

Tip #37

Using Personal Symbols in Art

Art is a language without words-communication in its purest form, direct from the artist's mind and hand to the eye and heart and soul of the beholder. Originally that may have been its sole purpose-and doesn't some amazing and serendipitous combination of colors, some gorgeous texture or sinuous line or cryptic image still speak to us in ways we find difficult to explain?



Art 37-1

Art 37-1, Anasazi symbols in Nevada's Redrock Canyon ("Symbols," watercolor, 15" x 22")

It's hard to tell what these symbols may have meant to their makers - the hands may have simply been showing who was present, or how many, or they may have had another meaning altogether. There appear to be storm clouds, human forms, and symbols of the hunt, as well-but standing there so near these symbols puts us in touch with a reality so ancient we can barely comprehend it ... yet there was the work of our artistic forebears.

Have you ever noticed how certain symbols speak to us as individuals? How they appear in our art again and again? Mother and child, water, fire, or even more graphic, less representational symbols, like circles, squares, handprints, the zigzag of lightning bolts, spirals.

That latter has been with me almost all my life. Even as a kid, I drew endless spirals, single or intertwined and covering an ever-widening area. I have no idea why I was so fascinated when I was little, but my school papers often had quite complex and decorative borders! And even later, as an adult, the spiral was one of my frequent doodles as I talked on the phone or waited for an appointment. It was fascinating, the more I read and explored, to

find that spiral symbol in everything from Native American earthworks to Celtic and Viking art! To me, it symbolizes the journey, the eternal journey.

Art 37-2, The spiral path (Cairntbeam, acrylic, 4" x 6")

I use this very personal symbol in my more formal art, now, too, since I have discovered its heritage. This is the view inside an ancient Irish cairn ... with the shadow of two pilgrims thrown against the stone. It holds within it not only my personal past as a scribbler of these mysterious spirals, but my Celtic heritage-and a sense of mystery...

What symbols speak to you? What do they mean, and why? What keeps cropping up in your work, both consciously and unconsciously? How can you use these symbols to give your art more meaning - to you, to your viewers?

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Art 37-2