne GERMAIN, *Les mosaïques de Timgad, (Etudes d'antiquités africaines),* Paris, CNRS, 1973, pl. III & pp. 11-12.

57 Pascal QUIGNARD, *Le sexe et l'effroi*, Paris, Gallimard, 1994.

58 George DEVEREUX, *Baubo*, Paris, 1974. On apotropaic amulets of Baubo, see *Ars amatoria. The Haddad Family Collection of ancient erotic and amulet art. Christie's New York, 17 December 1998,* nos. 99, 102-108.

59 Clara GALLINI, *La danse de l'argia. Fête et guérison en Sardaigne,* Lagrasse, Verdier, 1988.

60 I. SIX, *De Gorgone*, Amsterdam, 1885; A.A. BARB, *Diva Matrix: A faked gnostic intaglio in the possession of P.P. Rubens and the iconology of a symbol*, in *Journal of the Courtauld and Warburg Institute*, 16, 1953, pp. 193-238, especially p. 209, argues that Six's insights were wrongly rejected by later archaeologists.

61 BARB 1953, p. 210. In the ancient Near East, Gorgonesque spirits were venerated as patrons of healthy births. They were invoked against the dangers assoiated with childbirth. NAPIER 1986, p. 89.

62 GIMBUTAS 2001, p. 208; NAPIER 1986, pp. 92-93.

63 See for example the Vatican Museum, Museo Etrusco n° 12265.

64 W.P. YETTS, *Symbolism in Chinese art*, s.l., The China Society, 1912, p. 14.

Fig. 14
Anonymousm, Campania, c. 500-450 BC. Gorgon antefix. Clay, h. 36 cm. St. Petersburg, Ermitage, n° G1525.

Fig. 15
Anonymous, Attic, 5th – 4th century BC. Anthemion. Stone, h. 55 cm.

We have previously mentioned the association between the throat (*g-r-g*) and the female genitals. They are analogous passageways from one state to another. The new life must force its way through a narrow passage that is fraught with danger. Moreover, from a male phantasmal perspective, there is also an analogy between the vulva and the toothed mouth: the image of the *vagina dentata*, the castrating female genitals[65]. For men and women, throat and mouth are the respective symbolisations of this dangerous passage. [In therapeutic rituals, the latter is actually relived in the transition from sickness (= death) to healing (=(re)birth) by the patient crawling through a narrow passage: the suffocating rebirth.]

Transition and change are inherent in this motif. The *Gorgo* has its origins in an ancient 'Goddess of life and death'. In Greek art, there are several examples where she is represented in the company of wild animals, as the Mistress of untamed nature. In this sense, she is related to the 'obscure' Artemis (*Erinys*) and to Hekate. Erinys/Hekate is the moon goddess and, like the moon, has a changeable, two-sided nature: young and old, creative and destructive. The Orphics imagined the moon, the symbol of female periodicity, as a grinning *Gorgo*. All these analogous appearances – Mistress of Wild Animals, Hekate/Erinys, moon and *Gorgo* – as well as that of the original Neolithic goddess, for that matter, were associated with an inherent duality, an insoluble ambivalence.

65 See a 3rd-century mosaic featuring a carpet with a mandorla-shaped *vaginae dentatae* in El Jem (Tunisia), Archaeologisch Museum, n° 80. A similar shape is found in the so-called cauri shells, which appear in diverse cultures from the paleolithic as evil-repelling uterine symbols.

Fig. 17
Anonymous, Roman, Tunisia, 3th – 4th century. Mosaic medallion with Medusa. Tunis, Musée du Bardo.

Fig. 16
Monk Nektarios, Cyprus, 18th century. The holy Virgin in the Burning Bush. Panel, 127 x 85 cm. Nikosia, Byzantine Museum.

If the *Gorgo* was originally so closely associated with fertility and uterine singularity, why then was it Athena who was deemed to carry the *gorgoneion* or the shield with the Medusa? Why would this virginal goddess of war and wisdom choose to protect herself with the unfathomable and dangerous forces of female sexuality (and fertility)? One of Athena's epithets was *glaukopis*, which translates as 'bright-eyed' or 'with gleaming eyes'. This connotation is also recognisable in one of the goddess's attributes, the owl. Athena is most probably a classical incarnation of a Neolithic owl goddess, an emanation of

Fig. 18
Caravaggio, c. 1598. *Medusa*. Canvas, diameter 55 cm. Firenze, Uffizi.

the Great Goddess. The indefinable colour – with shades of grey, green and blue – that was brimming with terror was recognisable in the eyes of the owl and in the fearsome gaze of Athena.[66] This gaze was the sign of the inviolability of the virgin: any assailant would have to withstand it. And it was this gaze that came to be identified with the *Medusa/Gorgo* on Athena's shield. The shield was covered with a goatskin, the *aegis*, on top of which was attached the head of Medusa. Herodotus (IV, 189) wrote that this kind of shield was first manufactured in Libya. For that matter, the name and the figure of the goddess Athena were also known both north and south of the Mediterranean Sea. Herodotus and other Greek authors claim that her origins, too, lie in Libya, namely with the Libyan-Berber goddess of TaNeith or Tanit[67].

The goat's skin and the waterskin

The word *aegis* is derived from *aix*, 'goat'. The root of the word is, for that matter, the same in Indo-European languages such as Greek and the Germanic languages as in all Berber idioms: *g*-[vowel]-*d/s*. The Tuareg still refer to a male goat as *egheyd*. Most probably this root goes back to an ancient stratum, predating the division between the Semitic and the Indo-European language groups.

The goatskin has apotropaic potency. In many Berber fairytales, it protects a young girl against the homicidal or incestuous tendencies of her father, as in the Kabylic tale of *Tafunast igujilen*, 'Cow of Orphans'[68]. According to some myths, the goddess Athena transformed into a goat or a he-goat in order to escape the hatred or the incestuous urges of her father. The essence of Athena/Neith, then, lies in her *inviolability* as a virgin, whose fierce gaze wards off any potential assailant.

The association in Greek culture between goat and the virginal and strict Artemis – who was, for that matter, in turn associated with Medusa[69] – apparently goes back to proto-historical times, as various rites testify. Goats were also sacrificed to the goddess[70], as a substitute for a virgin or in memory of a virgin who had hanged herself to avoid being raped.[71] Goats were also referred to as *chimaera*, which places the animal on a par with the *Gorgo*. In other words, the goat was both a symbol of virginity and a spectre. Hence, the associative network of

66 Robert Triomphe, *Le lion, la vierge et le miel, (Vérité des mythes)*, Paris, Les belles lettres, (1989), p. 253; Georges Poisson, *L'origine préhistorique du mythe de Méduse et du culte d'Athène,* in *Revue anthropologique*, 26, 1916, pp. 389-398; Edmund Leach, *A* Trobriand *Medusa?*, in *Man*, 54, 1954, pp. 103-105.

67 Initial and final –t are typical in female Berber names. See on the 'Libyan Athena': S. Ribinchi, *Athena libica e la partenoi del lago Tritonis (Herodote IV, 180)*, in *Studi storico-religiosi*, 2, 1978, pp. 39-60.

68 Gabriel Camps & Salem Chaker, *Egide*, in *Encyclopédie berbère*, 17. *Douiret-Eropaei*, Aix-en-Provence, 1996, pp. 2588-9; Salem Chaker, *Linguistique et préhistoire. Autour de quelques noms d'animaux domestiques en berbère*, in *L'homme méditerranéen. Mélanges offerts à G. Camps*, Aix-en-Provence, Lapmo, 1995, pp. 259-264; Jean Servier, *Trois mots libyques dans Hérodote*, in *GLECS*, 5, 1948-51, pp. 71-72.

69 Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Figures, idoles, masques*, Paris, Julliard, 1990.

70 Robert Triomphe, *Le lion, la vierge et le miel, (Vérité des mythes),* Paris, Les belles Lettres, 1989, p. 284.

71 Triomphe 1989, p. 288, n° 10.

Fig. 19
Anonymous, Roman, Tunisia, 3th – 4th century. Mosaic floor with irregular concentric *matrix*. Tunis, Musée du Bardo.

Fig. 20
Anonymous, Roman, Tunisia, 3th – 4th century. Mosaic with 'nameless motif' in Oceanus's beard. Tunis, Musée du Bardo.

the goddess is composed of: virgin – inviolability/strength – goatskin – protecting/terrifying gaze.

The skin of a goat was also a symbol of fertility. Already around 1500 BC, goats were often represented alongside the 'tree of life'.[72] According to Greek mythology, the infant Zeus had been nourished by the goat Amalthea. This can be seen as an implicit concession that the male "Father of gods" was preceded by a feminine principle. In Roman Antiquity – and in other ancient cultures – there was a rite that illustrated the 'fertility' of the goatskin. During the festival of Lupercalia, the Luperci, worshippers of the god Lupercus, would strike women with straps of goatskin in order to make them fertile.

But why a goat? Goats had been reared since the Neolithic for their ability to conditions that were unsuitable for cattle and sheep. Perhaps this remarkable life force explains why the animal became a uterine symbol. However, its resilience was also seen to tend towards the supernatural, so that it could easily become a spectre. It is not inconceivable either that the eerie, cross-grained, 'transversal', yellowish gaze of the animal contributed to the association.[73]

However, in the archaic perception, most forces had a positive and a negative aspect, and hence goat and goatskin were both also attributed protective powers. Goatskins were moreover used to produce symbolically heavily charged artefacts, such as drums and receptacles. A striking example is the *guedra.* A guedra is a jar or a kitchen pot. With a goatskin stretched over the top, it can serve as a drum. In

72 Gimbutas 2001, pp. 233-235.
73 On yellow as a 'feminine colour', see Elizabeth Barber, *The peplos of Athena,* in *Goddess and Polis. The Panathenaic festival in ancient Athens,* ed. J. Niels, Princeton, 1992, pp. 116-117.

Fig. 21
Anonymous, 14th century (?). *Matrix marmorea*. Constantinople, Church of the Saviour in the Chora (Kariye Jami).

Southern Morocco, this type of drum is used to keep the rhythm of a dance, also known as the *guedra*. The female dancer is on her knees, playing an imaginary drum. The movements are performed with the upper body. The lower body, which provides the 'subject matter' of the dance, does not otherwise participate in the ritual, but is symbolically substituted by the guedra. The hands are the main means of expression. The rhythm is initially slow and controlled, but gradually increases. The movements of the dancer likewise pick up pace and become increasingly syncopated, and eventually end in spasms.

The *guedra* is analogous to the *gourba* or the goatskin waterbag. To be more precise, the former is a symbolic triplication of the latter. There is not only the goatskin, but also the earthenware pot and the sound of the drum. In the mythical African tradition, the drum is a 'world-creating' entity[74]: its sound possesses the power of creation. Hence, the *guedra* dance relates to the creative power of the drum-goatskin matrix, more specifically its dark, frightening aspects (i.e. the snakes for hair).

In Berber textile art, goatskin water bags commonly appear as the principal motif – or so it would appear on the basis of a superficial reading of their names. The main motif in carpets from the Haouz[75] region consists in a more or less empty red area with a diamond-

74 Viviana PÂQUES, *La religion des esclaves,* Bergamo, Moretti & Vitali, 1992. This is one of the most fundamental, yet largely ignored studies on 'holistic' subaltern culture and perception.

75 Korolnik Collection, Zurich. See also RICARD 1934, vol. 4, pl. XLII & XXXV, and Alfio NICOLOSI, *Tappeti rossi della valle del Tensift*, Casi di Nepi, 1998, p. 41.

Fig. 22
Anonymous, Rome (?), 3th century. Gladiators with apotropaeïc 'nameless motif' on their shields. Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional, n° 3601.

shaped pattern made up of triangles, surrounded by some hook-like forms. According to local informants, the motif represents a *gourba,* i.e. a goatskin water bag. However, it is worth noting that, in the Berber language of the North Moroccan Rif, *abiya* means both 'goatskin water bag' and 'belly (of a pregnant woman)'.[76] Propriety apparently forbids that 'existential' matters be mentioned by name; instead, there are innumerable metaphors one can deploy. Hence, the 'waterskin' that appears on carpets most likely represents not the lifeless object; in the light of the foregoing, and building on what we know about the *aegis*, it is reasonable to assume that the *gourba* actually signifies the generative power of the womb with all its paradoxical aspects and powers.

There is a distinction to be made in this context between a worked and an unworked goatskin. The first is the aegis with the apotropaic Gorgo, and it symbolises the inviolable virginity, the hymen whose fearsome glare (Athena glaukopis, the 'owl-eyed' one) wards off any assailant. As the incantation in the pan-Maghrebian protective ritual of the tasfih goes: 'I am a wall and the son of other people is a thread'.

76 Kamal Naït-Zerrad, *Dictionnaire des racines berbères (formes attestées). I. A-Bc ZL (Centre de Recherches Berbère* – INALCO. MS – II Ussun amazigh), Paris/Leuven, Peeters, 1998, p. 147. See also: *Les chants de la Tassaout, Poèmes et chants berbères de Mririda N'Aït Attik traduits du dialecte tachelhait*, ed. René Euloge, (Casablana, Belvisi, 19922), pp. 142 & 139; André Louis, *Greniers fortifiés et maisons troglodytes: Ksar Djouama,* in *IBLA*, 1965, pp. 390-391.

Like a thread is powerless against a wall, so a man should be unable to dishonour a determined young girl.[77]

The worked goatskin of the water bag is the protective *hymen* that has made way for the creative *matrix.* In folk mythology, the goatskin was commonly associated with the *uterus.* Marrakech is known for its tanneries, where the skins of goats are worked or impregnated, if you will, by soaking them in a so-called *iferd,* a pool of stagnant and rotting water, in a process that is reminiscent of both the processes of pregnancy inside the womb and of the underworld that is fertilized by ancestral souls. Through this treatment, the skin becomes suitable for use as a receptacle for holding water, as an image of procreation.[78] In various rituals, the skin plays a role that refers to this meaning. Across the Maghreb, it was customary in times of drought to hold a procession featuring the 'fiancée of the rain'.[79] This doll, formed of a large wooden spoon or *ghonja,* was dressed like a woman. Quite often she would be wrapped in a goatskin 'to bring rain and life'.

The *gourba* of the carpet, encircled by protrusions, is reminiscent of the 'tasselled Aegis' (Iliad, XXI, 400). In instances where this *aegis* bore the face of the *Gorgo*, it was effectively a conglomeration of various uterine symbols and the notion of the gaze in all its dimensions. So clearly there is a parallelism to be discerned between the ancient Greek representation of the *aegis* and the nameless motif with protrusions in Berber weaving.

Skin is an important element in Maghrebi folk culture. On the Day of Ashura, the *Bou Jeloud* and the monstrous *ghul(a)* are represented in costumes made of animal skins.[80] Sometimes, this being the latter is personified by two dancers, positioned back to back inside a single skin[81], to suggest a movement in opposite directions, as in the underlying symbolism. Proto-Berber rock carvings at Mghar el Tahtini would appear to represent a rite of identification between a female and a ram, from which is born a child. In another representation, we notice a skin-wrapped mummy[82], possibly to suggest a rebirth from skin. The Egyptian hieroglyph *mes* ('to give birth', 'to bring forth') consists in a drawing of three skins tied together. Some pyramid texts refer to 'skins-cradles' and 'skins-towns, images that seem to have originated in the dawn of time and that are hard to grasp[83]: 'He has gone through the skin/cradle'; 'I am the one who came forth from the skin'; 'I have wrapped myself in the skin Kanemt'; 'Perform these

77 Fathia Skhiri-Harzallah, *Le mariage au Sahel, le rite du tasfih,* in *Cahiers et arts traditions populaires* (Tunis), 6, 1977, pp. 51-73; Mohamed Khaznaji, *Rites magico-sexuels: le rbat et le tasfih,* in *ibid.*, pp. 76-81.

78 Danielle Jemma-Gouzon, *Les tanneurs de Marrakech, 'Mémoire du CRAPE, 19)*, Algiers, 1971, p. 59; Marceau GAST, *Cuirs et peaux,* in *Encyclopédie berbère*, 14, pp. 2144-2153.

79 Servier 1985, pp. 258, 260, 266, 271-282, 296-300, 454, 466; A.M. Goichon, *La vie féminine au Mzab. Notes complémentaires* in *Revue des études islamiques,* 4, 1930, pp. 249-250; Ch. Monchicourt, *Les rogations pour la pluie,* in *Revue tunisienne,* 22, 1915, pp. 65-81, particularly pp. 75-80; further: J.H. Probst-Biraben, *Les rites d'obtention de la pluie dans la province de Constantine,* in *Journal de la Société des Africanistes,* 2, 1932, pp. 95-102, particularly pp. 96-99; ID., *Pour la pluie de printemps en Algérie,* in *En terre d'Islam,* 22, 1927, pp. 264-272, spec. p. 267; Edward Westermarck, *Ritual and belief in Morocco,* 2, London, 1962, pp. 265-270.

80 E. Laoust, *Noms et cérémonies des feux de joie chez les Berbères du Haut et de l'Anti-Atlas* in *Hesperis,* 1921, pp. 70-72.

81 G. Germain, *Le culte du bélier en Afrique du Nord,* in *Hesperis,* 35, 1948, p. 115.

82 Ead., *art.cit.*, pp.116-117.

83 Ead., *art.cit.,* p. 118.

Fig. 23
Anonymous, Rome, 1763. Tabletop in *pietra murrina* with 'nameless motif'. Rome, coll. Alberto di Castro.

rites *in* the cow'. At the festival of Sed, the ritual object known as *seshed* appears to have represented a skin/uterus for the rebirth of the king. Hence, the association of 'skin' and '(re)birth' dates back at least to the proto-historical era.[84]

At the centre of the *aegis* was the gaze of *Medusa.* In North Africa, the *Medusa* is also found in ancient mosaics. A house in Timgad has a mosaic with a dizzying[85] (and, by consequence, warding off malevolent influences) black-and-white pattern with a *Gorgo* at the centre.[86] And similar mosaics are known to exist in Libya and Tunisia.[87] Analogous representations also served a protective purpose, including those of the Cyclops in the Roman baths of Dougga (Northern Tunisia), and of the 'Ocean'. The ocean was the symbolic equivalent of the uterus, as the *Iliad* testifies: 'Oceanus […], origin of the Gods […] (XIV, 201), […] the origin of all things […]' (XIV, 246)'. The sea appears as a uterine symbol in very diverse cultures, not just in the Mediterranean region. In a Roman mosaic at Bir Chana (Zaghouan, Northern Tunisia), the fearsome head of Oceanus constitutes the centre of the image. It is surrounded by crab and lobster shears. Other apotropaic imagery is scattered around the representation, including that of a peacock that opens its tail of 'eyed' feathers. The peacock was a popular evil-repelling motif in ancient and early-Christian art[88]. A similar mosaic was found at Sousse[89]. Clearly, the repellent aspect was focused on the evil eye. However, the head of Oceanus, with the wild spiky hair and shears, is more or less Medusa's counterpart. It is a representation of the *depth of the seas.* The sea creatures on these mosaics are primarily octopi, eels, crabs, lobsters and urchins.

The symbolic association between octopus and the *Gorgo* goes back to ancient times. They are both manifestations of the *matrix,*

84 Cf. Susanne Bickel, *La cosmogonie égyptienne avant le Nouvel Empire, (Orbis biblicus et orientalis,* 134), Fribourg, 1994.

85 Henry Maguire, *Magic and geometry in early Christian floor mosaics and textiles,* in ID., *Rhetoric, nature and magic in Byzantine art*, (*Variorum Collected Studies*, 603), London, Ashgate, 1998.

86 Suzanne Germain, *Les mosaïques de Timgad, (Études d'antiquités africaines),* Paris, CNRS, 1973, pp. 89-90, nr. 119, & pl. XXXIX.

87 See for example the 'House of Medusa' in ancient Thugga (present-day Dougga) (Northern Tunisia).

88 Germain 1948, p.115; Louis Foucher, *Inventaire des mosaïques. Feuille n° 57 de l'Atlas Archéologique de Sousse,* Tunis, 1960, p. 136; A. Lantier, *Les signes prophylactiques des mosaïques romaines d'Afrique*, in *Anthropologie* (Paris), 38, 1928.

89 Sousse, Musée Archéologique, n° 10.446; Germain 1948, pp. 116-7; an example from France: Janine Lancha, *Mosaïques géométriques. Les ateliers de Vienne (Isère)*, Rome, L'Erma di Bretschneider, 1977, ill. 105, n° 185.

like the sphere with protrusions (crab, octopus and sea urchin). This was also the case in the Ancient Near East[90]. The mosaic, produced by a male artist, is a subconscious representation of uterine aspects. These are expressed in a figurative form, as is customary in masculine art[91].

The Medusa caught the attention of early psychoanalysts. Freud and Ferenczi[92] both considered her appearance. They pointed at the subconscious equation of head and genital potency[93]. To male observers, a terrifying woman's head evoked the image of the 'dangerous' and 'devouring' feminine force. For the past century, ever since the studies of anthropologist Franz Boas into the Tsimshian myths of the 'toothed vagina', (male) scholars have referred to this complex as the vagina dentata[94]. The notion of devouring is already suggested in the name Gorgo, derived from the g-r-g root, which refers to the devouring opening, more specifically that of the throat[95].
To Freud, the *Gorgo* is the image of the seductive, phallic, dangerous mother. The terror that the Medusa exerts is that of an impending castration[96]. Freud's intuition was partly correct, but he overemphasised the genital-sexual aspect from a male perspective. The *Gorgo* first and foremost evokes the negative, i.e. the threatening and sinister aspects of the *metra*[97]. Hence, a hard-to-describe, but nonetheless terrifying appearance, and a staring, destructive gaze are important characteristics of the *Gorgo* and related figures.

Another elusive spectre: the 'ghula'

The first aspect is represented in the Maghreb by the *ghul(a)*[98], a mythical creature that can assume various appearances. The name is derived from the root *gh-w-l*, meaning 'to seize', 'assault', 'kill', 'bring to ruin'[99]. *Ghul(a)* is a 'calamity that strikes suddenly'. In the Berber language, the creature is known as *taghioult* or *tagrout* in its feminine guise and as *awarzeniou* in the masculine variant[100]. This dualism is, for that matter, also contained in the Greek *medusa* or *Gorgo*, who possesses male attributes, both on the exterior (beard) and interior (threatening, forceful). The creature is usually represented as a monstrous humanoid: hairy, repulsive, terrifying, voracious and extremely powerful, both physically and magically. It is usually devoid of any sense of morality, but can occasionally do good. Countless

90 Campbell Bonner, *Studies in magical amulets, chiefly Graeco-Egyptian, (University of Michigan Studies. Humanistic Series, 49)*, Ann Arbor, 1950, pp. 84-85 & 90; Aboubekr Abdeslam, *Notes sur les amulettes chez les indigènes algériens,* in *Revue africaine,* 81, 1937, pp. 309-318; J. Desparmet, *Ethnographie traditionelle de la Mettidja.* 6, in *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie d'Alger et de l'Afrique du Nord,* 1924, n° 100, & 1925, n° 103, pp. 237-282, & 1926, n° 105, pp.1-37.

91 The Oceanus head that appears in the North African mosaics is also found on the opposite shore of the Mediterranean. A typical example is a mosaic from Isère, where the spiked head is surrounded by fish, lobsters and putti riding on the backs of winged dolphins, which in itself serves as a uterine symbol. Janine Lancha, *Mosaïques géométriques. Les ateliers de Vienne (Isère). Leurs modèles et leur originalité dans l'empire romain,* Rome, L'Erma, 1977, fig. 105.

92 Sandor Ferenczi, in *Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse,* 9, 1923, pp. 69 & 25, 1940.

93 In the traditional psychoanalytical interpretation of Western art, the motif of St John the Baptist by Salomé is an expression of the male fear for castration or impotence. Julia Kristeva, *Visions capitales,* Paris, Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1998, passim. However, this in itself is a phallocentric reduction. The motif is far richer, as demonstrated by Barbara Baert, *The head of Saint John the Baptist on a platter: the gaze of death*, in *Ikon. Journal of iconographic studies*, 4, 2011, pp. 163-174; Ead., *The Johannesschüssel as Andachtsbild: the gaze, the medium and the senses*, in *Archaeus*, 15, 2011, pp. 225-264; Ead., *A history of a man's head: the Johannesschüssel or the image of the mediator and the precursor*, in *Mitteilungen für Anthropologie und Religionsgeschichte*, 20, 2010, pp. 219-262; Ead., *The head of St. John the Baptist on a tazza by Andrea Solario (1507): the transformation and the transition of the Johannesschüssel from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, in *Critica d'arte*, 69, 2007, pp. 60-82.

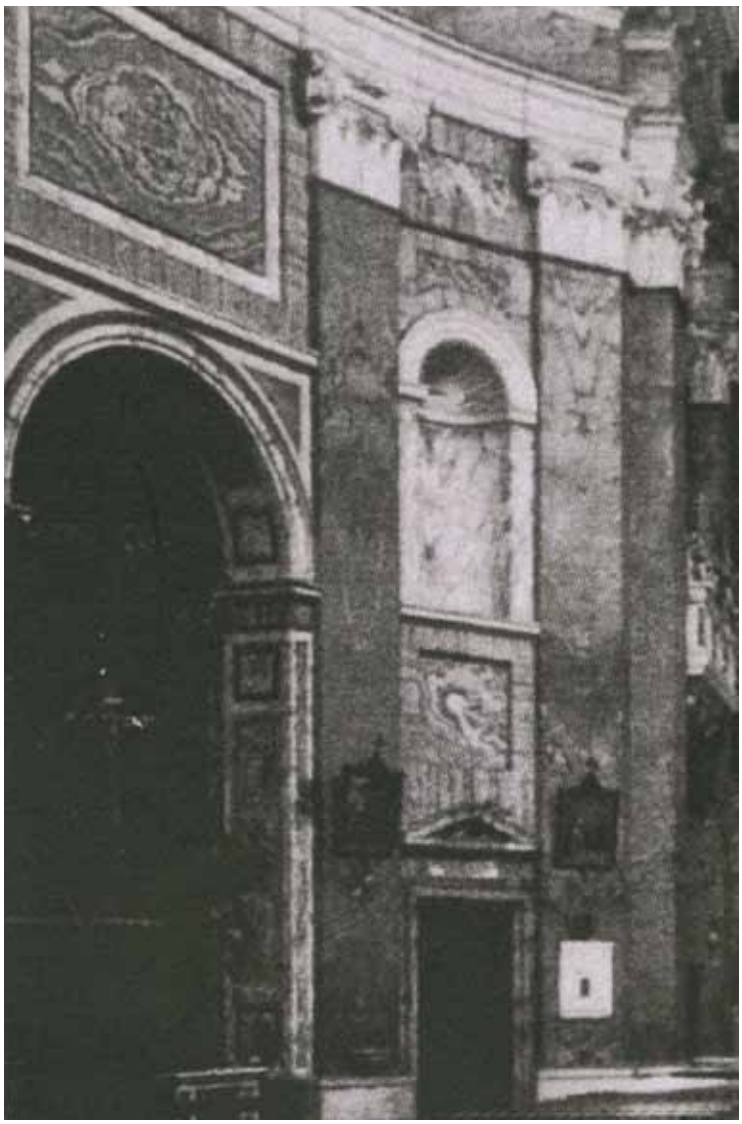

Fig. 24
Anonymous, Italian, 16th century. Marble slab with 'nameless motif'. Rome, San Giacomo degli Incurabili.

myths exist about this being, but invariably they deal with an aspect of unfathomable horror that devours.

The 'Testament of Solomon' from Late Antiquity refers to *Abyzouth*. This personification of the primeval abyss is like a female head with tangled hair and an invisible body 'like darkness'. Solomon suspended the demon by its hair from the temple – like the *gorgoneia* in the Greek world. In incantations from Antiquity, Abyzouth is also called *Gullo*, the *ghoul(a)* from Islamic culture. The same terrifying

94 The cauri shell would appear to symbolise this phantasm around the globe. E. Gobert, *Le pudendum magique et le problème des cauris,* in *Revue africaine,* 95, 1951, pp. 5-52.

95 In European folk mythology, mention is made of many different all-devouring *Gargantuan beings*. See Claude Gaignebet, *A plus hault sens. L'ésotérisme spirituel et charnel de Rabelais,* Paris, Maisonneuve, 1986.

96 Sigmund Freud, *La tête de Méduse,* in ID., *Résultats, idées, problèmes.* 2. 1921-1938, Paris, 1992.

97 Barb 1953, p. 209.

98 Nabil Fares, *L'ogresse dans la littérature orale berbère,* Paris, Karthala, 1994; Camille Lacoste-Dujardin, *Le conte Kabyle. Etude ethnologique,* Paris, La Découverte, (1981), pp. 50-107 and passim; *Contes populaires sur les ogres, recueillis à Blida,* ed. Joseph Desparmet, *(Collection de contes et chansons populaires, 35)*, 2 vols., Paris, Leroux, 1909-1910.

99 A. De Biberstein Kazimirski, *Dictionnaire arabe-français*, 2, Beyrouth, s.d. [reissue of the Paris 1860 edition], p. 518.

100 Specific names for the *ghoula* (feminine): *tamza* (also the name of a wild animal); *takoukkout*, possibly an onomatopoeia like *ukuku* or mythological Andean being; *taghouzant*, 'witch'; *boukho* (from *bou-akho*), fem. *tabekhout*, from the Ait Izdeg, 'spectre'; *tergo*, also refers to 'returning dead person', 'ghost'; *agrou*, fem. *tagrout*. In general, the *ghoula* was pictured as a hideous old lady with wild hair, a dark face, enormous teeth; she has a 'sore eye' and 'bad eyesight' or is afflicted by blindness. This aspect is significant. Émile Laoust, *Des noms berbères de l'ogre et de l'ogresse,* in *Hesperis,* 34, 1947, pp. 253-265.

Fig. 25
Anonymous, Tiwanaku, Bolivia or Northern Chile, c. 200-400 AD. Tunic with serpentine and ocular being.

figure appears in a 5th-century mural in the early Christian monastery at Baouit (Egypt): S. Sisinnios pierces the female demon *Gyllou* with his lance[101]. Whereas the ancient Greek astronomers associated the constellation of Perseus with the *Caput Gorgonis*, their Arab counterparts associated it with the *Ghul* (referred to in the medieval Latin translations as *Caput Algol*)[102], which is suggestive of a link between *Gorgo* and *ghul(a).*

The *ghula* is an embodiment of an abyssal terror. She devours and destroys. One imagines her as grotesque, excessive, hideous, with a flat, round face with large teeth and a tongue sticking out of an enormous mouth[103]. In the folk tradition of the Maghreb, there is a version of the *ghoul/Gorgo* that is intended specifically for children*: Oum es-Sobyan* or the 'Mother of (male) children'[104]. In a legend of the Chiadma in South-Western Morocco, the *Oum es-Sobyan* appears in the guise of an old woman, with unkempt hair, blue eyes (= the colour of the evil eye), connected eyebrows and a fire-spitting mouth. 'She ploughed the land with her fingernails'; 'She cleaved the trees with her voice'. She had the ability to assume any form she wanted. 'I tie up the wombs of women, I take the life of children unnoticed. I make the inside of women infertile, I close their uterus, I cause miscarriages, and I tie the panels of the bride's dress' [to impede the 'flow' of fertility][105]. As the negation of the uterus, Oum es-Sobyan effectuates stasis. She is generally imagined as an owl that roams at night. As in the European folk tradition, the owl was perceived in North African cultures as a harbinger of doom and ruin[106]. Oum es-Sobyan embodies the mother's anxiety over the wellbeing of her child. Some psychoanalysts might say that she represents an urge, separated from the ego of the mother: she personifies negative impulses towards children. The *taghioult* is very prominent in Berber culture: as a mythical female identification figure[107], she unites all feminine forces. A well-known Spanish Moorish textile from the Taifa era (11th century), the so-called 'Witches Pallium', features a row of creatures that, in our opinion, represent the *taghioult*[108].

The abominable Gorgo and the virginal Athena

Already in the early 20th century, certain 'fanciful' scholars intuitively recognised the proto-historical connections between owl, gaze, Athena/Tanit, and the Medusa. The rediscoverer of Troy, Heinrich

101 Paul Perdrizet, *Negotium perambulans in tenebris. Etudes de démonologie gréco-orientale, (Publications de la Faculté des Lettres de l'Université de Strasbourg, 6)*, Strasbourg-Paris, 1922, ills. 6-7-8.

102 Barb 1953, p. 24.

103 Traki Zannad-Bouchrara, *Symboliques corporelles et espaces musulmans, (Horizon maghrébin),* Tunis, Cérès, 1984, p. 100.

104 Madeleine Graf De La Salle, *Umm essobyan, la chouette,* in *Compte-rendu et communication du 70e Congres de l'A.F.A.S., Tunis, 9-16 mai 1951,* 3, Tunis, Bascone & Muscat, 1952, pp. 79-82; I. Aboubekr, *La Tebi'a ou mauvais génie ravisseur des enfants en bas-âge,* in *Bulletin de la Société de Géographie et d'Archéologie d'Oran,* 25, 1905, pp. 295-298; M.L. Greyghton, *La Taba'a: une représentation mentale,* in *Cahiers des Arts et Traditions populaires* (Tunis), 6, 1977, pp. 141-151, spec. p. 150: associations with 'old woman', 'blackness', 'nightmare', 'knife', 'danger', 'belt'.

105 Abdelkader Mana, *Les Regraga. La fiancée de l'eau et les gens de la caverne,* Casablanca, Eddif, 1988, pp. 137-138.

106 Paul Vandenbroeck, *Bubo significans*, in *KMSKA Annual 1985*, pp. 19-135.

Schliemann, excavated urns with striking images of eyes and breasts. The German archaeologist believed them to be proto-historical representations of Athena, the owl goddess, but his peers disagreed. Others found sculptures and earthenware at sites across Europe that arguably depicted the same mythical figure. They put it that these finds connected the concept of the unfathomable, unassailable gaze with a feminine virginal principle. This gaze was embodied primarily by the owl, an ancient *symbol of the unknown and of terror.*

Some 19th-century scholars speculated that Athena and the *Gorgo* were originally one and the same entity. They also sensed a connection with the octopus, though, peculiarly, on false grounds[109]. More to the point, however, all of these intuitive hypotheses were correct, as has been confirmed by the more recent religious-historical and archaeological insights into the prehistory of Europe. Images of the 'owl goddess' are well attested from the eighth millennium BC onwards, on innumerable artefacts from the Neolithic and Bronze-Age cultures of Europe and the Mediterranean Basin. She is recognisable by her eyes and beak/nose, her spread wings and some specifically female attributes (breasts, vulva). In the Mycenaean and Cypriot cultures, her image is found in a variety of artefacts, made of materials as diverse as gold and clay. She is the goddess under representing the aspect of death[110], the precursor to Athena.

It is very likely that Athena and the *Gorgo* are offshoots of the same entity. The tendency to banish chaotic and paradoxical, if not downright contradictory, figures from the mind is common to all 'elite' cultures. Here lies the origin of the phallic propensity towards the One – a uniformity to be attained through order and division, concurrently with the emergence of logic and science (as in Greece itself), or of patriarchal perceptive patterns[111].

In past 'primitive' cultures, on the other hand, there seems always to have been a realisation that, in reality, life contains an inherent duality and an element of paradox, if not of contradiction. Their belief systems reflected a reality that was considered to be eternal and unchangeable, that could only be as it was. From an experiential perspective, it was overflowing with paradoxes, but these were initially rich in meaning; it was only subsequently, in the logocentric model, that they became unsustainable contradictions. At that moment,

107 Camille Lacoste-Dujardin, *Ogresse berbère et ogresse corse: images de la femme méditerranéenne?*, in *Gli interscambi culturali e socio-economici fra l'Africa settentrionale e l'Europa mediterranea. Atti del congresso internazionale di Amalfi 1983*, Napoli, 1986, pp. 379-389; Farida Boualit, *L'ogresse farésienne: de l'oral du conte à l'oralité du texte dans la dès-écriture/réécriture de l'histoire*, in *Mythes et réalités d'Algérie et d'ailleurs*, in *Langues et Littératures* (Institut des Langues étrangères de Bouzaréah, Algeria), 6, 1995. Rich source material: Joseph Desparmet, *Contes populaires sur les ogres, recueillis à Blida et traduits*, (*Collection de contes et chansons populaires*, 35), 2 vols., Paris, Leroux, 1909-10.

108 Vic, Museu Episcopal, n° 557. Silk, 101 x 232 cm. Carlo Maria Suriano, *The Witches Pallium*, in *Hali*, n° 121, 2002, p. 119.

109 Georges Poisson, *L'origine préhistorique du mythe de Méduse et du culte d'Athène,* in *Revue anthropologique*, 26, 1916, pp. 389-398.

110 Gimbutas 2001, pp 190-195.

111 Cf. Beth Seelig, *The rape of Medusa in the temple of Athena: aspects of triangulation in the girl*, webpublication, pp. 895-911.

concurrently with the division of the old, uniform tribal civilisations, a realisation took hold that – however minimally at first – the outlook on life itself could change. Henceforth, life would have to adhere to new, clearer, more tangible principles. The mythology itself was adapted: the supernatural beings now stood for more clearly delineated 'domains'. This also held for the proto-historical owl goddess. Before the patriarchal compulsion to divide, she had been an all-embracing goddess. She was the owl of the night, death, misfortune, insight, knowledge, righteousness; she was also the goddess of the sea, Tritogeneia, offspring of *Metis*, the personification of cunningness who was born of Oceanus; she was the wild goddess of the Libyans, with the protective goatskin as an attribute, and a vigilant protector of virginity; she was the goddess of struggle and of the petrifying gaze: *glaukopis* but also *gorgopis*, 'with the gaze of the Medusa'; she was the octopus from the depths of the sea, with spiky protrusions ('hair', 'tentacles', hooks) around a fearsome head[112]. The tradition of the 'eye goddess', for that matter, dates back to the Neolithic[113].

'Gorgonian' dance and jewels

Berber weaving continues to reflect the aniconic, non-representational phase that preceded the Greek figuration of the *Medusa*.

The basic motif of protrusions (hair, tentacles, spikes) finds expression in different media in Berber culture. Fluttering and spiky hair[114] (like that of the *Gorgo*) is, for example, also the central motif in various dances across North Africa. This type of dance is, for that matter, very archaic. Variants are known to exist or to have existed in Libya, Southern Tunisia[115], Algeria and Southern Morocco. Only virgins, or possibly young widows or divorced women, could participate. Prior to the dance, their hair would be treated with a fixing agent, so that it could be arranged in tangles. The dance itself was very simple. The dancers would form a single line or a semi-circle, either standing or sitting on their knees. By means of head movements, barely noticeable at first but increasingly violently, they would shake out their hair, while holding on to a rock or a stick to keep their balance. The bottom half of their bodies remained perfectly still. This 'hair dance', which would be concluded suddenly with a sign, could result in trance. The dance is related to the previously discussed *guedra*, and it was performed mainly at wedding feasts. Although it was

112 All these functions of the goddess were perceived as incompatible in Classical Antiquity, at least by the men who by now had claimed the right to impose a religious ideology. The bifurcating and seemingly opposed aspects needed to be separated. This also happened in other cultures. In the European folk mythology from between ca. 1000 and ca. 1900, Mother Hulda likewise had a fundamentally dual nature: aggressive and accommodating, life-threatening and life-protecting, terrifying and appealing. In the Alpine cultures, this ingraspable aspect led to her being divided during winter rituals into 'beautiful' and 'ugly' Perchten. Another example: in the 14th/15th centuries, the mythic image of the old mother goddess was divided into the positive image of the 'good' old holy woman (St Anne) and the negative image of the 'evil' old woman (the witch). (On the Perchten, see Victor Waschnitius, *Percht, Holda und verwandte Gestalten*, Vienna, 1913; on St Anne and the witch, see: Ton Brandenbarg, *Heilig familieleven. Verspreiding en waardering van de Historie van Sint-Anna in de stedelijke cultuur in de Nederlanden en het Rijnland aan het begin van de moderne tijd (15de/16de eeuw),* Nijmegen, SUN, 1990.

113 See the brilliant but forgotten study by Margarete Riemschneider, *Augengott und Heilige Hochzeit*, Leipzig, Köhler & Amelang, 1953.

114 *Encyclopédie berbère*, 14, pp. 2218-19. On 'hair': Charles Berg, *The unconscious significance of hair*, London, Allen & Urwin, 1951; Edmund Leach, *Magical hair*, in *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute,* 88, 1958, pp. 147-168; Gananath Obeyesekere, *Medusa's hair: an essay on personal symbols and religious experience,* Chicago, Univ. of Chicago, 1984. For a description of the 'hair dance' of the Akkara of Zarzis: Bertholon, *Exploration anthropologique de l'île de Gerba* in *L'anthropologie*, 8, 1897, pp. 571-2. Further: J. Ferry, *La danse des cheveux (contribution à l'ethnographie du Sous),* in *Travaux de l'Institut de recherches sahariennes*, 6, 1950, pp. 101-142. G. Saint-Paul, *Souvenirs de Tunisie et d'Algérie,* Tunis, 1909, pp. 113-114 (over de Mrazig van

not a narrative dance, its 'significance' remains somewhat of an enigma. We argue that it should be understood as a fleeting expression of the same 'prickly sphere' conglomerate.

Another example is the *zarraf*, a wedding dance of Tuareg women. The dance is performed at night, preferably after the moon has risen. A number of women detach themselves from the wedding party and form a circle. Holding up their robes, they screen the dance, covering it with a tent, as it were. Without any musical accompaniment, producing rhythmical guttural sounds, they dance, shaking their hair and shoulders, eyes fixated on the ground. This dance, which is invariably brief, is considered to be erotically charged and to be associated with the 'spirit world', although there is no question of trance[116].

Another articulation is found in the characteristic 'protrusions' in Maghrebian jewellery. Berber women were traditionally very attached to their jewellery, but not primarily for financial reasons, as it was usually made of non-precious materials and low-content silver (gold jewellery is attested in just a few locations). Their attachment to these jewels lay more in the possibilities for self-expression that they opened up. Very little research has been conducted into this area, but it would seem that jewellery provides an analogous mode of expression for diverse aspects of individuals' self-image. And yet, the makers of these jewels were invariably men. Clearly, though, they were perfectly aware of the affects associated with each of the components of each jewel[117].

In this context, a central role was played by the *tabzimt*, the brooch. The more or less round, oval or elliptic concentric shapes with protrusions also constitute the 'body' of many *bzaims* from Southern Morocco (valleys of the Dra'a, Dades, Todgha)[118] and elsewhere in the Maghreb[119]. These types of jewels most probably date back thousands of years. Tunisian-Punic jewellery with supposed apotropaic properties had a number of similar motifs. Quite often, at the centre of the jewel, there was a kind of recipient with knobs, flanked by two serpents. Above this 'knobbed sphere', two further symbols: a disc-like shape and an insect[120]. On the central axis, sphere, disc and insect duplicate the same concept, which, together with the serpents, may be regarded as a prefiguration of the composition found in many carpets belonging to what we have dubbed the 'free style': a matrixial image (possibly with its various perceptive patterns) between two emblems of the fluctuating, dangerous and untameable flow of energy[121].

Sabria); Ernst Rackow, *Das Beduinenzelt, in Baessler-Archiv,* 25, 1943, pp. 29-31 (on Tripolitania); Cap. Maquart, *Étude sur la tribu des Haouaia (Territoire de Medenine),* in *Revue tunisienne,* 1937, p. 270; Gilbert Boris, *Documents linguistiques et ethnographiques,* pp. 139-141 (on the Mrazig from Douz).

115 On Douz: Eric de Hullessen, *Douz*, Tunis, Commedia, [after 1995].

116 Susan Rasmussen, *Zarraf, a Tuareg women's wedding dance,* in *Ethnology,* 34, 1995, pp. 1-16; Ead., *The Head Dance: contested self, and art as a balancing act in Tuareg spirit possession,* in *Africa,* 64, 1994, pp. 74-98.

117 With thanks to Karamat, former silversmith, Marrakech, for providing me with this information (1998-99).

118 Marie-Rose Rabaté, *Bijoux du Maroc*, Aix-en-Provence, 1996, p. 115 (Ait Ouaouzguit); p.135, 137, 139 (Ait Atta); p. 141 (Dra'a).

119 Wassyla Tamzali, *Abzim. Parures et bijoux des femmes d'Algérie*, Alger, EAP, 1984.

120 Brigitte Quillard, *Bijoux carthaginois. I. Les colliers,* Louvain-la-Neuve, 1979, pl. X, XI, XII, XIV, XXII, XXIII, XXIV and p. 75 ff.

121 This compositional scheme was also known to other cultures. It appears in, among other artefacts, a Nazca tunic (Peru, c. 200-400) with feathers, fitted on the other side with what is most likely a male emblem. *Hali* (London), n° 84, 1996, p. 144.

Fig. 26
Anonymous, Letur (?), Spain, c. 1450. Knotted rug with 'nameless motif'. Wool, 219 x 184 cm. Washington DC, The Textile Museum, n° R44.4.2.

Let us return to weaving. The 'nameless motif', as central element in the weaving iconography touches upon absolutely fundamental perceptions. Plutarch asserted that the Libyan goddess Neith, counterpart of Athena-with-the-goatskin and precursor to the goddess Tanit, boasted of being everything: 'I am everything that has been, that is, and that will be; and no mortal has yet lifted up my veil.' In primeval times, Neith took up the shuttle, strung the sky on her loom, and wove into being the world and all of existence. The weaver goddess was at once a creative, 'uterine' deity. In the Hebrew Old Testament, Psalm 139:13 goes as follows: 'Yes, thou hast woven me[122] in my mother's womb'. And verse 15: 'in the hidden place, I was embroidered'[123]. It is this arcane dimension that is presented in the 'nameless motif'.

Another cross-cultural excursion: From the Near to the Far East and to Pre-Columbian America

The scope of the motif complex at hand extended beyond the boundaries of the Greco-Roman or Mediterranean cultures. It also manifested itself elsewhere, in forms adapted to local traditions.

122 Root: sh-k-k.

123 Root: r-q-m, related to Arabic *ra-qa-ma*, 'to sketch', 'to draw', 'to embroider', 'to work out a pattern' – hence terms such as *ragma* ('motif'), *mergoum* (a flat fabric on the front and back of which appear such motifs), *reggam* (male designer of a certain type of carpet for a nomadic clientele) in the Tunisian and Algerian vernacular.

The Egyptian counterpart of the *Gorgo/Medusa*, for example, was the deity Bes, in combination with its feminine alter ego Beset[124]. Bes is represented as a squat, dwarf-like figure with a hideous appearance. The most striking features are the deep folds in his skin (as in Kubaba and Humbaba, Near Eastern 'relatives' of the *Gorgo*), the protrusions around his head (often feather-like or resembling the heads of birds or other animals, comparable to the *Medusa's* serpents), a rugged beard, also with spikes or curls, and grinning teeth[125]. Bes is also akin to the Near Eastern goddesses referred to as 'mistresses of the wild animals'. Like the *Gorgo*, he often has lion-like characteristics[126]. Bes is the protector of pregnant women and young mothers. His image has been preserved on thousands of small artefacts: apotropaic objects for private use, as in the case of the *Gorgo*, providing protection to newly conceived and newborn life. Bes, despite a distinctly male appearance (much as the *Gorgo* is often bearded and all but feminine), was the deity of the uterus. There are also various surviving representations of Bes without a head: rising from the headless torso is the infant Harpocrates, who, as the bearer of the secret of the uterus, holds a finger to his mouth. The Egyptian 'head version' of the uterine image was the head of Hathor. Headless body or bodiless head – both are alternative expressions of the Greek myth of *Medusa*. Hathor is recognisable by her omega-like headdress, a symbol of the 'divine uterus'. The same sign is associated with the Mesopotamian mother goddess Nintu, the 'Lady of Birth', and it also bears a resemblance to the Hittite ideogram for 'life'[127]. The motif also appears on Sumerian boundary stones (the uterus as the border zone par excellence). In Etruscan art, an omega-shaped headdress like that of Hathor adorns the head the *Gorgo* – yet another indication of their kinship[128].

The *Gorgo* also has an equivalent in Luristan art (8th-7th centuries BC). There are numerous examples of brooches with a circular piece showing a female head at the centre, similar to the *Gorgo* at the centre of the Greek *aegis*. She is surrounded by *goats* (cf. the *aegis*!), serpents and/or lions, all of which also appear in the *Gorgo* iconography. Stylised flowers and shells, as well as fishes and pomegranates, symbolise fertility. The *Gorgo* has hair similar to that of the Goddess Hathor, her Egyptian counterpart. On some of the brooches from Luristan her head is surrounded by a crown of protrusions. Her eyes are wide open and staring[129].

124 M. Malaise, *Bès et Béset: Métamorphoses d'un démon et naissance d'une démone dans l'Egypte ancienne,* in *Anges et démons, (Homo religiosus, 14)*, Louvain-la-Neuve, 1984.

125 Jan Quaegebeur, *La naine et le bouquetin. Ou l'énigme de la barque en albâtre de Toutankhamon,* ed. Nadine Cherpion, Leuven, Peeters, 1999.

126 A. D. Napier, *Masks, transformation, and paradox,* Berkeley/London, Univ. of California, 1986, passim.

127 BARB 1953, p. 199.

128 BARB 1953, n. 70.

129 Roman Ghirshman, *Perse – Proto – Iranéens, Mèdes, Achéménides, (L'univers des formes)*, Paris, Gallimard, s.d., p. 48-51.

In Chinese art, there is the *Taotie*. This, too, was a terrifying mask. The name is sometimes translated as 'gluttonous ogre', which would make it a direct counterpart of the 'devouring' *Gorgo*. The creature behind the mask is sometimes described as a 'bodiless monster'. In other words, the masked head was considered to operate independently[130]. The motif is widespread in the art of the Shang and Zhou dynasties, implying that it is much longer-lived than the Greek *Gorgo*, with which the *Taotie* shares a number characteristics: the element of terror, the aspect of devouring, and the independent mask head. Strikingly, the ancient sources provide no elucidation about the origins of the 'creature': its *raison d'être* is not framed mythologically, but is considered a given.

There are also parallels to be found in the New World. A ceramic figurine from the Nazca culture (Peru, ca. 100-700) represents an obese, sitting female nude. Painted on here abdomen is a black head with all the characteristics of the *Gorgo*[131]. The extruded tongue coincides with the vulva, which is marked with an incision in the clay. The head is surrounded by various concentric 'halos' of protrusions. The figure seems to bring together the figurative representation of the *Gorgo* with the abstract iconography in the woven textiles.

Representations of a similar being are found in the Paracas culture. A ceramic mask (ca. 300-100 BC) depicts a circular head with staring eyes, a grinning mouth and a garland of protruding snakes[132].

A piece of Chavín earthenware from Cupisnique (Peru, ca. 100-200 BC), in the form of a spondylus shell, has numerous spiky protrusions and a 'face', with two eyes in the shape of cauri shells. The object is reminiscent of ancient Mediterranean and Old European representations of hedgehogs and sea urchins as likenesses of the 'spiky' uterus[133].

The 'oculate being' was also part of the iconography of the Ocucaje culture (Peru, ca. 700-500 BC). Here it appears as a 'dream-like being' with huge eyes and a wide mouth. Often, there are snakes emanating from the head. The actual body of the creature often contains a similar smaller being, sometimes two[134].

In the Aztec culture, there is the so-called calendar stone or *Cuauhxicalli* (1479). At the centre, it features a deity that strongly resembles the archaic *Gorgo*[135].

In the Ocucaje culture, a piece of textile with a depiction of the 'oculate being' was sewn onto a mummy bundle, suggesting the crea-

130 Frank Russell, *A note on the animal content and meaning in late Chou masks,* in *Ornaments of late Chou bronzes,* ed. George Weber, New Brunswick NJ, Rutgers U.P., 1979.

131 *Inca – Peru. 3000 jaar geschiedenis*, exhib. cat., Brussels, Royal Museum of Art and History, 1990, p.122, no. 150 and ill. p. 121. See also no. 151.

132 New York, Brooklyn Museum, Babbott & Ramsey Fund, no. 64.94. Ill.: Anne Paul, *Paracas necropolis textiles: symbolic visions of coastal Peru,* in *The ancient Americas. Art from sacred landscapes,* Chicago, Art Institute, 1992, p. 282.

133 Lima, Museo Nacional de Antropología y Arqueología, n° C54029,I/2923.

134 Ferdinand Anton, *Altindianische Textilkunst aus Peru,* Leipzig, List, 1986², p. 48.

135 Stephen Wilk, *Medusa. Solving the mystery of the Gorgon*, oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 56 (we disagree entirely with the 'explanation' provided by the author).

ture had apotropaic characteristics. In later examples, the 'oculate being' often appears as the compositional barycentre – like the spiky pattern in Berber textile art[136].

An extensive variant of the *Gorgo* complex is found in the representation of the Hindu goddess Kali or Kalika. The goddess with a third eye on her forehead sits cross-legged, merely 'dressed with space'. She has a squint, fangs, an extruded tongue, long loose-hanging hair and serpents around her head, and typically wields a sword. Her two left hands make the sign that 'expels fear' (*abhaya*, similar to the Mediterranean *khamsa*, with joined figures and extended hand) and the sign of the fulfilment of all desires (*vara*). Her other right hand holds a severed head. All around her, vultures and jackals are scavenging. The goddess herself is straddling Shiva's shava (or corpse): at the bottom lies his emanation Niskala, indivisible in an unutterable oneness, and at the top appears Mahakala, the Lord of Time, representing the state of the universe in between two cycles.

Another known type is that of Kali on a lotus flower. On an eight-lobed lotus leaf lies a copulating couple. Standing on top of them is the Goddess, dressed with snakes and a string of skulls. She has just decapitated herself. The severed head drinks from the blood spouting from her wounded neck. Two other jets are drunk by two female attendants. They are Dakini and Varnini, who have sprung from Kali herself (like the three *Gorgons*). Both types of images feature the *viparita*, the 'reversal': the unification with the 'dead' undifferentiated Nothingness, and self-nourishment with the blood of the decapitation. This is the triumph of the active female *maya*, the unfolding of the magnificent pluriformity of life, reigning over the divisionless and ungraspable static Absolute, which is perceived as 'masculine'. According to the philosophical doctrine of Samkhya, the goddess Prakrti represents nature in all its diversity, which develops further until noticed by Purusha (the 'masculine' aspect, uniformity, the Absolute) upon which Prakrti disappears[137].

In Tantric art, we see her in the guise of Kali controlling her onlooker – including sexually. This is illustrative of her power: she sits at the top. And in the second type of image, Kali is Chhinnamasta, who lets the vital energy flow around her divided body. Here she represents a feminine expression of sacrifice, namely the act of self-sacrifice. And, in quite diverse cultures, the sacrifice gives expression to the (desired) structure of the cosmos, society and humanity, and of all analogies and interactions between these various levels[138].

136 New York, Brooklyn Museum, inv. n° 38.121. See *Hali*, n° 85, 1996, p. 75.

137 Charles Malamoud, *Indian speculations about the sex of the sacrifice,* in *Fragments for a history of the human body.* I, ed. Michel Fecher, Ramona Naddaff & Nadia Tazi, (*Zone, 3*), New York, Zone, 1989, pp. 75-103.

138 *Autour de la déesse hindou,* ed. M. Biardeau, (*Purusartha*, 5), Paris, Ehess, 1981.

The similarities between Kali and the Greek *Medusa* are clear to see. Her nature is *threefold* and her appearance *fearsome*. She is associated with a multiple and uncontainable creative force. Kali constitutes the barycentre and dialectic essence of the dangerous and the healing aspects of *seeing* and *being seen*, of *killing* and *being killed*. As the lethal gaze of the *Medusa* protects against the evil eye, so the terrifying Kali makes the sign that dispels all fear.

There are also parallels to be drawn between the *Gorgo* complex and other aspects of Kali. The 'uterine' *Gorgo* and related concepts stand for the perpetually creating, always changing feminine principle. In the Hindu perception, this is united with the rigid masculine counterpart (which she, for that matter, dominates). The flow of blood from the *matrix*/*Gorgo* is a flow of life, the vital flux that keeps the creative process going. This flow is released by her own doing (Kali, the abstract textile *Gorgo*) or, in subsequent versions, by that of the masculine principle (Perseus). Kali – Gorgo/Medusa – Ghoula – oculate being – nameless motif: all are emanations of the paradoxical dimensions of feminine (pro)creative potential.

The nameless motif in weaving: A cross-cultural perspective

We have mentioned a number of parallels with the *Gorgo* figure. More important, however, is the universality of the abstract 'nameless motif' in feminine weaving art.

In Andean weaving, a similar motif is referred to as *inti* or 'sun'. Researchers traditionally connect this with the historical sun cult of the Inca civilisation, which is argued to live on in folk weaving art. However, the name is clearly a generalisation of deeper-lying contents. The spiked diamond is referred to as 'sun' because of the protruding, radiating aspect of the mysterious entity. Hence the sun became synonymous with the uterine, or, at an abstract level, with the matrixial forces[139].

In Pre-Columbian weaving, the motif is recognisable in the form of a mysterious creature referred to in the literature as the 'oculate being', consisting in a bodiless head with protrusions and accentuated eyes. One of the earliest known examples features on a ceremonial textile from 100 BC. Here, the head appears in a rectangular version of the 'birth symbol', a representation that is also found on innumerable

139 Similarly in ancient Egypt, the image of the radiating sun stands for the birth of a child: Franz RENGGLI, *The sunrise as the birth of a baby: the prenatal key to Egyptian mythology*, in *Journal of prenatal and perinatal psychology and health*, 16, 2002.

Central Asian fabrics. The 'oculate being', with its radiating protrusions, was very common in the Southern Andes from the end of the Early Horizon to the beginning of the Early Intermediate, i.e. from ca. 300 BC to ca. 300 AD. These regions saw flourishing agrarian cultures with a mythology different to those of 'masculine' systems as existed during the latter Inca Empire.[140]

In Eastern weaving and textile art, the central motif is/was known as the medallion[141], the 'rose' or the 'lake'[142]. It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a comprehensive overview of articulations, as there are literally thousands of examples from Islamic Spain[143], the Caucasus[144], Anatolia[145]/Turkey[146], Persia[147], Afghanistan[148], …

The motif was also prominent in European domestic weaving[149], from where it spread to other forms of art, where it was not considered to manifest itself.

The 'nameless motif' in European art

Across the world, feminine domestic weaving presents itself as an abstract art form. However, the ideogram of the 'nameless motif' also impacted on masculine figurative art. As previously mentioned, the *Medusa* (or the 'jelly fish') developed into a recognisable phallocentric version in ancient Mediterranean cultures. Ancient and subsequent Western art was after all figurative, so that the ideogram had to be moulded into a form that conformed with this aesthetic.
In 'decorative', 'applied' art, the artist enjoyed greater freedom: here we encounter innumerable stylised manifestations of the 'nameless motif': 'cartouches', acanthus structures, medallions with extrusions etc[150].

In Europe, both variants occur: the abstract version in the 'decorative' arts and the anthropomorphous version in the figurative arts. However, very little remains of the European production of carpets or textiles for domestic use, as such pieces were not recognised as 'art' and hence were never admitted to the artistic canon, so that they were never treated with the same kind of care as 'true' works of art. The 'original' form most definitely also existed in Europe, as is apparent from the Finnish *ryijy* carpets. Hence the 'nameless motif' ap-

140 Perhaps the type originated even further back in time. A relief on the New Temple of Chavín de Huántar depicts a primeval Gorgonesque deity with *strombus* and *spondylus* shells and serpents for hair. See John Rowe, *Form and meaning in Chavín art,* in *Peruvian archaeology, Selected readings,* 1978, p. 103.

141 M. Dimand, *Medallion carpets*, in *Art Bulletin*, 6, 1924, pp. 82-84.

142 Christiane Herringman, *Notes on Oriental carpet patterns. III. Ghiordes rugs, rose and pomegranate patterns*, in *Burlington magazine*, 14, 1908, n° 69, pp. 147-158.

143 Washington DC, Textile Museum, n° R84.8. *Hali*, n° 92, 1997.

144 *Hali*, n° 68, 1993, p. 103.

145 *Hali*, n° 67, 1993, p. 83.

146 *Hali*, n° 67, 1993, p. 129.

147 *Hali*, n° 84, 1996, p. 107.

148 *Hali*, n° 109, 2000, p. 38.

149 For example: Albert Sautier, *Tapis rustiques italiens*, (*Monographies des arts décoratifs*, 1), Milan, Carlo Valcarenghi, 1922, pl. 15 & 31 right (purely abstract + semi-figurative nameless motifs), 21 & 30 right (abstract).

150 Joseph Rykwert, *The dancing column. On order in architecture*, Cambridge MA, The MIT Press, 1998.

Fig. 27
Anonymous, 17th century (?). *Tarasca*. Tarascon, Municipal Museum.

pears in a wide variety of manifestations: an irregular 'pomegranate' with extrusions and interior elements[151] or surrounded by dots[152], an irregular 'flickering' pattern consisting of white-red-blue zigzags[153], dissociated general structures across the entire surface of carpets[154], a 'vessel' with hook-like protrusions[155], an irregular hexagon with concentric framings[156], a shape with a thick envelope with extrusions[157], a heart-shape with phantasmic friezes[158], a 'medallion' as a 'birth symbol'[159], an exuberant 'medallion' with a 'flame' at the centre and proliferating rims[160], an irregular diamond with 'ejected' or eccentric colour fields[161], 'flowers' with irregular halos[162] …

The above also shows that 'free' domestic textile art was not constricted to a particular ethnic group. In the peripheral regions, which remained 'archaic' for a comparatively long time, a sufficient number of such artefacts have been preserved to be able to speak of a genuine tradition. Examples that come to mind are items from rural Finland, Morocco and Iran. The Finno-Ugric, the Berber-Arabic and the Indo-European cultures have in common that this kind of art was feminine-based. Hence, one can rightly speak of a *cross-cultural* tradition.

151 Pirkko Sihvo, *Rakas ryijy. Suomalaisten ryijyt*, s.l., Museovirasto/Suomen Kansallismuseo, 2009, p. 54, ill. 93 (tapestry from 1778); p. 63, ill. 119 (1799).
152 Sihvo 2009, p. 64, ill. 121 (1779).
153 Sihvo 2009, p. 57, ill. 101 (1780).
154 Sihvo 2009, p. 62, ills. 112 (1795 ?) and 114 (1791); p. 158, ill. 291 (1786).
155 Sihvo 2009, p. 65, ill. 122 (1785).
156 Sihvo 2009, p. 120, ill. 221 (18th century)
157 Sihvo 2009, p. 124, ill. 227 (top left and right)(1798).
158 Sihvo 2009, p. 132, ill. 236 (above the date) (1784).
159 Sihvo 2009, p. 149, ill. 270 (1790).
160 Sihvo 2009, p. 153, ill. 281 (1821); p. 154, ill. 283 (1811); p. 155, ill. 284 (1795).
161 Sihvo 2009, p. 193, ill. 373 (centre) (1803).
162 Sihvo 2009, p. 194, ill. 377 (1815).

We have already discussed how, in the most basic articulation of the so-called 'free style', the 'nameless motif' in North African and Iranian domestic textile art commonly exhibits a core of chaotic spots. These may be referred to as a *matrix marmorea*. As we have argued elsewhere, this aniconography is fundamentally connected with an unutterable perception of matrixial potential. The fact that its first and directional expression occurred in weaving by women who lived in gender segregation and worked in small 'archaic' communities should not come as a surprise. However oppressive these communities were to women, they did leave some room for a sometimes highly idiosyncratic 'feminine culture', which was only subsequently systematically dismantled in the 'Early Modern' societal models of Western Europe.

As we have argued, both in abstract weaving and in the predominantly figurative art of Europe, *marble* or similarly spotted 'tachist' fields had served from Antiquity as an icon for the unutterable creative forces and the aesthetic drive at the *feminine, natural and divine* side. Or perhaps it is more appropriate to call it an 'an-icon', for there is never evidence of a 're-presentation' or depiction in the true sense of the word[163]. Often, these 'an-icons' were unpredictable, 'chaotic' patterns of blots; sometimes they took the form of irregular *matrices*, as in the case of the 'nameless motif'. In the 'decorative' arts, 'containers' such as medallions and cartouches, sometimes encompass chaotic fields of blots and 'moving' serpentines and lines, which we may refer to as the *primordium*. They evoke the 'primordial' creational energies of a divine, natural and/or feminine origin.

In a domestic context, one finds furniture decorated in this manner. Examples are a tabletop from before 1557, designed by Giorgio Vasari, with a twofold centre with two primordiums[164], and an early-17th-century table from the archducal studios of Florence, with a central plate in onyx, an imageless image of creational energies[165]. In the decoration of Baroque churches, we encounter marble slabs, constructed around the primordium, or innumerable imitations of such marble panels, where the nameless motif occupies a central place. We also refer to the Cappella Cornaro at Santa Maria della Vittoria, more specifically to the marble panel under Bernini's sculpture[166].

163 Paul VANDENBROECK, *Matrix marmorea. The sub-symbolic iconography of the creative energies in Europe and North Africa*, in *New perspectives in iconology*, ed. Barbara BAERT, Brussels, ASP, 2012.

164 Rome, Banca di Roma. EAD., *ibid.*, p. 202, ill. 4.

165 Madrid, Museo del Prado. Annamaria GIUSTI, *Da Roma a Firenze: gli esordi del commesso rinascimentale*, in *Eternità e nobiltà di materia. Itinerario artistico fra le pietre policrome*, Firenze, Edizioni polistampa, 2003, p. 215, ill. 17.

166 Caterina NAPOLEONE, *Cultura antiquaria nel collezionismo dei marmi colorati tra XVI e XVII secolo*, in *Eternità… op. cit.*,p. 179, ill. 6.

167 Alexander VAN MILLINGEN, *Byzantine churches in Constantinople*, London, MacMillan, 1912, pp. 288-322, spec. p. 289.

168 W. MESSERER, *Mandorla (Gloriole, ganzfigurige Aura)*, in *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie*, ed. Engelbert KIRSCHBAUM, 3, Rome-Vienna, Herder, 1971, col. 147-149. It is striking that such a prominent motif in Christian art should receive such a brief entry in the aforementioned lexicon and attract virtually no scholarly attention whatsoever. See for example A. KRÜCKE, *Der Nimbus und verwandte Attribute*, Strasbourg, 1915, pp. 135-143; W. COOK, *The iconography of the globe mandorla*, in *Art Bulletin*, 11, 1929, pp. 38 ff.; B. ROWLAND, *The iconography of the flame halo*, in *Bulletin of the Fogg Museum of Art*, 11, 1949, pp. 10-16; Karl von SPIESS, *Marksteine der Volkskunst*, 2, Berlin, 1942, pp. 278 ff.

169 Bilbao, Museo de Bellas Artes, n° 69/226. Paneel, 122 x 64.5 cm.

170 Gerona, Museu d'Art.

171 Perpignan, Musée Rigaud.

172 Douai, Musée de la Chartreuse. FRIEDLÄNDER, ENP, vol. 12, pl. 50.

The non-man-made or acheiropoietic image of God and the divine aura

In the Byzantine Church of the Holy Saviour in Chora in Istanbul, a caption beside the mosaic of the Saviour reads: 'Dwelling-place of the living' (hē Chōra tōn zōntōn), while the text accompanying the mosaic of the Holy Virgin says: 'Container of the uncontainable' (hē Chōra tou Achōrētou)[167]. Chōra, in a religious context, refers to an unknown or unknowable place or space. In the Chora church of Constantinople, the *'matrices marmoreae'* are positioned quite conspicuously, including on both sides of the Birth. As will become apparent, in Christian art, the mandorla occupies a similar, albeit more codified place.

In traditional Christian art, a *mandorla* (Italian for 'almond') is the *vesica piscis*-shaped aureole surrounding holy figures. It appears from the 5th century onwards as a symbol of God in the mosaics of the Santa Maria Maggiore (ca. 432-440) in Rome (central of the three angels beside Abraham), as well as in themes such as the *transfiguration* (icon in Saint Catherine's Monastery on the Sinai peninsula, ca. 560), the *apocalyptic* Christ (triumphal arch mosaic at San Paolo fuori le mura, Rome), and the *maiestas domini* (apse mosaic in Saloniki, Hosios David, ca 480; 5th-century mural at the Baouit Monastery, Egypt). In Byzantine art, the mandorla is associated mostly with the theophany of the transfiguration on Mount Tabor, where Christ became radiant, thereby revealing his divine nature. Similar halos typically also appear in representations of Jesus' descent into Hell, the Ascension and the Final Judgment.

In Byzantine art, the mandorla is often rendered with protrusions (as in the frescos of Staro Nagoricane or Gracanica, early 14th century), and in the West, too, there are numerous examples of spiked or flamed mandorlas[168].

Such renderings include an *Ascension* by Nicolás Solana from ca. 1430[169], the *Transfiguration* on the 15th-century *Altarpiece of Saint Michael* from the church of Castelló d'Empúries[170], and the *Trinitarian Pietà* on the retable of the Llotja de Mar (1489) in Perpignan[171].
Similar examples are found in Netherlandish painting. In the *Polyptich of the Glorification of the Holy Trinity* by Jean Bellegambe, the glorified Christ is rendered with a halo of irregular protuberances, a motif that is enhanced by the medallions in the alcove behind and by the shell above his head[172]. In the *All Saints Triptych* (1523) by Jacob

Cornelisz van Oostsanen[173], the irregular concentric circles of radiating clouds form a huge 'nameless motif' – symbol of the creative cosmic principle – behind the Trinity.

In the Middle Ages and subsequently, Mary the Mother of God is also often depicted within a mandorla. A flaming halo surrounds Mary and infant in Pisanello's *Apparition of the Virgin* (ca 1445)[174] and on a painting of the same subject matter by Rueland Frueauf (ca 1505)[175]. This iconographic principle would be preserved up into the Baroque era, including on other continents. The example shown here is a 17th-century painting from the Convento de Santa Clara in Tunja, Columbia.

Sometimes the mandorla literally reiterates the apotropaic aspects of the nameless motif, as in a *Coronation of the H. Virgin* by the 15th-century artist Bartolommeo di Tommaso with its eye-dazzling rows of brightly coloured blocks[176].

In other instances the motif appears on the abdomen of Mary herself[177], abundantly emphasising the uterine connotation. The motif of the pomegranate belongs to the same register[178], as does that of the pine cone (such as the gigantic pine cone from the ancient Baths of Agrippa in the *Cortile della Pigna* in the Vatican).

The abyssal face of the Creator

As the official art of Europe from the Middle Ages up to the 20th century was figurative, it is rather self-evident that the *energetics* of the 'nameless motif' should be transferred to a figurative shape. Its arcane nature meant that it was first incorporated into religious art. Between the 13th and the 19th centuries, one such manifestation was the *vera icon*, a supposed imprint of the features of Christ on the cloth with which a woman had wiped the blood and sweat from his face on the way to Calvary. This woman became a mythical saint, known as Veronica. It has been argued that this name was a vernacular derivation from Latin *vera icon* or 'true image', though a more probably explanation lies in the connection with Greek name Berenike. Veronica is the saint of the true face.[179] In popular devotion, she soon came to be identified with the 'woman with an issue of blood' (*Haemorrhoissa*)[180], who was cured after twelve years of bleeding by a touch of Christ's garment. She became the patron saint of linen seamstresses and laun-

173 Kassel, Gemäldegalerie, n° 30. FRIEDLÄNDER, ENP, vol. 12, pl. 136.
174 London, National Gallery.
175 Klosterneuburg, Stiftmuseum.
176 Vatican Museum, Pinacoteca, n° 296. The filling of the blot is very similar to those in the 'eye-dazzling' Algerian or Tunesian kilims.
177 Geraardsbergen, Benedictine priory of Hunnegem. Photo: KIK-IRPA XO22856.
178 Friedrich MUTHMANN, *Der Granatapfel. Symbol des Lebens in der antiken Welt*, Bern, Abegg Stiftung, 1982.
179 Georges DIDI-HUBERMAN, *Un sang d'images,* in *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse,* 32, 1985, pp. 123-153.
180 Cf. Barbara BAERT, *'Who touched me and my clothes ?' The healing of the woman with the haemorrhage in early medieval visual culture*, in *Antwerp Royal Museum Annual* 2009, pp. 10-51.

dresses, and she was invoked against haemorrhaging. In the mystery plays of the 15th and 16th centuries, she appeared as a linen vendor[181]. She was blind, like the Roman soldier Longinus, who pierced Christ's side with his lance. As Longinus regained sight by a droplet of blood from Christ, so Veronica was healed by placing the cloth with the true icon on her eyes. Here, too, there is a remarkable tension between seeing and not seeing. Veronica is associated with menses, and a menstruating woman was deemed to cloud reflections in a mirror. Veronica was blind, but (Christ's) blood gave her back her sight. The eyes of the suffering face stare directly at the viewer, who is thus invited to stare back equally intensely. 'Mirror yourself in Me' in order to be 'reformed' to the Christological ideal – an invitation that ran parallel to the intentions of the Orthodox iconography. The gaze of the True Icon was deemed to dispel evil influences and to invite a reciprocal gaze. Hence, the *vera icon* was attributed apotropaic qualities in folk culture, much as the *Gorgo* had in Antiquity. People would carry a small equivalent of the *vera icon* on their person as a means of protection against the evil eye and other dangerous forces. *Veronica* was venerated mainly by religious women, but her appeal extended to more secular circles. Her cult was given a strong impulse by the new feminine religious movements of the 13th century.[182]

The *vera icon* is an imprint of suffering, of painful bloodletting. The bearer of the imprint is a white cloth. For women in Europe, it was, within the confines of the ubiquitous Christian iconography, the only available idiom for subliminally suggesting their discomfort and suffering at childbirth, menstruation and pathologic bleeding, but also their life-giving and life-restoring power. The abyssal gaze, the blood, and the crown with protrusions of hair and radials make the *vera icon* the medieval counterpart of the Ancient protective *Gorgo* and the spiky circular motif in North African weaving. Like the *Gorgo*, the *vera icon* was fundamentally dual in nature. Many medieval texts comment on the ugliness and beauty of the True Face. There are also several known examples of black renderings of the *vera icon*, despite a lack of religious substantiation for such articulations. It has been speculated that this blackness is an expression of the absolute pain and dejection of the Sufferer, or the lowly human nature of the viewer, who is elevated to a higher plane by the gaze of the *vera icon*, or the 'enigmatic mirror' (*speculum in aenigmate*, Paul) that would subsequently become a gaze from face to face. However, the true reason eludes any iconographic explanation.

181 Yvonne VERDIER, *Façons de dire, façons de faire: la laveuse, la couturière, la cuisinière,* Paris, Gallimard, 1979.

182 Paul VANDENBROECK et al., *Hooglied*, exhib. cat., Brussels, Palais des Beaux-Arts, 1994, pp. 58-59; Jeffrey HAMBURGER, *The visual and the visionary. Art and female spirituality in late medieval Germany*, New York, Zone, 1998, pp. 317-381 (Vision and the Veronica, spec. p. 366); Barbara BAERT, *The gendered visage: facets of the Vera Icon*, in *Antwerp Royal Museum Annual*, 2000, pp. 10-43; EAD., *Kijken naar het ware gelaat van Christus*, in *Onze Alma Mater* (Leuven), 54, 2000, pp. 492-520.

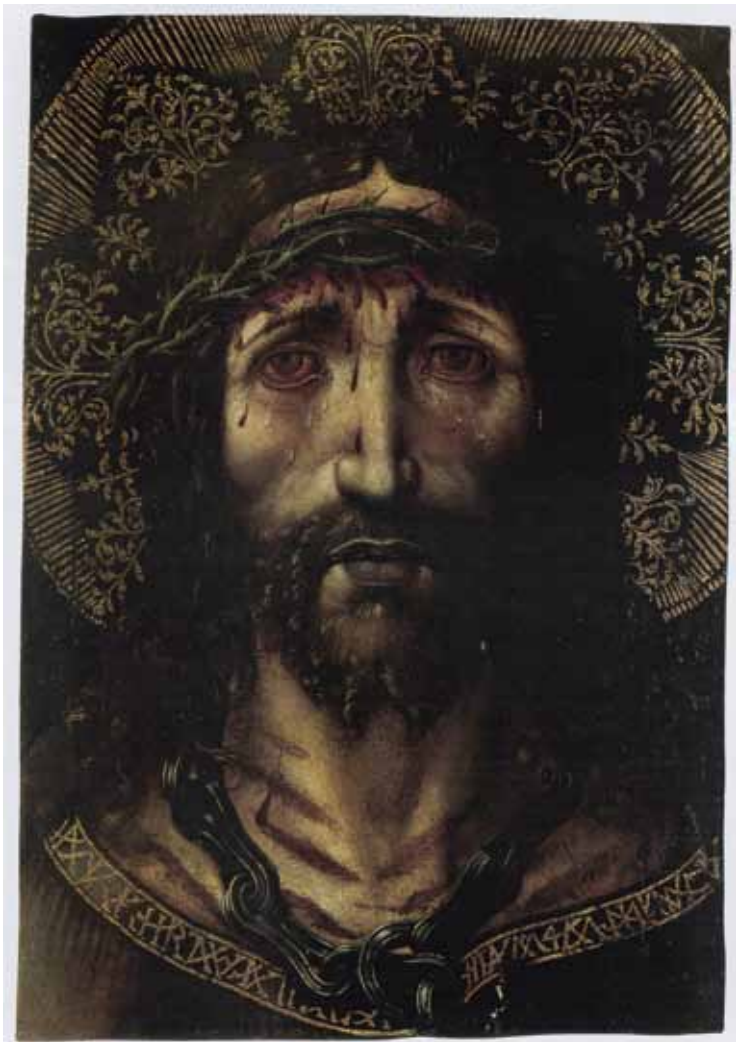

Fig. 28
Joan Gascó, Vic, c. 1513. *Vera Icon*. Vic, Museu Episcopal, n° MEV 1947.

The *vera icon* is the matrixial image of the transformation, the rebirth of suffering and sinful humanity. It has both a threatening aspect, associated with pain and death, and an aspect of protection, positive energy and vitality.

The *vera icon* represents Christ in his human appearance; Jesus' abstract divinity finds expression in the Eucharist, the white host, as captured and visualised in the monstrance or ostensory. And the latter is one of the phantasmal structures in Western art that are closely related to the 'nameless motif'. From the 13th century, when the notion of *desiderium videndi* appeared forcefully on the scene, the monstrance

183 Barbara BAERT, *A head on a platter. The Johannesschüssel or the image of the mediator and the precursor*, in *Antwerp Royal Museum Annual 2003*, pp. 9-41.

184 Paul VANDENBROECK, *De energetica van een onkennelijk lichaam. Het sacrale en het beeldloos-sublieme in de religieuze cultuur van de vroegmoderne tijd*, in *De hemel in tegenlicht. Macht en devotie in het aartsbisdom Mechelen, 1559-2009*, exhib. cat., Tielt, Lannoo, 2009, pp. 174-205. English version: *The energetics of an unknowable body. The sacred and the aniconic-sublime in early modern religious culture*, in *Backlit heaven. Power and devotion in the archdiocese of Machelen, 1559-2009*, exhibition catalogue, Tielt, Lannoo, 2009, pp. 174-205.

came to the fore as the exhibitor of the Eucharist. The Eucharist itself may be seen as a life-giving and transformative essence, divine in nature – as well as uterine and matrixial. Especially between the 16th and 19th centuries, the monstrance, with its spiky 'eye', was often surrounded by inwardly and outwardly twisting protrusions.

The facial features of the *prodromos* ('forerunner') John the Baptist was similarly represented. In Oriental Christian art, the saint was given a dark, emaciated appearance with eyes 'that can see the other side', and a face surrounded by wild, spiky hair. In Western art, this type of face appears primarily in renderings of the platter with John's decapitated head. The similarity with the Medusa is again quite striking[183]. In this instance, the image is horrible and protective – but so too was that of the Medusa. Yet the Byzantine face of the Forerunner exudes a sense of mysterious darkness, as well as an element of – as Renaissance artists would call it – *terribilità*.

The irreducible duality of the 'nameless motif' and its figurative variant, the Medusa, was indigestible to subsequent monotheistic cultures. Hence, in Western Christian art, it had to disappear in its original form and to be divided into a 'good' and an 'evil' essence. Insofar as this matter was controllable, of course, which it was only very partially.

The 'transposed' energetic body as a site of the 'nameless motif': altar, monstrance, exposition throne

As we have argued elsewhere, while the body occupied a central place in Western religious art of the 16th to 18th centuries, its physical aspect could be visualised only to a limited extent[184]. In order to be able to represent the 'energetic', 'non-realistic' body, artists created 'transposed' images, which 'officially' did not represent a body, but nonetheless evoked its energetics. In this manner, three remarkable forms of 'applied' art were developed in the context of Western religious figuration: altar, monstrance, and exposition throne. These three elements have quite often incorporated substructures that effectively paraphrase the 'nameless motif'. They have in common that they create the *site where the transsubstantiation of the host takes place, where the host is shown, where (an image of) holiness is presented*. It is this

shared dimension that inspired Western artists – unknown to themselves! – to recreate the matrixial 'nameless motif'. We have argued elsewhere how these three forms of art are 'auratic' expressions of the 'transposed', energetic body. And this body in turn constitutes a part of the *matrix*, not as a physical entity, but rather as an *energeticon*. Hence it should not come as a surprise that the matrixial 'nameless motif' appears in innumerable shapes and guises as a part of the transposed body.

Fig. 29
Hans von Reutlingen, 1520. Sun monstrance. Detail. Aachen, Domschatz.

Whereas in the 15th and 16th centuries the structure of an altarpiece or retable consisted of a more or less elaborate frame around a painting or sculptural ensemble, in the Baroque era of the 17th century altars developed into single dynamic and multimedial works of art. The altar became a throbbing, pulsating body, as it were, composed of architectural, sculptural and painterly components. The Baroque altarpiece becomes one dynamic body: verticalizing but also *expansive* in every direction, bound to a location but sprawling dynamically. The boundaries became hazy, blurred, and a sense of movement, vertically and horizontally, invaded the composition. From the fourth quarter of the 17th century, the dynamic barycentre migrated upward, as in a process of decorporalisation. The central part remained quite static, to support the upward movement. Later, the central imagery is 'pulled' upward, restricted only by the architrave, and subsequently evolved towards a single vertical composition that often possessed a dual core. In the third quarter of the 18th century, the barycentre became more volatile: the essential visual structure would rise into the sky and 'explode' like firework or 'stick' to the apsidal vault in conclusion of the vision. These structures, too, often adhere to the model of the 'nameless motif', incorporated into a *unified, pulsating body*, *brimming with 'meaningless ornaments', without distinction between 'core' and 'frame'*. The Baroque altar is an 'auratic' form, as is apparent from, among other things, the often demonstrable structural correspondences with the exposition throne.

Exposition thrones

A second 'abode' for the 'nameless motif' is found in so-called 'exposition thrones'. As their name suggests, exposition thrones are open structures designed for the purpose of exhibiting a cultic image, ei-

ther in a house of worship or during a procession. Exposition thrones most probably already existed in the Middle Ages, although the examples known to us all date from between ca. 1600-1900.

As these structures were usually entirely open, they provided no protection against the sun, rain and dust. So, in this sense, they served no practical purpose whatsoever. Clearly their raison d'être lay elsewhere. They were essentially abstract, while the religious art of the day was figurative. Exposition thrones consist of an open structure that is suggestive of an *aura*: they encompass or duplicate the cultic image by means of a typically abstract form that changes with time; naturally they followed the stylistic preferences of their day at least to some degree, but there is more to their evolution than fashion alone. Especially in the 17th-18th centuries, types developed that reiterate the outlines of the nameless motif, either as a component or as a compositional principle.

First and foremost, there are exposition thrones with Salomonic columns. While such helical columns were very popular during the Baroque era[185], they originated in Antiquity. Their spiral pattern is always complementary, twisting in the opposite sense. In tribal and rural cultures, such a double volute is a common visualisation of the primordial energy: two diametrically opposed spirals were associated with the generation of the cosmos[186]. A similar dual and opposed 'twist' is also apparent in the 'birth symbol'.

In the Baroque exposition thrones, the four twisted columns often ended in an open, pear or onion-shaped baldachin, sometimes topped by a crown or a radiating sun, or occasionally with a more complex structure. Sculptures of *putti or angels* are indicative in religious art of a sacral space or moment, while in profane art since Antiquity they often refer to the motif of love or fertility. Hence they have connotations of sacrality and creative potentiality; in the case of exposition thrones, this creative potentiality is sacral, which again is a connotation inherent in the nameless motif.

Quite often the main structure consists in foliaged friezes. The column structure sometimes becomes narrower near the top and often bulges towards the centre. It is commonly supported at the bottom by volutes or volute-like *cornucopiae* or angels. Volutes can also be found on top of the structure, and the friezes often emanate from volute-like twists. In general, such structures tend to exude a sense

185 Stefania TUZI, *Il tempio e le colonne di Salomone dall'antichità al Barocco*, Roma, Gangemi, 2002. Older writings: Victor CHAPOT, *La colonne torse et le décor en hélice dans l'art antique*, Paris, 1907; Etienne SCHWEITZER, *La colonne en spirale, image de la vie*, Metz, 1963.

186 Viviana PÂQUES, *La religion des esclaves*, Bergamo, Moretti & Vitali, 1992.

of swooping *exuberant ascendancy*. Sometimes a lateral bulge adds a sense of sideways expansion, while a concentration of forms at the top upholds the overall upward dynamics. Similar structures – albeit without the characteristic Baroque exuberance – can be found in much older 'representations' of the un-imaginable 'paradisiacal' and/or mortuary energies, as in Early Christian art and folk art[187]. In the 18th century, the foliated friezing could take on the appearance of four 'cripple' columns. These could narrow to assume a pear shape or, more rarely, an upside down pear shape, or they could resemble two intertwined medallion shapes. A notable feature is their interior 'struggle' between convex and concave forms. Upwardly, they tendrils sometimes bend towards each other, as if to clasp the head of the sculpture standing inside. Their overall appearance is dynamically stirred or even fierce, as if bent by the expulsive force of the holy essence contained inside. This type, too, is sometimes dominated by heavy, yet dynamic structures. The alternation between convex and concave shapes evokes a paradoxical experience: the essence is contained in the concurrence of or the tension between opposed forces. The tension of concave versus convex is reminiscent of the so-called 'birth symbol', with curling protrusions to the inside as well as the outside adding to the sense of paradox: twisting inwardly in order to expand outwardly, and vice versa. This motif, too, is cross-culturally attested[188].

187 Karl von SPIESS, *Baum und Quelle*, in *Marksteine der Volkskunst*, 2, Berlin, 1942, pp. 1-72; Waldemar DEONNA, *Sacra vitis*, in *Les cahiers techniques de l'art*, 2, 1952, n° 3, pp. 1-64.

188 Max ALLEN, *The birth symbol in traditional women's art from Eurasia and the Western Pacific*, Toronto, Museum for Textiles, 1981.

The monstrance

From the 13th century, the sense of *desiderium videndi* – an uncontrollable desire to see the essence, the divine and thus humanly imperceptible body of Christ – grew stronger. This found collective expression in the celebration of festivals such as *Corpus Christi*, in the devotion to the Body, and in the invention of the *monstrance*. The word 'monstrance' is derived from Latin *monstrare*, 'to show', and, exhibited at its centre is the white and imageless host. This abstraction is the absolute aesthetic centre, around which gravitate myriads of visual images in the Christian houses of prayer. From the 14th century, the monstrance developed into a Gothic tower in precious metal openwork. This type would remain in vogue in the Gothic and/or Renaissance formal idiom up until around 1650. From the 17th up into the 20th centuries, a prominent type was the 'solar' monstrance,

Fig. 30
Rueland Frueauf, c. 1505. Apparition of the Holy Virgin in an irregular spiky halo. Klosterneuburg, Stiftmuseum.

where the host was surrounded by a spiky aureole. Sometimes the halo is the main component of the artefact, sometimes it is in turn surrounded, enhanced, supported and/or crowned by other shapes. These forms are often highly dynamic and expansive, but they rarely display the paradoxical combination of concave and convex elements that is so common in exposition thrones. The aura of the host, therefore, is 'steadier', less paradoxical – and hence less matrixial. Yet the monstrance remains matrixial at its core: an *unknowable essence*, surrounded by spikes/protrusions/rays – much like the nameless motif in its most arcane dimension. This essence is the source of all life (*fons vitae*). It should be noted here that the host is *not* a symbol; it is the actual *Presence* of a cosmic life-giving and recreational potentiality.

Fig. 31
Antonius Claeissins (c. 1536-1613). St. Anna with stylized pomegranate as 'nameless motif'. Sotheby's Amsterdam, 14 may 2002.

The motif complex of a radiating unknownable entity is also the principal icon in weaving, in global perspective[189]. In its abstract articulation, which was characteristic of feminine weaving art, it manifested itself as a pattern of blots or patches, often white, red and/or black, and ranging in appearance from chaotic to ordered. In the 'original' stage – which, diachronically speaking, may have dated back to the Neolithic – a weaver would have designed her own matrixial icons. Gradually, though, these designs were stylised into fixed, possibly community-wide patterns. The central medallion in 'Oriental' carpets (from China to Morocco) evolved from it. However, women weavers from Iran to the Maghreb continued to weave their own originary and distinctive *matrixes* up into the 20th century.

In the masculine figurative art of the Mediterranean world, the 'nameless motif' became the *Medusa* (or one of her counterparts in other cultures). Up into Late Mediaeval and Early Modern art, one frequently encounters images of warriors with shields depicting a fearsome, apotropaic head; sometimes the edges of the shield are curled, as in a cartouche or medallion[190]. The *Medusa* icon is a presentation (rather than a representation) of the sheer divine and sometimes sinister female, uterine/matrixial potential for creation. Here lies an analogy with the host, which is likewise presentation rather than representation. In patriarchal religions, this creative potential has – out of 'uterus envy', as it were – been appropriated by the male creator-gods, who are thus able to magnify their own creative power

189 Paul Vandenbroeck, *Azetta. Berbervrouwen en hun kunst*, Brussels-Ghent, Palais des Beaux-Arts/Ludion, 2000, cap. IV.

190 See for example Jesús María González De Zárate, *El Palacio Escoriaza-Esquibel como imagen del buen ciudadano y de la mansión del amor*, Vitoria, Ayuntamiento, 1987, ill. p. LV.

to cosmic dimensions. This process has also occurred in Christianity, hence the design of the solar monstrance. Obviously theological images of Christ such as the 'Sun of Justice' also played a role, but this epithet is merely very secondary in the doctrine of the *transsubstantiation*. The collective and spontaneous formal choices that were made in the arts were no doubt inspired by deeper-lying sentiments regarding the transcendental, meta-matrixial, creative powers of the Godhead.

The 'other' side of white sacrality: The terrifying manifestation of the matrix

We have previously mentioned that the nameless motif in weaving was not just a positive icon. It had essentially *sinister* dimensions, which came fully to expression in the myth of the Medusa or the Gorgo. It is well established that beings or entities with a dual, contradictory nature were quite 'acceptable' in the archaic and feminine religious perception, and that it was only subsequently, under more phallocentrically categorising systems, that they were divided into separate 'good' and 'evil' entities. From Mediaeval times, what was considered to be spiky, terrifying and feminine was also commonly presented as such in urban processions. The *tarasca*, *tarasque*, *doudou*, *cuca* or dragon, or however the being may have otherwise been called, was central to the folk imagination. We encounter it in many countries of Europe, including the Netherlands[191], France[192], Spain[193], Italy … Very often the dragon appeared in Corpus Christi processions, which depicted the social system of which it was an essential (though also terrifying and dangerous) part. Much as the Medusa was decapitated by the hero Perseus and his men[194], so the dragon was slain by a saint (St. Michael or St. George) or by the community[195]. Similarly, female saints with names beginning in *mar-* (Margareta – Marina – Martha) were conquerors of dragons. Striking examples are the breathtaking image on the *Santa Marina Retable* by the Master of Palanquinos[196] and Raphael's[197] rendering of *St. Margaret and the Dragon*. Here the beast's mouth has become a phantasmatic *vagina dentata* – as so often in male imagination. The 'sinister feminine' aspect had to be overcome by 'masculine heroism' – at least in phallocentric Europe. The memory of the precious feminine side of the dragon was retained in the motif of the treasure or the pearl that is guarded by the monster, which appears in innumerable fairytales,

191 A. Piette, *Dragon légendaire et mise en scène rituelle. Essai de description et d'interprétation du combat de saint Georges et du dragon à Mons*, in *Ethnographie*, 84, 1988, pp. 45-63; *Les géants processionnels en Europe. Catalogue de l'exposition organisée à Ath du 22 août au 30 septembre 1981*, s.l., Ministère de la Communauté française, 1981, pp. 13, 51-59, 61-65, 101-103; Jean Markale, *Le Mont-Saint-Michel et l'énigme du dragon*, Paris, Pygmalion, 1987; Michel de Waha, *De neergevelde draak*, in *Sint Michiel en zijn symboliek*, ed. Mina Martens et al., Brussels, Éditions d'Art Lucien De Meyer, 1979, pp. 39-102.

192 G. Cauvet, *Les origines de Tarascon et la Tara*, in *Bulletin de la société de géographie d'Alger*, 36, 1931, pp. 79-101; Louis Dumont, *La tarasque*, Paris, Gallimard, 1951.

193 Juan Pablo Sánchez Beltrán, *Apuntes al estudio del dragón como elemento festivo en Oriente y Occidente: China y España*, in *Revista HMiC*, 5, 2007 [http://seneca.uab.es/hmic].

194 E.S. Hartland, *The legend of Perseus*, 3 vols., London, 1894-96; S. Davis, *Argeiphontes in Homer*, in *Greece and Rome*, 22, 1953.

195 *El drac en la cultura medieval*, Barcelona, Fundació La Caixa, 1987.

196 *Colección Pedro Masaveu. Pinturas sobre tabla (ss. XV-XVI)*, exhib.cat., Oviedo-Gijón, Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias, 1999, pp. 54-57, n° 12g: 'Apparition of a dragon'; 12h: 'The saint retrieved from the body of the dragon'.

197 Paris, Louvre, n° 607. Canvas, 178 x 122 cm; Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, n° GG171. Canvas, 191 x 123 cm. Both painted c. 1518.

198 Paul Newman, *The hill of the dragon. An enquiry into the nature of dragon legends*, Totowa (NJ), Roman & Littlefield, 1979; Calvert Watkins, *How to kill a dragon. Aspects of Indo-European poetics*, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1995; Francisco Vaz Da Silva, *Metamorphosis: the dynamics of symbolism*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2002, chap. 4.

Fig. 32
Master of the Embroidered Foliage, ca 1500. Madonna and Child. Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland.

Fig. 33
Anonymous, Columbia, 17th century. The Holy Virgin in the sun. Tunja (Colombia), Monasterio de Santa Clara.

myths and legends[198]. The word 'dragon' is, for that matter, derived from Greek *derkomai*, 'to stare'. So clearly the motif of the dangerous, sinister gaze once again comes to the fore.

Similarly in the East, dragons are a fixed ingredient of festive processions. In the artistic imagination, Occidental and Oriental dragons are very similar, but their connotations are diametrically opposed. The Oriental dragon is a creature that (although powerful and dangerous) is to be cherished[199]; it is often the keeper of a flaming pearl[200] – the latter itself a hypostasis of the 'nameless motif'. The Oriental dragon is paradoxically associated with both water and fire, ferocity and benevolence. It possesses female as well as male traits (and is often bearded, like the Gorgo), but above all else it is a Proteic matrixial being.

The 'nameless motif' was, from the beginning, associated with notions of procreation and creative potential. These aspects were situated at the feminine or rather the matrixial side. In subsequent 'mas-

199 M.W. De Visser, *The dragon in China and Japan*, 1913 (reprint Kessinger, 2003); L.N. Hayes, *The Chinese dragon*, Shangai, Commercial Press, 1922 (reprint Kessinger Press); Qiguang Zhao, *A study of dragons, East and West*, Frankfurt, Peter Lang, 1992; Qiguang Zhao, *Chinese mythology in the context of hydraulic society*, in *Asian folklore studies*, 48, 1989, pp. 231-246.

200 Helmut Nickel, *The dragon and the pearl*, in *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, 26, 1991, pp. 139-146.

culine' monotheistic systems, it was appropriated as a sign of the divine creative force. It appeared as a mandorla, an aura of the divine or matrixial (Mary) figure, but also as a 'transposed' aura around the Holy of Holies, holy beings or holy images.

The counterpart of the solar monstrance is the dark spiky monster that played such a prominent role in annual processions and festivals in Western and Southern Europe: the *tarasque*, a fearsome mythical creature that is conquered by a hero or a collective. The tarasque is a dark-coloured, dragon or beetle-like creature with a terrifying head and a spiky body[201]. It is no coincidence that, in many places, it features in the festival of Corpus Christi, as it was regarded as the opposite of the divine, white, radial, 'male' and at the same time matrixial body.

The 'original' *matrix* contained illuminating, creative, protective aspects on the one hand and sinister, destructive, threatening elements on the other. But in the patriarchal-Christian perception, where the masculine and logicistic (rather than logical) *doxa* prevailed, this was impossible. Like other paradoxical notions from animistic or subaltern or feminine realms, the *matrix* had to be divided into diametrically opposed beings. These were the 'positive' white host (particularly in the monstrance) and the 'negative' black monster. Their 'kinship' – however antagonistic – is apparent from their formal similarities: an undefined shape surrounded by spikes. The paradox was retained in numerous Marian devotions, most specifically in the 'black' Madonnas that are found across Europe (Halle – Walcourt – Valvanera – Guadalupe – Loreto – Czestochowa etc.), and in the Mediterranean and Iberian 'advocations' of the H. Virgin (in Spain: the *Virgen del Pino*, *de la Peña*, *de la Candelaria*, …)[202].

Hence, this complex of motifs connects three unknowable bodies: the 'masculine' imageless *corpus Christi*, the 'feminine' black dragon, and the feminine H. Virgin with the fathomless interior, the virgin who retained her own paradoxical nature[203].

The cult of the Eucharist and its aesthetic presentation by means of the monstrance dresses the 'masculine' and arcane figure of Jesus in a matrixial guise. Here lies an explanation for Jesus' strong appeal: he is a male figure, but with distinctly matrixial dimensions. This aspect also comes to the fore in many of his ethical utterances, based on compassion, empathy, and shared responsibility. *The cult of the Eucharist introduces the white imagelessness, which traditionally is situated at the 'feminine' side, as a non-symbolic centre in the flow of Christian images.*

201 Louis DUMONT, *La tarasque*, Paris, Gallimard, 1951, which overemphasises the local historical aspect, while the Mediterranean and Ibero-American folklore of the tarasca is left unmentioned.

202 VANDENBROECK 2012 (*Capturing nameless energies*).

203 In terms of structure, this complex is reminiscent of 'the man and his two women' in West African and Maghrebian folk cosmogonics; see Viviana PÂQUES, *L'arbre cosmique dans la pensée populaire et dans la vie quotidienne du nord-ouest africain*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 1995, passim.

Similar forms came to fruition in mediaeval mosaic art, though not as halos. Consider the famous example of the apsidal mosaic in the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome. The motif is the Salvation of the universe through the sacrifice on the cross. Above the cross we see a hand with a laurel medallion; the hand appears in a band of cloud, to the right and left of which there are spiky 'mandorlas' containing smaller shapes at their core. They are similar to their woven counterparts. The cross is rooted in a thorny acanthus bush. Beneath the bush appears a well, alongside a stag and a serpent. Also growing out of the bush is the cosmic tree, which leads out on either side in an endless double helix. Again, the prickly bush paraphrases the 'nameless motif': it stands for the force from which the universe emanates, and which connects life and death and salvation (sacrifice of the cross + resurrection)[204]. The life tree's spirals recall the double volutes of the 'birth motif'.

16th-century painting developed an abundance of such forms in so-called 'decorative' structures that have no specific meaning within the idiom of the visual presentation. Nonetheless, these elucubrations are quite striking articulations of subconscious impulses of the artists that produced them.

In an altarpiece by Albert Cornelisz (c. 1519-20)[205], the archangel Michael, who occupies a central place in the composition, is wearing a suit of armour featuring a shield/medallion decorated as a complex 'nameless motif'. St. Michael, in his capacity as protector against evil, is of course well placed to bear a motif with such apotropaic connotations.

In devotional pieces and altarpieces, the Virgin and Child are often depicted against a background of (painted) brocade. Often a medallion forms a halo around Mary's figure, as in panels by Lucas van Leyden[206] and by Adriaen Ysenbrant[207].

The 'nameless motif' also appears in a 'realistic' form. The midwife who is attending to S. Anna during the birth of the Virgin in a picture by Jan de Beer is wearing a fanciful headdress that is reminiscent of the motif[208]. The same artist rendered the throne of the Holy Virgin as a proliferating medallion structure[209].

Lancelot Blondeel designed huge framing structures either serving as a medallion or containing one (often with smaller peripheral forms), with characteristically thorny writhing patterns, twisting in-

204 On the relationship between representations of the 'passage to the other world' in folk art and the 'nameless motif': Karl von Spiess, *Das Tor zum anderen Welt*, in ID., *Marksteine der Volkskunst* 2, Berlin, 1942, pp. 249-262. This book, although contaminated with Nazi delusions, also contains a wealth of material and correct associations.

205 Bruges, St. Jacobskerk. Friedlaender ENP, vol. 11, pl. 155.

206 Berlin, Gemäldegalerie. Friedländer, ENP, vol. 10, pl. 127.

207 Friedländer, ENP, vol. 11, pl. 139, ill. 186.

208 Friedländer, ENP, vol. 11, pl. 20.

209 Friedländer, ENP, vol. 11, pl. 11, ill. 10.

Fig. 34
Anonymous, Catalan, 16th century. 'Nameless motif' on ceiling. Barcelona, Palacio Aguilar.

wardly and outwardly, tearing and intertwining[210]. On a more modest scale, similar patterns appear in the work of Jacob Cornelisz. Van Oostsanen, including the St. Hieronymus altarpiece[211] from 1511.

The medallion or medallion-like structure itself is one of the most popular 'caprices' in art from the Renaissance onward. It appears 'self-evidently' in architectural and 'decorative' sculpture (for example on tombs, where it serves as a (subconscious) reference to rebirth[212]). In Baroque architectural decoration – the notion of 'decoration' should be rid of its connotations of 'emptiness' and 'formalism' – there are countless examples of epiphanies of the 'nameless motif'. And this is no coincidence, as the notions of the cycle of life and the interwovenness of creative force and (in)finiteness are ubiquitous in Baroque art and thought. In Andalusian Baroque art alone, there is an abundance of examples. Those that come to mind include the layered decoration of the dome of Santa María la Blanca in Seville (Pedro and Miguel Borja, 1659)[213], the communion hatch at the convent of Santa Clara at Carmona[214], the tambour of the Sacramental chapel of Santa Catalina in Seville (Leonardo de Figueroa, 1725-26)[215], the oculus of the Sancta Sanctorum and of the structure above the gate of the *sagrario* at the Carthusian monastery of El Paular at Granada (Francisco Hurtado Izquierdo, 1709-1720)[216], the dome of the sacristy of the Carthusian monastery at Granada (Tomás Ferrer, 1753)[217] and countless smaller components of the surrounding stucco structures (1732-1745)[218], the portal to the Sacramental chapel of San Salvador in Seville (Cayetano da Costa, 1770)[219], the innumerable medallion-shaped stucco structures in the *camarín* of the Virgen de la Victoria at Málaga (1694)[220], the structure of the main altar in the Chapel of S. Joseph at Seville (Cayetano da Costa?, 1762-1766)[221], the main altar of San Salvador at Seville (ibid., 1770)[222] …

The profane body: Attire and jewellery

In the late 16th and 17th-centuries, white lace collars became very fashionable in formal European dress. Ladies' collars in particular could be quite elaborate, resulting in striking three-dimensional articulations of the 'nameless motif'. They were layered in breadth and depth, and commonly ended in spiky borders. The collars were no doubt an emanation of the more general fashion of lacework. But

210 Central medallion: 'St. Luke painting the H. Virgin's portrait' (Bruges, Groeninge Museum); window with medallions: 'Altarpiece with Saints Cosmas and Damian' (Bruges, St. James' church).
211 Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, n° 646. Friedländer, ENP, vol. 12, pl. 135.
212 Joan Evans, *Pattern. A study of ornament in Western Europe, 1180-1900*, 1, New York, Da Capo Press, 1976, p. 39, ill. 305 (1617).
213 Antonio Bonet Correa, *Art baroque*, Barcelona, Polígrafa, 1985, ills. 68-69.
214 ID., ill. 111.
215 ID., ill. 156.
216 ID., ills. 165, 171.
217 ID., ill. 181 (the 'columns').
218 ID., ills. 181 & 184.
219 ID., ill. 269.
220 ID., ill. 304.
221 ID., ill. 237.
222 ID., ill. 271. In a large-scale primitive construction, the nameless motif is evoked through a pointed, 'spiky' rock or cave, like those around the sculptures in a Calvary group at St. Amand 's Church in St. Amands (c. 1850). Photo: KIK-IRPA M41616.

Fig. 35
Anonymous, English, c. 1620. The Kederminster Library. Langley Marish Church, Buckinghamshire.

coincidentally or not, they visually separated the wearer's *face* from their body, in a similar way as the head of the *Gorgo* was severed from its body, injecting a dose of matrixial *eeriness* into high fashion. Modern counterparts are found in some of the self-portraits by Frida Kahlo (1943 and 1948), where the artist frames her face in a spiky and veined collar of lace and flowers.

For that matter, the nameless motif generally appeared quite prominently in lacework – an essentially feminine abstract art form that flourished from the 16th to the 20th centuries[223]: it is recognisable in conglomerates that are sometimes reminiscent of flowers, and sometimes semi-abstract or even purely abstract, and invariably characterised by protruding extensions.

It is also striking how, from the 17th century onwards, lacework came to occupy an essential place in the dressing of the 'sacral' body: veils covering sculptures of the Holy Virgin, altar cloths and even the liturgical robes of priests were richly decorated with lace.

Closely related to clothing fashion is jewellery art. Again, one cannot but notice that Renaissance and Baroque jewellery contains numerous examples of striking three-dimensional articulations of the nameless motif[224]. Quite often, 'sinister' or eerie elements (dragons, grotesque and monstrous beings) would be incorporated into such creations.

223 See for example Anne Kraatz, *Calais. Musée de la dentelle et de la mode. Dentelles à la main,* Paris, RNM, 1996, ill. 59, 82, 161, 227, 388; floral vases and bouquets: ill. 103, 106, 157, 164, 203, 204, 305; Martine Bruggeman, *Kant in Europa. Een historisch overzicht vanaf het ontstaan van de kant tot aan het Interbellum*, Bruges, Stichting Kunstboek, 1997, p. 22 (buratto, Spain or France, 16th century), 27 (Flemish, 16th and 17th centuries), 56 (right: Bibila, 19th century), 64 (Milan, 18th century), 141 (Nieuwpoort, 1915), 168 (bottom: Alençon, 19th century), 192 ('Blonde', 19th century); for other striking examples see *Dentelles européennes*, exhib. cat, Kyoto-Tokyo, National Museum of Modern Art, 1987-88, ills. 8 and 12 (passementarie, c. 1600), 43 (several variants on the central axis, France, c. 1680), 44 (ibid., throughout the field), 55 (Brussels, c. 1720), 56 (Brussels, c. 1720: several variants), 114 (Brussels, ca 1860), 123 (bridal veil, Brussels, c. 1860-80: double transposed mandorla, as in religious iconography), 165 (Belgian, c. 1820).

224 *Een eeuw van schittering. Diamantjuwelen uit de 17de eeuw/A sparkling age. 17th-century diamond jewellery*, exhib. cat., Antwerp, 1993, n° 7 (birth symbol), nos. 24, 36, 37, 39, 44, 88, 97, 100, 103, 104, 106, 107.

225 See the bibliography in: Michael BYRNE, *The pomegranate in modern Greek folklore and ancient Greek religion*, in *Revue des archéologues et historiens d'art de Louvain*, 26, 1993, pp. 165-169.

226 *Ledertapeten. Kunsthandel Glass, Essen*, Essen, 1991, pp. 90-91, n° 34.

227 *Bedeutende Goldledertapeten 1550-1900. Kunsthandel Glass, Essen*, Essen, 1998, pp. 262-263, n° 157; pp. 276-277, n° 165.

228 *Ibid.*, pp. 198-199, n° 124; pp. 234-235, n° 141; pp. 240-241, n° 144. See also: Peter THORNTON, *Form and decoration. Innovation in the decorative arts 1470-1870*, New York, Abrams, 1998, p. 44, ill. 74; p. 77, ill. 150; p. 78, ill. 152-153; p. 95, ill. 190; p. 97, ill. 196; p. 114, ill. 231; p. 148, ills. 322-323; p. 175, ill. 367; p. 178, ill. 372.

229 As in the Kederminster Library (Langley Marish Church, Buckinghamshire), which was decorated around 1620 with various crab-like variations on the nameless motif. The motif also commonly appears in furniture with *pietre dure* inlay. For an abundance of examples see Alain GRUBER & Jacques THUILLIER, *L'art décoratif. 1.Renaissance et Maniérisme*, Paris, Citadelles & Mazenod, 1993.

230 Bernard DE SCHEEMAEKER, *Émaux de Limoges de la Renaissance, provenant de la collection de M. Hubert de Givenchy*, Paris, J.Kugel, 1994, p. 78, n° 16: Jean de Court, c. 1565-75.

231 One in-depth study of a single location (Lecce, Salento, Southern Italy) provided an entire repertory; see for example Marosa MARCUCCI, *I mostri di pietra, guardiani della soglia. Civiltà della pietra leccese tra medioevo, barocco e Liberty*, Lecce, Mario Congedo Editore, 1997, see passim for dozens of examples; colour plates III (bottom) & IV (top), VII (bottom), VIII (top), IX (top).

232 Cartouches are also commonly found on the title pages of Baroque books as a frame for emblematic images or texts.

233 Rudolf BERLINER, *Ornamentale Vorlageblätter*, 4 vols., Leipzig, 1926; Peter JESSEN, *Meister des Ornamentstiches*, 4 vols., Berlin, 1923; *Katalog der Ornamentstichsammlung der Staatlichen Kunstbibliothek Berlin*, Berlin-Leipzig, 1939; Alfred LICHTWARK, *Der Ornamentstich der deutschen Frührenaissance*, Berlin, 1888.

Interior decorations

Likewise in the decoration of interiors – similarly perceived as an extension of the body – innumerable examples of medallion-like patterns appear ('pomegranates', 'flowers', …) on brocades, satin fabrics and other textiles, as well as on gold leather and even wallpaper, from the middle ages to the present day[225]. Gradually, such patterns became more standardised, less 'charged' than in the case of individual weaving or painting. In wall coverings, particularly gold leather and wallpaper, the nameless motif commonly serves as the main compositional element. A Spanish leather wall covering features an irregular red primordium in a medallion-like shell[226]. Sometimes the motif appears as a medallion[227], sometimes as a central shape with extruding elements[228]. In furniture making, the cartouche appeared on the scene in the 16th-century Italian Renaissance, particularly on *cassoni*, where it was sculpted frontally and centrally. In other cases there is a veritable proliferation of the nameless motif in the shape of various cartouches[229].

Phantasms of the 'nameless motif' are found on numerous Renaissance and Baroque ornamental artefacts[230] and, quite often, in architectural sculpture. Medusa/mask/nameless motif appear in innumerable variations[231]. Traditionally, such shapes are labelled as 'ornamentation'. This is due in part to the fact that they appear as part of a 'decorative' whole, and in part to the inadequacy of the available art-historical concepts and categories, which fail to capture such images or indeed to say anything meaningful about them. From the 16th century onwards, the nameless motif appeared in the shape of cartouches and medallions. The word cartouche, or *cartuccia* in Italian, means 'container', 'cartridge', and is also related to *cartoccio*, 'bag', 'envelope', like the *gourba* in North African culture. But why choose this particular word from a whole range of synonyms? Surely it is no coincidence that 'cartouche' has the connotation of an 'explosion', expansion, excentricity. This aspect often finds expression in the seemingly torn, twisting foliage around.

Many, many examples are found in so-called ornament prints[232], graphic designs that were disseminated as models and sources of inspiration for all kinds of artists and craftsmen: sculptors, woodcutters, silversmiths,[233] … Ornamentation was regarded as secondary, but hence it offered some freedom to the designer, in the sense that

Fig. 36
Anonymous, 17th century. Mask. Martina Franca (Salento), Via Franca.

subconscious impulses were not totally restrained by the requirements of motif and figuration[234].

Remarkable examples are provided by artefacts from the Flemish Renaissance. Some well-known leading designers were Cornelis Floris (1514-1575) and Hans Vredeman de Vries. The title page of Floris's *Veelderleij veranderinghe van grotissen* (1556) exhibits a complex scroll work medallion of inwardly and outwardly curling patterns, enhanced below by a masked head surrounded by lobes[235]. In 1556 and 1557, Floris published *Pourtraicture ingenieuse de plusieurs façons de masques*, an extensive overview of monstrous 'Medusa medallion' or mask heads[236], as well as designs for three-dimensional 'organic' medallions with an unmistakable sexual element[237]. Similar cartouches were created by Vredeman de Vries and his peers. Many appear in his series of prints with design samples[238], while others serve as frames for oval[239] or rectangular[240] paintings, coats of arms[241], etc. Such designs are often closely connected with the so-called 'grotesques'.

Returning to textile art and flowers

Large analogous compositions were produced in tapestry art, as in the paradigmatic series entitled *Grotesques with Floral Vases and Monkeys* (Brussels, c. 1550)[242]. It features hanging flowers and playing monkeys in fantastical three-dimensional structures. The floral vase – a container with water and protruding flowers and foliage, and quite

234 See for example Joan Evans, *Pattern. A study of ornament in Western Europe, 1180-1900*, 2, New York, Da Capo Press, 1976, p. 55, ill. 327 (Mosyn; see also W. Zülch, *Die Entstehung des Ohrmuschelstiles*, Heidelberg, 1932), p. 164, ill. 237 (Lemersier).

235 *Cornelis Floris 1514-1575. Beeldhouwer, ontwerper, architect*, Brussels, Gemeentekrediet, 1996, p. 59.

236 *Ibid.*, pp. 150-152.

237 The three most striking examples are: *ibid.*, p. 154, ill. 173; p. 166, ill. 177; p. 161, ill. 194.

238 *Hans Vredeman de Vries en de Renaissance. Tussen stadspaleizen en luchtkastelen*, exhib. cat. Antwerp, KMSK, 2002, p. 237, nos. 61-62 (1555); p. 240, n° 68 (1555-57).

239 *Ibid.*, p. 189, n° 9: image at the centre of the painting 'Jesus in the house of Martha and Mary', 1566.

240 *Ibid.*, p. 238, n° 63.

241 A random example from many thousands: *Die Renaissance im deutschen Südwesten*, exhib. cat., 2, Karlsruhe, Badisches Landesmuseum, 1986, p. 775, n° P13 (1585).

242 Patrimonio Nacional (Spain), n° A258-7490, A258-7486, A359-12102, A258-7489, A238-6500, A258-7488, A258-7491, A363-12278, A258-7487, A361-12185. Paulina Junquera De Vega & Concha Herrero Carretero, *Catálogo de tapices del Patrimonio Nacional. I. Siglo XVI*, Madrid, Patrimonio Nacional, 1986, pp. 214-224.

Fig. 37
Daniel Seghers & Erasmus Quellinus.
St. Catharine of Siena in a cartouche with flower guirlands. Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, n° 331.

often insects – is arguably a pseudo-naturalistic articulation of the nameless motif. For that matter, the floral motif as such presents us with a problem. Flowers are more or less absent from traditional feminine textile art[243]. However, once it was pushed towards figurative artistic expression, flowers became quite prominent, as in Persian and Indian hand-knotted carpets, especially from the 17th century onwards. When women became involved in figurative painting, they displayed a marked preference for flowers[244]. This seems to suggest that they perceived floral motifs as an appropriate 'substitute' for earlier abstract motifs – the 'nameless motif' perhaps? In the traditional, segregated feminine culture, the flower was a tactile and an olfactory rather than a visual element, an unfathomable barrel of fleeting 'feminine' and matrixial sensations, that did not necessarily need to be

243 Paul Vandenbroeck, *Catharina Y.*, in *An unexpected journey. Vrouw en kunst/Woman and art*, Antwerpen, Gynaika, 1996 [=1997], pp. 296-307. French versions: *A qui les fleurs?*, in *L'empire de Flore. Histoire et représentation des fleurs en Europe du XVIe au XIX siècle*, ed. Sabine Van Sprang, Brussels, La Renaissance du Livre, 1996, pp. 336-344; *Un tapis de roses*, in *Les fleurs dans la peinture aux Pays-Bas de Jan Breughel à Vincent van Gogh*, Brussels, Crédit Communal, 1996, p.41-50. Dutch version: *Een kleed van rozen*, in *Bloemenschilderkunst van de 16de tot de 20ste eeuw*, tent. cat., Brussels, Gemeentekrediet, 1996, pp. 41-50. Here we argue that this feminine preference for the floral motif was induced by the integration of female artists in a 'male' pattern of artistic production. This assertion needs qualifying in the sense intended here.

244 *Elck syn waerom. Vrouwelijke kunstenaars in België en Nederland 1500-1950*, ed. Katlijne Van Der Stighelen, Antwerp, KMSK, 2003.

Fig. 38
Frida Kahlo, *Selfportret as Tehuana* (1943).
Mexico City, coll. Jacques & Natasha Gelman.

represented visually. One could say that the *genesis* and the ephemeral qualities of the flower were more important than its visual characteristics. In the visually and figuratively oriented masculine monoculture, the flower lost this significance in favour of sexual connotations, and of the idea of visual splendour and its decay (cf. the *vanitas* motif). In Islamic art, an analogous phenomenon occurred: in carpets designed by male experts, who were active in courtly and urban circles, floral motifs were very prominent, particularly in paradisiacal contexts. Once again, a sexual element comes to the fore here, by analogy with the virgins of Paradise or *houri*. The appearance of the floral bouquet in Western painting from the 16th to the 19th centuries can be argued to have been a nostalgic and 'sclerosised' evocation of a multi- and meta-sensorial matrixial experience.

Fig. 39
Anonymous, Finland, 18th century. *Ryijy* rug (1786). Pohjanmaan Museo (Finland), n° 59-336.

In popular art, where the distinction between abstraction and figuration was rarely applied strictly and the transitions are clearly visible, one can see more easily how the motifs of flower and bouquet are an instance of hypostasis of the nameless motif' or of the uterine and/or the matrixial forces. Here, flowers appear as fantastic structures of a similar nature as the motifs in Maghrebian carpet designs. Innumerable examples present themselves in weaving[245] and other modes of artistic expression[246], as well as in architecture. Suffice it to refer here to the oniric, 'exploding' bouquets in the spandrels of the partition wall between the sacristy and the church at the Carthusian monastery in Granada (1732-1745)[247] …

In 17th-century floral painting, the cartouche is frequently incorporated into the composition[248]. Painters such as Daniel Seghers would

245 Pirkko Sihvo, *Rakas ryijy. Suomalaisten ryijyt*, s.l., Museovirasto/Suomen Kansallismuseo, 2009, ills. 101, 119, 121, 247, 250, 251, 281, 288, 291, 356, 357; Helmut Bossert, *Folk art of Europe*, Tübingen, Wassmuth, 1990, part I: pl. 4, n° 1 & 3 (Norway), pl. 13, n° 7 (Italy), pl. 14, n° 8 (Greece), pl. 17, n° 3 (Greece), pl. 19, n° 10 (Greece).

246 Helmut Bossert, *Folk art of Europe*, Tübingen, Wassmuth, 1990, part II: pl. 18, n° 23 (Austria), pl. 22, n° 1 & 11 (Friesland), pl. 25, n° 9 (France), pl. 33, n° 8 (Yugoslavia), pl. 35, n° 12 (Rumania).

247 Antonio Bonet Correa, *Art baroque*, Barcelona, Polígrafa, 1985, ill. 179.

248 David Freedberg, *The origins and rise of the Flemish Madonnas in flower garlands. Decoration and devotion*, in *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Künste*, 32, 1981, pp. 115-150.

place a religious scene in a stone cartouche, surrounded by garlands [*guirlande*, borrowed from Italian *ghirlanda*, originating in *ghir-*, 'caprice, whim, turn, twist, unexpected element'[249]: the notion of a(n unconscious) whim is essential]. In Seghers, the *cartuccia* often bears a shell motif[250] and/or a double volute[251]. The shell, containing a mollusc and possibly a pearl, is one of the most ancient symbols of feminine reproductive potential, equated with utmost preciosity[252]. For that matter, the double or quadruple volute (twice inwardly and twice outwardly) remained an essential architectural and 'decorative' component throughout the Baroque era. The motif originated in weaving, more in particular the cross-culturally attested 'birth symbol', a diamond with volute hooks attached to the corners.

When Daniel Seghers painted a Madonna with Child in a garland-encircled cartouche, he thrice evoked the notion of motherhood, the giving of life, vital force – a potential that, for the often ecclesiastical clientele of the artist, only bore significance in a sublimated form.

249 Paul VANDENBROECK, *Zur Herkunft und Verwurzelung der „Grillen". Vom Volksmythos zum kunst- und literaturtheoretischen Begriff, 15.-17. Jahrhundert*, in *De zeventiende eeuw* (Deventer), 3, 1987, pp. 52-84.

250 Antwerp, KMSK, nos. 329, 331.

251 Antwerp, KMSK, nos. 329, 331, 803, 5075.

252 B. SIMUNDZA, *The shell: a symbol*, Long Island, California State University, 1985.

Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the complex surrounding a particular motif in (feminine) weaving and other (masculine) modes of artistic expression. Historically speaking, the period covered spans several thousands of years. Moreover, evidence is found of parallels in the most diverse cultures. Consequently, our exploration is, by necessity, very sketchy and the overview provided by no means comprehensive. Clearly, though, the evidence provided suffices to demonstrate that the impact of the motif is both *transhistorical, transcultural, and cross-gendered.* On the basis of the data available to us, we speculate that it is *universal*, though a lot more research is required to substantiate that claim.

The 'nameless motif' falls outside any narrative pattern: it is a complex with connotations of:

- uterine forces
- enveloping-protective and threatening gaze (eye, mirror, …)
- inwardly and outwardly spiky and painful
- various types of 'lower order' animals (spider, octopus, crab, insect, …)

- contraction, expansion, undulation, roaming, constant metamorphosis
- the intimate *and* the unknown
- constriction *and* concealment

It is an ideogram of feminine and uterine capacities, but neither exclusively nor in a purely physiological sense. The ideograph of the matrix concerns the known unknown, powers that are part and parcel of the unfathomable foundation of being. Not without reason was the uterus 'perceived' as a miniature cosmos, while the latter was regarded as an organism that brought forth life through analogous processes. The shapes surrounded by spiky halos also evoke convulsion, contraction/expansion and spasms. This fundamentally feminine perceptive complex would appear to us to constitute the basis for the altogether abstract iconography at hand[253]. Still, the nameless motif should certainly not be 'read' as an 'image' of the female reproductive organ.

The 'nameless motif' is pre-eminently an energetic pattern, i.e. it is an aesthetic articulation of primary psychocorporeal pulses, long preceding the formation of ideas or concepts, and even emotions. These pulses are basal to the genesis of the work of art, more fundamental than the conceptual and even the emotional field; they are essential to both corporeal and de-corporealised works of art.

Although any attempt at 'historical reconstruction' of an *energeticon* that finds expression in innumerable different versions is fraught with danger, we feel a partial chronological sequence can be discerned that encompasses the following stages:

1. a(n imageless) perception of the unfathomable aspects of the womb and the feminine reproductive power, and/or of a psychocorporeal realm, and/or of the subsymbolic *matrix*;
2. performances that give the foregoing an ephemeral 'appearance';
3. shapes and blots with which this feeling is synaesthetically 'framed';
4. beings (for example toad, sea urchin) that incorporate or embody 3;
5. a 'loose' pictorial formula, that may be transposed into a 'fixed' shape.

Hitherto, it concerned feminine mental processes and forms of expression that are already demonstrable in pre- and proto-historical

253 Cf. Gimbutas 1989, pp. 99, 108, & 127, fig. 203.

Fig. 40
Anonymous, Finland, 19th century. *Ryijy* rug (1821). Turun Maakuntamuseo (Finland), n° 10386.

sources. The subsequent stages were mediated by a phallocentric approach and/or masculine 'mythographers':

6. the transmutation of the aforementioned characteristics into a terrifying head and gaze;
7. the myth of the decapitation of the *Gorgo* by Perseus, or similar myths in other, related cultures.

From classical antiquity – i.e. from stages 6 and 7 – all versions appear synchronically.

Reversing the research process, one could describe the origin of the complex as a range of *psycho-corporeal perceptions surrounding the womb* and/or *matrixiality*. Women felt the need to express these sen-

sorial and meta-sensorial perceptions by means of a familiar artistic medium, namely weaving.

To some extent in weaving, and systematically in other, male-dominated, fields of art, the corresponding forms of expression gradually became fixed in stereotypical models. Quite illustrative in this respect is the fact that this codification would come to constitute the basis of what is regarded in the West as the 'archetypical' Eastern rug. In Persian carpet weaving from the 13th century onwards or even earlier, male *designers* gradually robbed the pattern of its psychocorporeal resonance and used it instead as 'ornament', for decorative purposes. In 15th-century Western graphic art, it was laid down in pattern books' and subsequently further disseminated.

Both in feminine and masculine weaving, as well as in the male-dominated 'decorative' arts, this process is characterised by a phallocentric tendency towards symmetry, standardisation, regularisation. Cultures inevitably tend not only towards the creative, the transgressive, the revolutionary, but also towards the static, the repetitive, the uncharged. The innumerable manifestations of the 'nameless motif' are thus gradually robbed of their energetic nature and are recuperated into the regular repertory of weaving motifs or of motifs in the so-called decorative arts. Their 'charge' – for in the subsymbolic realm one can hardly speak of 'signification' – most likely decreases. But the sometimes compulsive manner with which certain cultures articulate them time and again in the decorative arts would appear to suggest that, subconsciously, even the pattern itself is by no means 'empty' or 'devoid of meaning'. This perception remains outside the sphere of linguistic competence though: never is an *explanation* provided of why the medallion or cartouche was deemed so important.

In our view the *most original articulations* – both in a historical and an ontogenetic sense – *are the (primitive or refined) examples in feminine weaving.* As feminine art tended towards abstraction, and as psychocorporeal perceptions are essentially entirely *sui generis*, pre-verbal and hence not phallocentrically 'identifiable', they appeared in an abstract form. However, the fact that they emerged first and foremost in the female self-perception and feminine art does not mean that they remained imperceptible or inexistent on the masculine side. After all, we are not concerned here with exclusively biologically-based percep-

tions: the matrixial field is accessible to women in two ways, and in only one way to men[254]. Masculine art tended towards figuration, so that the identification of the unnamable presented a problem. Still, there is no denying that the 'nameless motif' also appeared – either nameless or under a 'technical' name such as medallion or cartouche – in artistic production on the masculine side. This was especially the case in the applied arts, as these were less subject to ideological and artistic censorship, and because they were less (if at all) incorporated into a particular narrative.

The formal structures discussed here have received little attention in the fields of art-historical research and visual analysis. Yet they are far from inessential. On the contrary, they quite often occupy a very central position. In domestic weaving art, these formal structures are not framed within a particular narrative: this form of artistic expression operates beyond any reflexive discourse. The same is true for Western decorative arts. These are, after all, 'decorative' formal expressions that appear within a figurative framework, or, more correctly, that serve as frames for the figuration. They emerged without narration, non-verbally, wordlessly; they had no 'official' meaning; they fell beyond the realm of phallic signification and hence were elusive, ungraspable. The *matrix* emerged of its own accord at the surface of the image. *In the art and perception on the feminine side, this speaks for itself; in the art and perception on the masculine side, it remains unspoken, i.e., it escaped from any available discourse.*

The (an)iconic processes investigated here lead us to conclude that iconogenesis is essentially a *transmodal* process: a fundamental icon (or, from a phallocentric perspective, a symbol) has its origins in sensory perceptions and / or metasensory experiences. This iconogenesis is not about perceiving and re-presentation. A basal pictogram (in a psychoanalytical sense) is observed not sensorially, but in a psychocorporeal 'border space'. Through a transmodal occurrence, the pictogram may be sensorially imagined and 'pictured'. Ultimately, its foundation long precedes language and any culturally determined imagination; *it lies in a zone that is already 'entered' in the pre- and perinatal state and that requires no language in order to give birth to meaning.*

In the field of the 'nameless motif', there are innumerable demonstrable hypostases. We have discussed three: the 'spikeless' motif, the

254 We refer to the epochal studies by Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger, which have been published since 1990, but after two decades are still largely ignored or marginalised in the Humanities. Just a few research centres (Leeds, Minnesota, …) and a few art centres have hitherto acknowledged the great value of her artistic-psychoanalytical-heuristic research.

spiky motif, and the 'birth symbol'. This is a primitive categorisation of a highly versatile and subtly nuanced complex that encompasses thousands of variants. We are as yet unable to fully grasp this complexity, or to 'read' the plethora of variants, be it on the feminine or on the masculine side of artistic articulation. We are, in other words, only at the dawn of a new, meta-iconic research approach to shapes that are all too readily labelled as 'decorative' or 'ornamental'.

Fig. 41
Anonymous, Roman-Tunisian, 3rd century.
Mosaic with irregular nameless motifs. Tunis,
Musée du Bardo.

Fig. 42
Anonymous, Holland, c. 1630. Portrait of a lady. Antwerpen, KMSK, n° 775.