



The Complete Dictionary of Symbols

By Jack Tresidder

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The Complete Dictionary of Symbols is an engaging and accessible guide to more than 2,000 major themes, figures, and symbols that are commonly found in myth, art, and literature. Drawing on classical mythologies, Biblical themes, and traditional symbols from cultures worldwide, this user-friendly, attractively priced reference has comprehensive entries on everything from individual animals, plants, and objects to gods, goddesses, supernatural creatures, heroes, heroines, mythical episodes, prophets, saints, miracles, and myriad other subjects. Whether the topic at hand is Mercury or Merlin, the Egyptian ankh or the humble ant, engaging text reveals the origins and meaning of each symbol. Interspersed with the main entries are short articles on themes of special interest, such as the Sun, Moon, and stars, or common vices. Three hundred illustrations, an intuitive system of cross-referencing, and authoritative research make *The Complete Dictionary of Symbols* a reliable resource for school, home, or library.

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Editorial Review

From School Library Journal

Grade 9 Up—This dictionary is both too modest and too boastful: it condenses hundreds of myths and includes deities, heroes, saints, historical figures, animals, etc., with connections to art and literature, yet it is hardly exhaustive. Double the length of Tresidder's *Dictionary of Symbols* (Chronicle, 1998; o.p.), it preserves that work's format and adds a brief bibliography. Most of the author's *Symbols and Their Meanings* (Sterling, 2000) is also found here. Marginalia include primary-source citations and cross-references. Violet backgrounds distinguish 60 short articles on such diverse topics as Trojan War heroes, the Buddha, angels, avatars of Vishnu, dance, liberty, the jaguar, and more. The book includes many non-Western myths and symbols, but a broad perspective in some articles is lacking. The features on architecture, chastity, the ages of man, and religious orders are entirely European in focus. Many articles—e.g., on music, floods, fish, dragons, death, creation—are culturally broader. Africa deserves better coverage. Small black-and-white and/or violet graphics—useful, if not compelling—appear on most pages. Clare Gibson's *Signs & Symbols* (Grange) and Miranda Bruce-Mitford's *Illustrated Book of Signs & Symbols* (DK, both 1996), though less complete, will attract browsers with their color photos. Hans Biedermann's *Dictionary of Symbolism* (Facts On File, 1992) is better illustrated, more detailed on Western symbols, less global; Tresidder's volume offers high value for cost, if there is a myth/symbol gap on the reference shelf.—*Patricia D. Lothrop, St. George's School, Newport, RI*

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From [Booklist](#)

This is the first symbols source to be labeled *complete*, although the introduction does not specify the qualities that make it so. Its 2,000 entries are twice the number found in other resources on the topic, such as Tresidder's 1998 *Dictionary of Symbols: An Illustrated Guide to Traditional Images, Icons, and Emblems* (much of which is duplicated in the newer book). The alphabetically arranged entries focus on classical and Christian symbolism but encompass other traditions worldwide. In addition to traditional symbols (e.g., objects, animals, flowers, shapes), the volume includes legends, themes, or concepts important for understanding systems of symbols and historical, mythological, or religious figures. It also includes brief references to the use of the symbol in art. For example, the entry *alchemy* is identical to that in the *Dictionary of Symbols* except for a reference to the depiction of alchemists in Vasari's painting *The Alchemist's Laboratory*. The *Complete Dictionary*'s articles range from a few sentences to one-page panels on more comprehensive topics (*Colours; Elements; Music, musical instruments*). Its format is similar to *Dictionary of Symbols*, with *see* references and sources placed awkwardly in the margins, where they might be missed. Bibliographical references are minimal; most cite only basic sources such as Psalms 42:1 for *Stag* or Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* for *Phoenix*. A geographically arranged bibliography at the end of the volume includes a good selection of older, classic texts on art, mythology, and religion. Illustrations are in-house drawings from original artifacts rather than actual photos. The *Complete Dictionary of Symbols* is an acceptable reference book for home and small libraries and for public libraries that need a symbol source for general readers. It overlaps very little with the fascinating, graphically oriented *Symbols.com* (a free Internet source). It is unnecessary for larger collections that already have scholarly sources such as Carl G. Liungman's *Dictionary of Symbols* (Norton, 1994), Hans Biedermann and James Hulbert's *Dictionary of Symbolism: Cultural Icons and the Meaning behind Them* (Facts On File, 1992), and Anthony Stevens' excellent, thematically arranged *Ariadne's Clue: A Guide to the Symbols of Humankind* (Princeton, 1999). *Christine Whittington*

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About the Author

Jack Tresidder is a journalist and critic who has written about foreign affairs and the arts in the UK and his native New Zealand. He lives in the French Alps.

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