

## Altars: Tradition and Innovation in a Women's Art

By Kay Turner

In her recent book, *In A Different Voice*, psychologist Carol Gilligan suggests that women's *identity is defined in a context of relationship and judged by a standard of responsibility and care*. Similarly, [women's sense of] morality is seen ... as arising from the experience of connection and conceived as a problem of inclusion. Further, Gilligan quotes Jean Baker Miller, author of *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976), who states that "women's sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make, and then to maintain, affiliations and relationships ...," and that *this psychic starting point contains the possibilities for an entirely different (and more advanced approach to living and functioning ... [in which] affiliation is valued as highly as, or more highly than, self-enhancement.*

Women's profound desire for good relationships, the reliance on affiliation and connection with others as a source of identity and as a basis for moral judgment, has long been represented in a religious art form which has been created and maintained primarily by women: the art of home altars.

In the making of home altars, women set aside a sacred space in their homes for creatively assembling a group of objects, images, and symbols which visually represent the power of, and need for good relationships and positive affiliations. The altar may also serve as an instrument for procuring and protecting good relationships. If, as Gilligan maintains, "women's sense of integrity appears to be entwined with an ethic of care, so that to see themselves as women is to see themselves in a relationship of connection," the home altar becomes a visual-artistic model of women's sense of integrity. On the home altar, women assemble a symbolic model of connection and affiliation by bringing together images which represent different realms of experience and meaning—heaven and earth, family and community, nature and culture.

A vari-voiced assortment of images (icons, sculpture, family photographs, flowers, shells, candles, etc.), provides a visible exemplum of the emphasis women place on creating links between people, between things, and between realms.

Traditionally, the major purpose of a home altar concerns the promotion of good relationships between humans and deities, but this goal can only be accomplished through regular acts of communication. An altar, in the religious sense, marks the site where communication is initiated and carried on between heaven and earth. The altar becomes a channeling device whereby such communication is effected, and a symbol that the drawing together of distinct realms—heaven and earth—is not only possible, but guaranteed.

Whether they are traditional Roman Catholic women who use their altars as an intercessory device for communicating with God or feminists who, before their altars, speak with the Goddess, the use of home altars exemplifies women's propensity for intimacy with the divine. Rather than accept the distinctions between heavenly and earthly realms (thereby accepting their separation), altar makers creatively unite these different domains.

The oldest domestic altars known to have been made by women have been excavated by James Mellaart at Hacilar and Catal Huyuk, ancient Anatolian (now Turkey) sites dating back to Neolithic times (8000-6000 B.C). That the tradition of keeping home altars has continued over such a long period to the present is not mere speculation. Geraldine Cornelia Gessell (1972) demonstrated the archaeological evidence for the Minoan house cult and its survival in Iron Age Crete; David Orr (1978)<sup>6</sup> has documented the existence of household shrines throughout the extended Roman Empire including Spain and Great Britain, although these shrines have not been shown conclusively to be women's works. William A. Christian gives pertinent information concerning shrines dedicated to Mary and their relation to places once used to worship the pre-Christian great goddesses in Spain. He traces a continuing use of such shrines from the sixteenth century to contemporary times and makes passing note of the use women make of household images in Spain today?

In the New World, ethno-historical evidence suggests a continuous history of home altar use in Mexico from the Conquest period to contemporary times. We cannot say with complete authority that these altars were always made and kept by women, but judging from interviews with living Mexican-American altar makers who can trace the tradition back through the female line in their families to the early nineteenth century, we can suggest that the Mexican tradition as practiced by women is very old. Certainly, the great majority of living altar makers in Western tradition are Roman Catholics whose religion retains the longest and deepest historical connection with pre-Christian Mediterranean practices. It seems that everywhere Roman

Christianity spread, the domestic altar making tradition came with it. We can document the practice of the art among all European Catholic peoples, including Italians, Germans, French, and Spanish, and here in the New World wherever those groups settled during Colonial or immigration periods. In all these groups, women are the primary practitioners of domestic altar making.

The earliest home altars were used to enhance fertility, to invite the protection of the gods and goddesses, and to memorialize dead ancestors. All of these functions prevail in the use of home altars today, but less as explicit than as implicit functions. Whereas in early times, a woman prayed at her home altar for fertility and good birth (i.e., for the actual physical creation of a relationship in the form of a child), she now uses the altar as a place for promoting a more diffuse, abstract notion of fertility transmuted into the ideal of good relationships and affiliations between herself and others. Still evident in the altar making art is a concern for linking past and present, even death and life, by using the altar as a place to remember and show concern for those who are departed.

In a recent article on painting, "The Ambush of Absence;" John Berger makes some suggestive comments concerning the need to bring images into an interior: *Something painted or carved may be placed in a wilderness, far from any human habitation, but, when this happens, the image only works as an appeal to a superhuman power who exists outside time and space. No image can withstand natural or cosmic space alone. The draft extinguishes the flame. As soon as an image is addressed partially to other people, it requires the mediation of the space proposed by a human habitation or a human tomb: it needs to be surrounded by other human work ... , it needs the assurance of an interior. ... The paradox of painting is that it invites the spectator into its room to look at the world beyond. Hence, the terms of its fundamental dialectic. To paint is to bring inside: yet what is brought inside is what is far away.* Because the domestic altar visually activates a relationship between humans and deities and is simultaneously an agent for the promotion of kinship and other human loyalties, it is no wonder that very early home altars became a means of "bringing inside" that which is far away. The altar became a "home for images;" a way of diminishing the vast loneliness of space, and because worship at the altar was, and still is, a method for safeguarding memories and projecting futures, it also became the place where time and space were creatively conjoined to represent *being: The Image, then, has its place. And it's not anywhere. If architecture is the Mother of the Arts, it is so because it protects them from endless space by introducing the distinction interior/exterior. The metaphor of Mother is well chosen, for the body of a real mother does something similar for the imagination of her child.* The first interior where images were kept-not surprisingly-was that architectural construct which in many cultures is synonymous with mother: home.

Further, the altar is a visible presence of that which is effectively absent from view. ... *the visible produces faith in the reality of the invisible.* Once we are inside, the outside disappears: the world is *out there-as* are the gods and goddesses. But the altar and its images visibly broadcast a continual reconstruction of our relationship with the exterior, with the unseen. The home is an enclosure, a necessary source of separation and self-definition, but the presence of the altar there brings a small, symbolic representation of the world into the house. Symbolically, it reverses the notion that the world is keeper of the house; rather, the house and its primary resident become keepers of the world.

## **Understanding the Home Altar in Feminist**

### **Terms**

While only some altar makers have come to this art form as a result of feminism, it is through feminist criticism that we can best understand the combined spiritual, political, and ethical concerns at work in the production of home altars. In fact, the home altar is the prototype of all women's arts which evolve from the art making process Miriam Schapiro has aptly called *femmage*. *Femmage* (derived from collage and assemblage) is the name Schapiro applied to the process which seems evident in so much of women's traditional domestic art making (quilting, sewing, cooking, weaving, for example) as well as in the works of contemporary artists. This is the process of collecting and creatively assembling old or seemingly disparate elements into a functional, integrated whole. *Femmage* denotes an aesthetic of connection and relationship which in the home altar results in the grouping of a powerful association of images, really a "family" of images that synthesizes and projects the fundamental social and spiritual values of the feminine domestic realm: nurturance, intimacy, relationship, and sense of place (i.e., home is where the heart is, the hearth is, the heat is). Essentially, *femmage* is the art of "making something out of nothing" and in this

sense, both metaphorically and literally, resonates with the most basic of female biological functions: intrauterine creation of the child-the making of *someone* out of nothing.

If there is a feminine aesthetic, it includes a crucial sense among women of aesthetic *function*. The home is the first center of cultural organization and meaning. Women's art forms emergent in the home provide important means to the physical survival of the family (e.g., cooking and sewing) and to the psychological identities of family members, especially children. Within the home, women's arts propel a cycle which constantly turns fragmentation to wholeness and back again: *Fragmentation need not connote explosion, disintegration. It is also a component of networks, stratification, the interweaving of many dissimilar threads, and an emphasis on imposed meaning in favor of multiple interpretations .... Fragmentation pervades women's work in all the arts on many subtle levels.* As a sacred, symbolic model of this cycle, the home altar demonstrates the value of fragments which when linked together provide a center derived, not through imposition, but organically through layering and accretion. Accretion and accumulation, the *modus operandi* of altar making, are also the means of advancing that underlying ethical principle at the heart of women's self-identity: relationship and affiliation.

In addition, domestic images are often concerned with the particular, concrete events of the personal life-the life lived in the body rather than in the mind. This attention to the concrete as indicative of women's larger contribution to culture has been documented and discussed by anthropologists Nancy Chodorow and Sherry Ortner: *One relevant dimension that does seem pan-culturally applicable is that of relative concreteness vs. relative abstractness: the feminine personality tends to be involved with concrete feelings, things, and people, rather than with abstract entities, it tends toward personalism and particularism. A second closely related dimension seems to be that of relative subjectivity vs. relative objectivity ...* The altar maker is a prime example of one whose art is dedicated essentially to the maintenance of a concrete, particularistic, and subjective ideology. This concreteness and particularism is ultimately dedicated to insuring the possibility of fruitful relations among the things and people of this earth. And this dedication is felt as well by contemporary women artists. Women such as Mierle Laderman Ukeles whose "Maintenance Art" (a project for a museum show in which she would perform housework duties such as scrubbing the floor in the public space of the museum) suggests that, in the long view, much of women's art, like our lives, is oriented toward preservation, continuance, and support. Ukeles "sees women's role as representing the life instinct in art'- the perpetuation and maintenance of the species.

To come to a more precise understanding of *femmage* as it defines altar making, we need to further explore both the process and the resulting physical aesthetic of the women's art we are comparing. The *femmage* method emphasizes the possibility inherent in what Buckminster Fuller has called "random interaction" with the environment. Random interaction is a diffuse process of organizing and coming to terms with the natural world. In physics, quantum mechanics explains the ultimate randomness of particle interaction which, at the most basic level, makes up our universe. In art making among women, random interaction might define the diffuseness in process and the receptive-addictive quality discoverable in many works.

In women's altars, for example, receptivity is both a sentiment prerequisite to making successful petition through prayer and a visual quality of the altar itself. The altar can always take on more in the way of statues, candles, pictures, and odd objects. It is a receptive site which can hold layer on layer of sacred objects in a loosely defined scheme. Items are added and subtracted as the "random interactions" of life and their resultant relations proceed. The altar is a sacred locus which represents eternal faith but always in terms of eternal change: *Everywhere altars are surrounded and covered with instruments of action .. and change. The dynamic aspect of the altar cannot be disregarded.* Immediately felt in women's altars is this sense of dynamic diffuseness, what Lucy Lippard previously called a sense of fragmentation. And another art critic, Ruth Iskin, has commented upon the "essentially additive act of building and integrating" in women's art: *The additive process is predominant in the traditional crafts and arts invented and dominated by women: pottery, basketry, quilts, lace, weaving, and embroidery. The similarity in the use of the additive process is communicated in the product. The additive process of making art is slow; the whole is created by a repetition of a small and consistent element. In the additive process the act of artistic creation is one of rhythmic repetition of the kind that one finds in rituals ....* The additive process and the sense of fragmentation (or of joining fragments) often combine as they do in women's altars to create works which visually project a layered and repetitious quality. In the layering we get the feel of randomness, sensuousness, adaptability, and organic growth while in the repetition of certain motifs or patterns we simultaneously sense the satisfaction of design and order.

## The Altar as an Instrument for Communication

In the most important sense, the home altar projects the essence of women's art as being *communicative* in function and intention. An altar, by definition, can *never* merely represent; there is no altar made for art's sake alone. The personal altar always invites communicative exchange: it engages the viewer who, moving beyond the simple seeing of altar images, begins to use them, to encounter them, to speak to them. In so doing, she empowers herself with the affirmation of "speaking her mind"-and soul.

The historical importance of the personal altar as a vehicle of women's communication is underscored by the patriarchy's longstanding prohibition against the effectiveness of women's speech. As Mary Daly suggests: *Male religion entombs women in sepulchres of silence in order to chant its own eternal and dreary dirge .... The silence imposed upon women echoes the structures of male hierarchies*. Yet, if women's voices have been silenced in the public, male domain, they have freely risen within private, domestic chambers where the altar has provided a sacred space apart for the validation and perpetuation of women's spiritual and ethical ideals.

It is important to understand the altar as an art object, but, as suggested earlier, it is also important to see it as a performance space, better yet a communication instrument. As an instrument, the altar becomes a focusing device for acts of communication. The images on an altar act as receivers for the transmission of messages which are sent by the altar maker. Traditional altar makers encounter what they make through the use of ritual acts (gesture, object manipulation, gift-giving), but most crucially through speech and song. At the altar a special kind of speech is heard: that of a woman seeking and receiving power. There women encounter deities and speak with assurance in their mutual ability to change things.

The altar is the prototype of any art which upholds the congruence of image and experience. Here images are assembled intuitively and brought to bear on the experiences-past, present, and future-of the altar maker and her family. The altar is a repository for memories; memories given form through the choice and arrangement of images, especially photographs and mementos. It is also a site where women actively engage the present-a woman gains presence at the altar in the sense of feeling centered, unbound. And there the future becomes available, open for her projection.

A charged performance place, the altar derives its active nature from its definition as a threshold, a point of departure. Because the altar is a microcosmic archetype of the earth, it functions like the surface of the earth as a between place: the deep earth or underworld below and the heavens *above*. The powers of earth are condensed at the altar and an altar maker relies on those powers (the powers of the *present*, and of *presence*) to enable her to channel her desires below (into the past) or *above* (into the future).

The communicative incentive which defines the home altar's reason for being can be understood most profoundly in the sense that the altar serves as women's instrument for defying the limits of linear or historical time. Time in its patriarchal construction is equated with progress, the ceaseless forward flow of events which is ultimately constricted by death. Death is the absence of communication. At the altar site, women *remove* themselves from the relentless, death-oriented compulsion of patriarchal time. There women create a different sense of time based not in progress, but in what Mary Daly has called "the power of presence." This "power of presence" Daly characterizes as enabling a ... *time breakthrough which is a continuing ... process .... What it is, in fact, is women's own time. It is our life-time. It is whenever we are living out of our own sense of reality ... living in a qualitative, organic time that escapes the measurements of the system*. The altar, a place of profound *presence*, enables the user to freely *move* through time: past, present, and future are all available there. The personal altar has been and continues to be woman's own time machine. There she can literally "speak in circles" and get results. Whether memorializing the dead (thereby bringing the past forward to the present), praying for a good birth (projecting and determining the future), or offering thanks for the day's blessings (affirming the present), the altar maker can use the altar as a special place to shape time rather than be shaped by it.

The home altar is a distinctly different monumental art form of women's own making. Unlike the monuments of the patriarchy (e.g., burial vaults, heroes' effigies, war memorials and the like) erected to remind us of the dead and simultaneously to affirm the absolute separation, i.e., the end of time, imposed by death, the home altar negates the separation of death by asserting the primacy of communication between realms as an antidote to death. As a patriarchal ornament, the monument is useless except

as a thing-usually too large, blocking the sun-which in its *heavy*, colorless way decorates death, and stands changeless in the face of change; the monument is a motion-less marker on the patriarchal time line. But the home altar changes with time, reorders time to allow for more life, *even* as it changes in form or size as meaningful things are added to it or taken away. There time does not lead to death; rather time at the altar serves the desire to *live*.

At the altar one practices the desire to make perfect in other aspects of life, and this perfection is nothing more or less than the possibility of *effective* communication. Here communication is defined as *purposive* interaction, aimed at perpetuating a necessary cycle of giving and receiving. Communication involves the sharing of codes, codes which when learned and transmitted become the basis for shared meanings. All the traditional home arts of women can be viewed like communication codes which are daily deciphered and transmitted from woman to woman, woman to child, and woman to man. These arts compose a "language of materials," the messages of which include survival, sustenance, continuity, warmth, beauty, memory, spontaneity, kinship, friendship, and love. They are arts which not only reflect a reality but construct a reality as well. It is in these arts that women have created "a common language" of fragments assembled into wholes, women who "with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world."

In *Beyond God the Father*, Mary Daly speaks of the need for women to create a new space apart, a space which she defines primarily as a state of mind "where it is possible to be oneself, without the contortions of mind, will, feeling, and imagination demanded of women by sexist society"<sup>22</sup> Further, she maintains that this new space is set apart *precisely from the nonreality of sexist alienation and since we are in it only insofar as we confront nonreality, it is not static space, but constantly moving space...its center is on the boundaries of patriarchy's spaces, that is, it is not contained*. Daly's dynamic "space apart" in the minds of revolutionized feminists is prefigured in the home altar, a concrete space apart which women have consciously built in the privacy of their homes for centuries. For the home altar has likewise been constructed on the outermost boundaries of patriarchal alienation. Deep within her home the women's private altar has been a separate space dedicated to the fulfillment of relationships, a place both instrumental and symbolic of anti-alienation and anti-death. The home altar is a symbol and an instrument of women's desire to redeem ourselves and our values.





