

ASTRO—MYTHOLOGICAL PSYCHOLOGY
by Leo Katz, director Atelier 17



OPIUCHUS — 1950

Engraving and Soft-Ground Etching by Leo Katz

This plate is the first of a planned series, dealing with constellations. The purpose of this series is neither purely technical, scientific nor purely artistic. After many years of analyzing the movements of modern art, I came to the conclusion that we suffer from a formidable *isolationism*. Most art movements concentrate, with uncompromising exclusiveness on extremely limited problems of content or presentation. I chose an approach of "*Astro-Mythological Psychology*" because it seems to offer a stepping stone to a wider horizon, a *bridge* between isolated and neglected areas.

What is "Astro-Mythological Psychology"? Let me explain; Freud after years of observations and a multitrude of clinical data, discovered a *strange parallelity between some of his typical cases and the problems masterfully represented by Heroes in classical, Greco-Roman Mythology*. In his later years he studied Egyptian religion and culture. Jung emphasized a *parallelity between paintings and drawings* made by his patients and *Mandalas of the Far East* (The Secret of the Golden Flower, London 1931).

I added the discovery of the astonishing *parallelity between modern surrealist, subconscious symbolism and Pre-Columbian Mythology* (Article on "Coatlque", April issue of Magazine of Art 1945 and article by Jean Charlot on "Who discovered America" in November issue of Art News, 1953). Thus an enormous field of interest in *Mythological Psychology* had developed.

In the process of this discovery it was mostly overlooked that the connection with man's subconscious problems represented only one side of the mythological job, and that *men of antiquity had poured their wisdom and genius into the problem of forging mental bridges between conscious knowledge and the unfathomable depth of the subconscious forces of man on the one hand, and the impenetrable mysteries of cosmic vastnesses on the other*. This combination of fact and poetry, science, art, religion, philosophy, psychology and education was a more efficient instrument for life than our disinterested, highly isolated, specialized scientific machinery. There was much more food for the mind and soul in the red hot adventure stories based on legends, originally created as accurate but coded records of past tribal events and experiences (see Ernst Fuhrmann, "Neue Wege" 1954, Hamburg), than in the sterilized, quantitative information given by modern Astronomy with its endless charts of inconceivable distances, incomprehensible speeds and unimaginable numbers, completely removed from our life, and our subconscious.

Those are a few reasons why I am tackling the problem of reuniting the *Astro-Mythological branch* with the less neglected *Mythological Psychology*. We can not revive, or imitate the Mythology of past ages. We have to create and build our own bridges but we can start by digging for ancient symbols still alive in our collective subconscious and use them for new artistic versions of scientific, cosmic acquaintance.

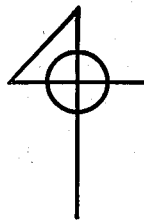
In other words, we need most desperately a way of combining as many aspects as possible, in order to combat the tragic frustration-fatigue that results from specialization in unrelated information and to defeat the fatal horror of being suspended in midspace between *the abyss of our subconscious world and the ever growing cosmic world with its countless universes. We have to connect again, our life consciousness with the powerful worlds within and without, worlds of which we are inextricably a part.*

In order to prepare for the "Ophiuchus" I had to get an up-to-date scientific, astronomical chart. I think, I chose "Ophiuchus" as the first plate because he represents, probably, *the oldest known subconscious symbol, man wrestling with the serpent (or dragon)*. That motif appears in many mythologies and scriptures all over the world, and is related to many heroic figures, leading from Gilgamesh in Mesopotamia through Jason and Hercules in Greece to the story of Adam and Eve and the Serpent in the Garden of Eden and many other versions in Far Eastern and Pre-Columbian religions.

In studying ancient stories about constellations, it became obvious that astronomers of antiquity, perhaps on a mountain with clear desert air, without the interference of city lights at night, saw many more stars with the naked eye than we usually see today. Therefore I selected more stars than we are familiar with unless we use a telescope. Instead of drawing around the major stars of a constellation, in a vague way, the figures and animals after which they are named, I started to connect the stars directly with lines, sometimes straight and sometimes curved, as it would seem natural following the feeling of tension between points. I expected to find some pattern which might suggest a recognizable figure in a similar way as one discovers figures in the maze of ink spots in a "Rohrschach Test". To my surprise, there was not much effort of imagination needed to find the figures which the wise men of the past had ascribed to the constellations.

"Ophiuchus" probably goes back to the ancient Sumerians, or even before that. He was among other things, a God of Healing (Medicine) and in ancient Greece this old symbol was locally adapted to the stories of Asclepius (Aesculap) and his serpent. Later the constellation became known as Serpentiarius, the serpent carrier. This constellation reaches with one leg into the Milky way, and with the other into the constellation of Scorpio. The head of Ophiuchus reaches into the head of the constellation Hercules whose giant figure moves in the opposite direction. *Thus, the composition should not be viewed like other straight pictures on a wall, but like a segment on the ceiling of a cave where figures can move in different directions* without standing on their heads, as one can notice in prehistoric caves, or in some ceiling frescoes (like on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel). The subject offers a very stimulating opportunity to work entirely with points as centers of fields of visual energy, connected by lines expressing the tension between the points on a plane. In that way "Ophiuchus" presented himself in the two-dimensional arrangement of head in profile, shoulders in front view and legs again in profile, which was the manner to present figures in the ancient Mesopotamian countries, as well as in Egypt (in drawing or relief).

While working on the Ophiuchus plate I also worked on a canvas dealing with the myth of Cygnus, which has also strong subconscious, emotional as well as astronomical associations. I did not know why I had started with those two constellations which are not even parts of the Zodiac. True, Ophiuchus was one of the oldest universal symbols I could find but Cygnus was a choice I could not explain or justify. Recently (almost 5 years after the choice was made) I saw a chart of the radio telescope of Ohio State University which shows that the peak of intensity of radio signals comes from the immediate vicinity of Ophiuchus and another most concentrated center is in Cygnus while large sections of the sky seem silent or dead as far as radio impulses are concerned. The fact that I picked those two centers whence the most intense bombardment of radio waves originates could be an interesting coincidence. Some day when we know more about such things and their origins we might step into all sorts of surprising problems.



four directions gallery

CENTER • DISCUSSIONS • PUBLICATIONS

114 FOURTH AVENUE NEW YORK 3, N. Y.

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR — M. MINTZ

EXECUTIVE COUNCIL — B. BOVASSO, L. BOVASSO, E. JASTRAM,

E. F. MINTZ, D. ROSENFELD, F. H. STERN, M. VILLARD.