The One Thread

Ananda K. Coomaraswamy

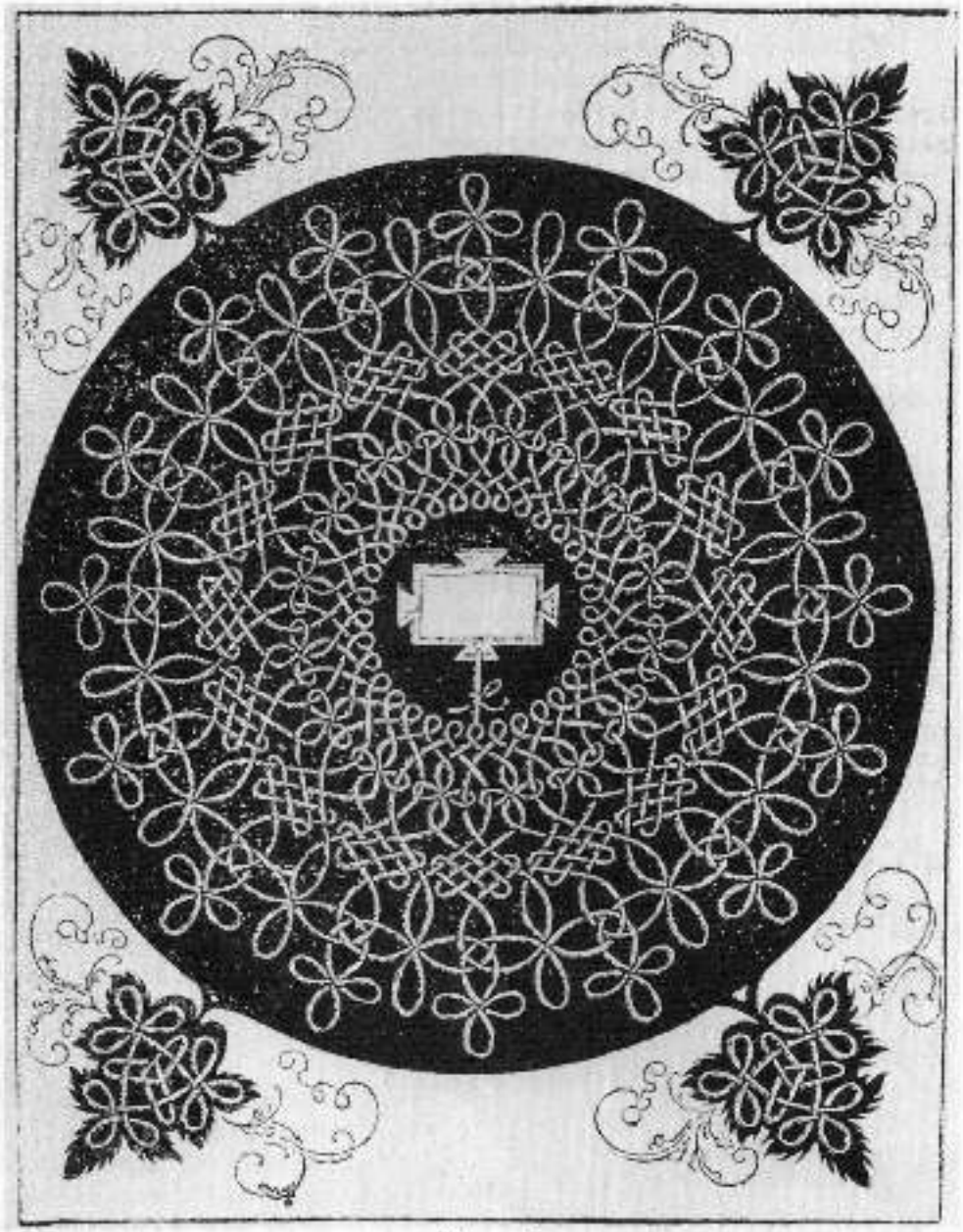

Figure 1

AMONG Albrecht Dürer's wood-engravings is the series of *Sechs Knoten*; the design (Fig. 1) fills a circle and consists of a very complicated unbroken white line pattern on a black ground; the main pattern is echoed in four small corner pieces and in several cases Dürer's own name is engraved in the central dark circle from which the main design expands.[1] The usual view is acceptable, that Dürer's *Knots* are variations of a well-known engraving on copper of a similar medallion (Fig. 2), the design of which is commonly attributed to Leonardo da Vinci, and in the center of which there appear the words *Academia Leonardi Vinci*. Goldscheider[2] sees in this "fantasia dei vinci" probably a "hieroglyphic signature." [It has also been suggested that] ". . . some by-play to *vinci* in the sense of *vincoli* (bonds or fetters) may have been intended . . ."[3]

That the lines of Dürer's *Knots* are superposed and intersect represents a translation of the idea of the maze into three-dimensional and textile terms. The significance of Leonardo's "decorative puzzle"—which, from an Oriental viewpoint must be called a *mandala*—will only be realized if it is regarded as the plane projection of a construction upon which we are looking down from above. So seen, the pattern breaks up into three parts, that of the dark ground of the earth (with angle ornaments indicative of the four directions), that of a knotted tissue that broadens out below and is contracted above, and that of a center and summit that would be white if one were looking at it from below but in the figure itself is dark because the dark ground shows through it.

Leonardo's *Concatenation* is a geometrical realization of the "universal form of the knot" spoken of by Dante (*Paradiso* XXXIII.91). He must have known Dante, and could have taken

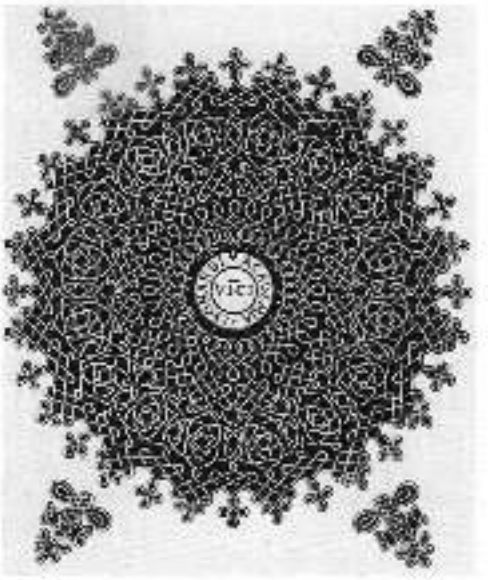

Figure 2

from him the suggestion for his cryptogram. But there is every reason to believe that Leonardo, like so many other Renaissance scholars, was versed in the Neo-Platonic esoteric tradition, and that he may have been an initiate, familiar with the "mysteries" of the crafts.[4] It is much more likely, then, that Dante and Leonardo both are making use of the old and traditional symbolism of weaving and embroidery. In connection with the traces of this tradition in Swiss folk art Titus Burckhardt remarks: "Ornaments in the form of a knot, which are widely distributed in nomad art, comprise an especially suggestive symbolism, based on the fact that the different parts of the knot are opposed to one another, at the same time that they are united by the continuity of the string. The knot resolves for whoever understands the principle of knotting of which the invention is, so to say, itself a symbol of the hidden principles of things."[5]

Dante's *questi la terra in se stringe* [God "who draws the earth to him-

self"] goes back through intermediate sources (cf. John 12:32) to Plato's "golden cord" (*Laws*, 644) that we ought by all means to hold on to if we would be rightly governed, and not distracted by the pulls of contrary passions; and so to Homer's "golden chain" (*Iliad* 8.18 ff.) with which Zeus could draw all things to himself and in which Plato (*Theaetus*, 153) rightly saw a solar power. It is related, too, that when Zeus was ordering all things, he consulted Night, and asked her "how all things might be both one and divided, he was bidden wrap aether around the world and tie up the bundle with the 'golden cord'."[6] It is in almost the same words that Marsilio Ficino (whom Leonardo must have known) says that "as in us the spirit is the bond of Soul and body, so the light is the bond of the universe (*vinculum universi*)."[7] The clew survives in William Blake's:

I give you the end of a golden string,
Only wind it into a ball:
It will lead you in at Heavens gate
Built in Jerusalems wall.[8]

and in Rūmī's lines:

He gave me the end of a thread—a thread
full
of mischief and guile—
"Pull," he said, "that I may pull; and
break it
not in the pulling."[9]

In India, all determinations or knots are bonds from which one could wish to be freed rather than remain forever "all tied up in knots." One would be released from all those "knots (*granthi*) of the heart," which we should now call "complexes" and of which the ego-complex (*ahaṁkāra, abhimāna*, Philo's *sklēsis*) is the tightest and the hardest to be undone.[10] The concept of liberty, in Vedic contexts, is repeatedly stated positively in terms of "motion at will" and negatively in those of release from bonds, knots, or nooses (*bandha, granthi, pāśa*, etc.). In Sanskrit also, to be independent ("on one's own hook") is expressed by the significant term *svu-tantra*, "being one's own thread, string or wire"; we are not, then, if we "know our Self," the knot, but the thread in which the knot is tied or on which beads are strung, the meaning of which will be clear from the often repeated simile of the threaded beads. The knots are many, but the thread is one. Indra, the Great Hero (*mahāvīra*) is said to have "found out the secret knot of *Susna*,"[11] and it is significant that the followers of the later *Mahāvīra* are known as the Nirgrantha, "whose knot is undone." There is a prayer addressed to Soma to "untie as it were a knot, the entangled (*granthitam*, knotted) straight and tortuous paths,"[12] that is, almost literally, to guide us through the labyrinth in which these ways are indeed confused. The Spirit is in bonds only where and when the knots of individuality are tied; its and our true Self is the continuity of the thread on which the individualized entities are strung.[13]

"Continuity of the thread": in these words lies the clew to the doctrine *que s'asconde mel velame degli nodi strani* [which is hiding in the veils of the strange knots]—to adapt the words of Dante that must have been familiar to Leonardo. For what our "complex" states—and solves—is the relationship of one to many: "one as he is there in himself, many as he is here in his children";[14] one as thread and many in the knots, for as the *Brahma Upanishad* expresses it, the solar Spider spins his web of a single thread, an omnipresent thread, immanent and transcendent, "undivided in things divided," "measureless in measured things," "bodiless in bodies," "imperishable in the perishable,"[15] "th' unstable, Thou,

the stable, rangest."[16]

To have realized that the thread is one, however many the knots, is to be assured that by holding on to this one thread or golden chain by which, as Plato says, we are suspended from above, we cannot go astray; it is only for so long as we think of the knots as independent substances that we cannot "thread the maze" or escape from the toil (Latin *tela [texla]*, "web," and metaphorically "pattern" or "design"). The device is really a labyrinth, and whoever keeps on going without ever turning back, however much the way winds, will inevitably reach "the end of the road"; and just as in the medieval labyrinths he will see there the image of the architect, or at the center of the knots their author's name, so there at world's end will be found the cosmic Architect, who is himself the Way and the Door. The analogy of the human and divine architects is drawn repeatedly throughout the Middle Ages. Leonardo says himself that "that divine power, which lies in the knowledge of the painter, transforms the mind of the painter into the likeness of the divine mind."[17]

THE UNITY of the thread is reflected in what has been called the "one-line technique," of which our knots are an example, and that is equally of our knots and of the spiral forms to which the labyrinths approximate. In this technique, one line is used to form the whole design. The line is often white on a black ground, and as E.L. Watson says, "the use of white lines, known as 'negatives,' to carry the continuity is a prehistoric characteristic";[18] and while the line is by no means always thus a "negative," its whiteness is still conspicuous in the case of our knots and in the representations of labyrinths. Good examples of the continuous

Figure 3

white line, combined with spirals, are represented in the two designs (Figs. 3, 4) from American Indian (Mimbres) bowls, both of which are unquestionably cosmic diagrams.[19]

We have already remarked that our knots and labyrinths approximate to spiral forms. In the case of the single spiral, which resembles a coiled rope or snake, it is evident that if we follow round the line from the outside we reach a center, just as in following round the thread of a spider's web we should reach the spider's "parlor."

From the single we are naturally led to a consideration also of the double spiral.[20] Here too we shall meet with striking illustrations of the one-

Figure 4

line technique. The spiral itself is a growth form;[21] and it will depend upon our own orientation with reference to movement along it, whether we think of it as a centrifugal or as a centripetal form. This ambiguity is made more explicit where we have before us a pair of connected spirals of which the convolutions are either in opposite directions or which are placed on opposite sides of a common axis. These oppositions are essentially those of the paired motions of evolution and involution, birth and death, positive and negative values, etc., that inhere in the totality of the world extended in space and time. (Compare the winding and unwinding of the ribbons by which the dancers are connected to the Maypole. The history of the labyrinth is intimately connected with that of dancing and we still speak of "treading a maze.") On opposite sides of a common axis (where they are sometimes replaced by two separate forms each of concentric circles) they correspond to the right and left hand branches of the Sephirotic Tree and more generally to the "things of the right hand and those of the left." This is sufficiently clear in the Boston Museum earring (Fig. 5), of the type of which the history has been discussed by Miss Berta Segall.[22]

Even more interesting is the double spiral form of many early fibulae, of which there is a magnificent example in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Fig. 6). The outstanding constructional feature in these brooches is the fact that the whole is made of a single wire, of which one end (which may be called the beginning) forms the "eye" and the other the "hook" (which may be called its termination). It is, in other words, a metal pin or needle, bent upon itself, so that when it fastens anything the point rejoins the head or re-enters the eye; a wiry "thread" that ends where it began; and a snake with its tail in its mouth; and what holds it together is the two opposite edges of a "material" that is itself an imitation of the cosmic veil in which the spirit of life at once conceals and reveals itself. The whole is, so to speak, a puzzle: for what one sees when the device is intact, is only the two spirals, and it is not apparent that the whole is really an endless circle in which the visible spirals are the knots; we do not "see the point." The last end and the first beginning coincide.

The primary sense of "broach" (=brooch) is that of anything acute, such as a pin, awl, or spear, that penetrates a material; the same implement, bent upon itself, fastens or sews things together, as if it were in fact a thread. French *fibulae*, as a surgical term, is in fact *suture*. It is only when we substitute a soft thread for the stiff wire that a way must be made for it by a needle;

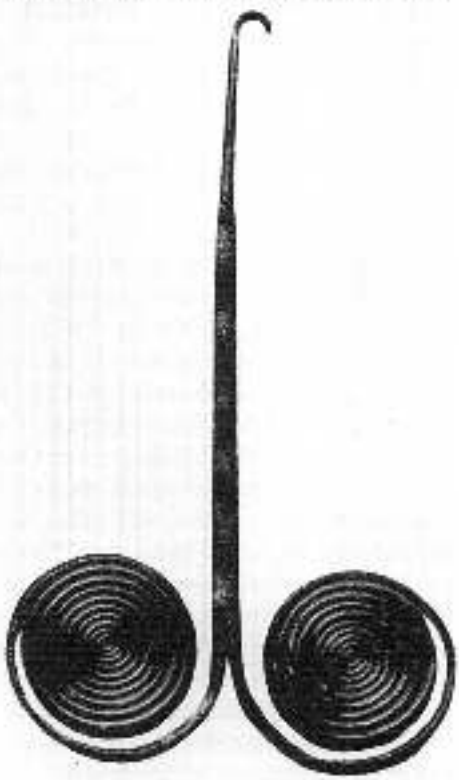

Figure 5

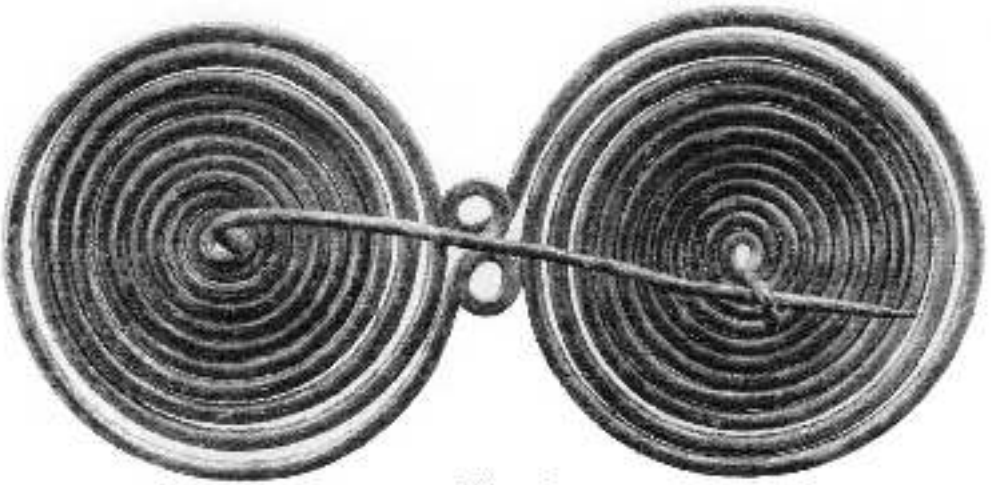

Figure 6

and then the thread remaining in the material is the trace, evidence and "clew" to the passage of the needle; just as our own short life is the trace of the unbroken Life whence it originates. We cannot here pursue the symbolism of embroidery, i.e., of the technique itself, except to call attention (1) to the correspondence of the needle to the arrow and (2) to the well-known symbolism of the "needle's eye" as a strait gate. How the quarters are attached to the Sun by a pneumatic thread is very clearly demonstrated in the *Sarabhanga Jātaka*, where the Bodhisatta Jotipāla (the "Keeper of the Light") standing at the center of a field, at the four corners of which there have been set up posts, attaches a thread to the nock of his arrow and with one shot penetrates all four posts, the arrow passing a second time through the first post and then returning to his hand; thus, indeed, he "sews" all things to himself by means of a single thread. We meet with the needle's eye not only in the familiar context of Luke 18:25, but again in Rūmī's *Mathnawī* I. 3065, "'Tis the thread that is connected with the needle; the eye of the needle is not suitable for the camel."

We have said enough, perhaps, to remind the reader that in primitive art the needs of the soul and body are provided for at one and the same time, thus fulfilling the condition on which Plato admitted the artist to his ideal city. Here there is no divorce of meaning from use; much rather, the aptitude and beauty of the artifact (*et aptus et pulcher*, like St. Augustine's stylus and Xenophon's house) at the same time express and depend upon the form (idea) that underlies it; content and shape are indivisible. As Edmund Pottier says: *"à l'origine toute représentation graphique répond à une pensée concrète et précise: c'est véritablement une écriture* [in the beginning, all pictorial representations respond to a concrete and precise thought: they are, indeed, a kind of handwriting]."[23] In the same way the art of the Middle Ages "was at once a script, a calculus and a symbolic code" and by the same token still "retained the hieratic grandeur of primitive art."[24] The Middle Ages, for which art had been not a merely "aesthetic" experience but an "intellectual virtue," lived on into the Renaissance; the modern divorce of "science" from "art" had not yet taken place; a Guido

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d'Arezzo could still maintain that it was not his art but his *documentum*, i.e., doctrine, that made the singer; philosopher and artist could still be combined without conflict in one and the same individual.

M. Vulliaud remarks that some of Leonardo's works are "enigmatic," and can only be understood in the light of the "intellectualism of the Renaissance." He is speaking, indeed, of the paintings, but what he says will apply as well to the geometrical "fantasies." He points out that the Renaissance, too, "expressed itself through the *lingua franca* of symbolism" and that Leonardo was by no means the least of those artists in whose works it is the voice of the spirit rather than that of fancy that can be heard. "To pretend," he says, "that Leonardo painted traditional subjects in which he did not believe, I dare not."[25] Belief is defined theologically as "assent to a credible proposition" and we are asked to "believe in order to understand." For the modern decorator, indeed, ornament is nothing but an "ornament," devoid of any "meaning"; but I cannot admit that Leonardo was already one of those who do not "understand their material." And even if it could be proved that in his concatenations he was only amusing himself, it would still remain that these unilinear devices retain a meaning in the same way that a word retains its meaning even when spoken by one who no longer knows what it means, and that its history can only be understood when we take account of this meaning.

We have no intention to deny that Leonardo cared, perhaps as much as Plato himself, for "beauty"; our argument is that "the beauty of the material world" was still for him, as for Marsilio Ficino, "a kind of shadow or symbol of that of the immaterial world"; and that this applies as much

to his abstract "fantasies" as to his more realistic drawings. Leonardo was still a whole man. Our distinction of a fine from an applied art, of the artist from the workman and of the archaeologist from the critic, are all the evidence of the contemporary schizophrenia; for none of these, by himself, is a whole man. Is it not absurd to pretend that man *cannot* be at the same time an archaeologist and a philosopher or theologian whose interest is in ideas, *and* an artist whose interest is in "beauty" or in "feeling," or to pretend that the artist was less a man when he designed ornaments for the use of goldsmiths or embroiderers than when he painted the Gioconda? Let us at least desist from the persuasion that the primitives cared only for ideas on the one hand and the Renaissance only for beauty on the other. We assert that Leonardo's concatenation is *et aptus et pulcher* and that these are qualities inseparable in the thing itself; the knots are food for the mind as well as for the eye. •

NOTES

1. Valentin Scherer, *Dürer* (3rd ed.). Klassiker der Kunst. The *Sechs Knoten* are reproduced on pls. 223-225.
2. G. Goldscheider, *Leonardo da Vinci the Artist*, Oxford, 1943, pp. 6, 7, and Fig. 5 (in the present article, Fig. 2).
3. A.M. Hind, *Catalogue of Early Italian Engraving in the British Museum*, 1910, p. 405.
4. Cf. René Guénon, *L'Ésotérisme de Dante*, Paris, 1925; J.H. Probst-Biraben, "Leonardo de Vinci, Initié," *Le Voile d'Isis*, 38, 1933, pp. 260-266; "Symbolisme des arts plastiques de l'occident et du proche orient," ibid., 40, 1935, pp. 160-173; Paul Vulliaud, *La pensée ésotérique de Leonardo da Vinci*, Paris, 1910.
5. In *Schweizer Volkskunst; Art Populaire Suisse*, Basel, 1941, p. 85, cf. pp. 94-96.
6. The words are A.B. Cook's in *Zeus*, II, 1029, based on the Orphic Fragment, Niels 165, and other sources.
7. *Op. Om.* p. 981, cited by P.O. Kristeller, *The Philosophy of Marsilio Ficino*, 1943, p. 116.
8. William Blake, *Jerusalem*, plate 77.
9. R.A. Nicholson, *Odes of Shams-i-Tabriz*, Cambridge, 1898, no. 28.
10. For the "knots of the heart" see *Chāndogya Upanishad* VII. 26.2 and *Katha Upanishad* VI. 15, etc. The references to bonds and knots collected in J. Heckenbach, *De nodibus sacra sacrisque vinculis*, Giessen, 1911, have mostly to do with the ritual untyings that symbolize a spiritual liberation *(lāsis, moksa)*.
11. *Rgveda* X. 61.13.
12. *Rgveda* IX. 97.18.
13. Cf. *Sarvopanisat* 1-3 and 19.
14. *Śatapatha Brāhmana* X. 5.2.16, in answer to the question, "Is he one or many?"
15. *Atharva Véda* X. 7.39, XI. 4.15; *Katha Upanishad* II. 22; *Bhagavad Gītā* XIII. 7.16, XVIII. 20, etc. Cf. Hermes Trismegistos *Lib.* V. 10 a.
16. Joshua Sylvester.
17. H. Ludwig in Eitelberger's *Quellenschriften für Kunstgeschichte*, 68.
18. Edith L. Watson, "The One-Line Technique," *Art and Archaeology*, XXXIV, Sept.-Oct. 1933, pp. 227-234, 247.
19. After E.L. Watson, loc. cit. The types illustrated have many close parallels in old world art, see for example, Anna Roes, "Tierwirbel," in *IPEK*, II (1936-37), Abb. 12, 21, 31.
20. Cf. René Guénon, "La Double Spirale," *Études Traditionelles*, 41, 1936. See also René Dussaud, *Les civilisations préhellèniques*, 1910, p. 218 f; the motive had a religious significance and played a part in ritual.
21. T.A. Cook, *The Curves of Life*, London, 1914; D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, *Growth and Form*, Cambridge (Eng.), 1943.
22. MFA. *Bulletin*, No. 245, 1943.
23. *Céramique peinte de Suse*, Délégation en Perse, XIII (1912), 52.
24. Emil Mâle, *Religious Art of the Thirteenth Century in France*, 1913, Introduction.
25. Vulliaud, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-103.

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