

Two Short Extracts from Titus Burckhardt's First Book

by

Titus Burckhardt

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*Swiss Folk Art*¹

The Wooden Chest

Because of its geometrical form, comprising six flat sides, which the chest (traditionally carved out of one piece of wood) has in common with the ship, the house, and the coffin, it is regarded, in the traditional lore of all peoples, as a symbol of the earth—not the earth in a geographical sense, but in a transposed sense, as a degree of existence (the terrestrial state), which supports or contains life, just as the chest contains precious possessions, and which like the ark floats on the waters of the deep. There is an inverse relationship between the symbol of the three-dimensional or six-armed cross, which represents the world as radiating outwards from a centre, and the sacred chest which, in its hexahedral, crystalline form, symbolizes the terminal stage of creation.

Gargoyles

The purpose of the grotesque masks on the outside walls of Romanesque churches was undoubtedly that they should serve as a means of exorcism against impure spirits. The mode of action of such exorcistic masks can be readily understood if one considers how, when a man approaches a sanctuary and seeks to direct his spirit towards the highest, all the dregs in his being, owing to a natural reaction of the soul, tend to arise and seek to enter his thoughts under a multitude of guises. If, at this moment, he espies a mask which represents, with unmistakable grossness, any hidden greed, passivity or lust, he can look on them “objectively”, and laugh at them. In this way the evil spirit is exorcized and flees the scene.

These stone masks thus contribute to a process of unmasking in the soul, but on a basis that is the exact opposite of modern psychoanalysis. For whereas in the latter the one who is plagued by dubious impulses is invited to accept his complexes as himself, the medieval man, awakened

1. *Schweizer Volkskunst*, Urs Graf Verlag, Basle, 1941.

by an exorcistic device, looks on the mischievous intruder in his soul as an enemy from without, as an impulse foreign to himself which, like a disease, has sought to take root in him, and which one has only to perceive with clarity in order to be freed from it. For, according to Christian doctrine, the devil cannot tolerate the truth.