CHLOË SUGDEN

Embodying the Great Mother

Olga Fröbe's Spiritual Authority at Eranos

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This article examines the trans-disciplinary œuvre and hosting activities of the Swiss-based artist and archivist, Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn (1881–1962), founder of the Eranos Conferences and creator of the Eranos Archive. Drawn from my doctoral project's findings, the text argues that Fröbe's self-identification with the "Great Mother archetype" functioned as a strategy of feminine spiritual authority at Eranos—expressed through practices of conference-hosting, image curation, archiving and visionary art-making. Through unpublished correspondence, *Eranos-Jahrbücher* texts, and visual analyses of Fröbe's *Visions* drawings (1934–37) and "Great Mother" Archive images, Fröbe is situated within 1930s New Age esotericism. Drawing on religious studies concepts and art-historical methods, her "mythopoetic performance" of the Great Mother is interpreted as a mode of both institutional and visionary authority. Fröbe's *opus* exemplifies how *fin-de-siècle* women mobilised visionary experience and archetypal symbolism, constructing autonomous modes of spiritual and epistemic leadership within modernist intellectual cultures.

Introduction

The life's work of the Swiss-based artist, archivist and researcher Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn (1881–1962)[1] is the subject of this article. Her trans-disciplinary *opus* unfolds at the intersection of *fin-de-siècle*, visionary art-making, esoteric epistemology, image archiving, curation and conference-hosting. From 1933 until her death, Fröbe orchestrated the annual Eranos Conferences (*Tagungen*) at her property on the shore of Lago Maggiore in Ascona-Moscia, Switzerland. Her events brought together psychologists, mythologists, historians of religion and theologians (Bernardini et al. 2015, 13). Figures including C. G. Jung, Gershom Scholem and Henry Corbin attended for lectures spanning religion, philosophy, psychology and cross-cultural visual symbolism (Hakl 2013, 54). More than a logistical organiser, Fröbe cultivated the persona of Eranos's "Great Mother", merging her practices of hosting, art-making, image-archiving and curation into one role (Sorge 2012, 390–8). This article examines how Fröbe's (1938b, 1; 1938c, 1) self-identification with the Great Mother or Magna Mater archetype operated as a strategy of spiritual authority at Eranos. I argue that her multi-modal embodiment of the Great Mother constitutes a "mytho-cosmological performance"—a performance in which these practices operate as instruments of a distinctly *feminine authority*.

1 Abbreviated to Fröbe henceforth.

Highlighting her enduring New Age beliefs,[2] the text first situates Fröbe and the Eranos Conferences within the inter-war context. The materials, methods and theoretical framework of the article are then outlined and Fröbe's role as Eranos host is addressed, including her cultivation of the Great Mother persona. Fröbe's Eranos Archive is also introduced, as I argue that photostats under the Great Mother category across the Archive's folders form a Warburgian constellation. Close readings of key mixed media artworks from Fröbe's *Visions* (1934–38) series follow, tracing how initiatory symbols materialised and amplified her identification with the Great Mother and her wider syncretic occult cosmology. The conclusion synthesises Fröbe's archival and artistic materialisations of the Magna Mater, arguing that these media—as mytho-cosmological enactments—functioned as vehicles of spiritual authority. The article draws on findings from my doctoral dissertation, entitled *Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn's Art and Archive: A Study in Cosmogrammatic Form* (2025). Images were accessed and are reproduced here with the generous permission of the Eranos Foundation Archives, Ascona-Moscia, the Warburg Institute Photographic Collection, London, and the C. G. Jung Institute's Bildarchiv, Küsnacht.

2 By "spirituality" or "spiritual beliefs," I refer to what Wouter Hanegraaff (2000, 296–304) identifies as an individualised form of religiosity that emerged within the secularised contexts of early-twentieth-century Euro-American modernities. When aligned with Fröbe's "New Age esotericism," spirituality in the 1930s signified a turn away from institutional religion toward personal, experiential and syncretic modes of meaning-making. (See fn. 3 for definition of the term *New Age* in this article's context.)

Context: Fröbe's Eranos and the 1930s New Age[3]

Against the idyllic Ticino landscape the two-week, annual Eranos Conference entailed intensive lecture schedules and lively academic exchanges over roundtable meals outdoors (Hanegraaff 2012, 278–81). Each year's event revolved around a specific theme solely dictated by Fröbe (1944a, 1; 1936b, 3), such as *The Gestalt and Cult of the Great Mother* (1938) or *Gnosis and Alchemy* (1942). Jung (1936, 1) described Eranos lectures "on living questions in the field of philosophy, religion and the history of symbolism, fields of research to which modern psychology turns constantly for orientation". Fröbe (1935, 5–8) edited and published the conference proceedings in the *Eranos-Jahrbücher*. From 1934, she also sourced thousands of photographic and photostatic "archetypal images" for her Eranos Archive, using them to visualise Conference themes via exhibitions that she curated (Fröbe-Kapteyn 1941b, 1–3). She envisioned Eranos as a "circle of work" carried along by a trans-personal "undercurrent" (Fröbe 1956, 2). "We all serve the indestructible", Fröbe wrote in the 1952 *Jahrbuch*. "Whether we know it or not [...] this service largely determines the quality and substance of the culture in the process of renewal" (Fröbe-Kapteyn 1952, 7). In this formulation, "the indestructible" signifies a trans-historical principle that Fröbe (1952, 7) believed endures beneath

3 All mentions of the *New Age* in this article refer to 1930s Euro-American contexts, when currents of esoteric modernism converged with psychological and scientific paradigms to form what Hanegraaff (2000, 291–304) describes as an early manifestation of New Age religiosity.

the shifting conditions of material existence. Her close collaborator from the 1920s until 1932, the Theosophist Alice Bailey (1925, 146) frequently invoked the "indestructible" as an eternal, unchanging spiritual essence. Fröbe (1941b, 1–3; 1952, 7) engaged with Baileyan Theosophy from at least the 1930s through to the 1950s, and across public statements and private correspondence she articulated her belief in a New Age of spiritual evolution.

Prior to the foundation of Eranos, Fröbe visited Bailey in Connecticut in 1930, outlining her plan to establish a non-sectarian "spiritual centre" in Ascona-Moscia, unrestrictedly "open to esoteric thinkers and occult students of all groups in Europe and elsewhere" (Bailey 1973, 216). Fröbe and Bailey co-founded and co-directed the Spiritual Centre as a summer school from 1930 to 1932, declaring: "We are gathered here not for the satisfaction of personal curiosity, but in the spirit of a joint enterprise, a work dedicated to the development of a new consciousness" (Fröbe-Kapteyn and Bailey 1930, 1). Ten years later, Fröbe (1941a, 3) similarly asserted that Eranos was more than a forum for intellectual discussion, envisioning it as a site of spiritual and cultural renewal animated by ideals of collective transformation. Her vision of this collective "process of renewal" positioned Eranos within the 1930s New Age mythos, anticipating an epoch of radical transformation in human consciousness—the dawning Age of Aquarius (Sutcliffe 2002, 112). Situated within this wider New Age religiosity, Fröbe's thought and practice sought to integrate esoteric, psychological and scientific frameworks in the pursuit of holistic transformation (Hanegraaff 2000, 296–304). She wrote that her Eranos project was "a typical synthetic creation of the new age", a beacon amid the surrounding darkness of war and cultural fragmentation (Fröbe-Kapteyn 1941b, 1–3). As the religious studies scholar Tim Rudbøg (2019, 133–48) notes, this was the eschatological horizon of much early-twentieth-century esotericism: not apocalypse but transmutation, the rebirth of culture through spiritual reintegration. At the same time, the inter-war period was defined by profound disorientation, marking the breakdown of Enlightenment rationalism and the emergence of a collective search for renewed systems of meaning (Jay 2004, 117–34). Within this volatile landscape, Fröbe (1939b, 8; 1955, 5–6) conceived Eranos as an intellectual and spiritual sanctuary, a site for trans-disciplinary experimentation and epistemic creativity. The tension between Fröbe's (1939b, 1–9) professed cultivation of an experimental, non-hierarchical New Age space for dialogue and the institutional, symbolic and gendered dynamics structuring the Conference invites closer reflection. This article therefore investigates her role as Eranos's woman orchestrator.

Materials and methods

The study draws on Fröbe's unpublished letters and notes (Eranos Foundation Archives, ETH Bibliothek's C. G. Jung Papers Collection, C. G. Jung Institute's Bildarchiv, Wellcome Collection), and published writings in the *Eranos-Jahrbücher*, together with two key visual corpora. First, Fröbe's (1938b, 1) *Visions* pencil and pastel drawings on onion skin paper, allegedly produced after a 1934 trance experience of the Great Mother in Crete. Second, the photostats she indexed under the Great Mother for the Eranos Archive and atten-

dant Conference exhibitions. The selection of individual images for close reading is guided by three criteria: (1) explicit reference to the Great Mother in Fröbe's own cataloguing or correspondence; (2) highly legible formal motifs associated with initiation and rebirth across multiple visual traditions; and (3) evidence of circulation, such as images she mailed to or reproduced for Eranos participants. Methodologically, my analysis combines art-historical and religious studies approaches. From art history, I employ formal and iconographic analysis. Highlighting Hans Belting's (2001, 23–34) concept of the "image act", I treat Fröbe's symbolically charged images as active, fluctuating agents rather than inert representations. Situating the ensuing image analyses within a broader interpretative context, I also draw on Max Weber's (1947, 328–41) theory of charismatic authority from the sociology of religion, reading Fröbe's visionary claims as a crucial source of her spiritual legitimacy. Extending Weber's concept, I also integrate Karl Baier's (2010, 107–19) notion of "fields of spiritual power", alongside Manon Hedenborg White's (2020, 257) writings on "divine or sacralised feminine symbolism" as a point of departure for redefining feminine spiritual authority. All primary sources are cited with archival call numbers and translations are the author's unless otherwise noted. Regularly cited primary voices, especially Fröbe's, are not approached as straightforward factual accounts. Primary writings and testimonies are understood as self-fashioning strategies or interpretative claims, examined in relation to the broader visual, archival and intellectual contexts in which they operate. This approach frames my readings of Fröbe's *Visions* drawings and "Magna Mater" Archive imagery, where narrative and image together construct the grounds of Fröbe's spiritual authority. The article's mixed qualitative approach—archival research, close visual analysis and theoretical interpretation—supports the argument that Fröbe's *Visions*, hosting and Archive images were instruments of feminine authority, materialising her self-identification with the Great Mother.

Theoretical framework

Conceptions of spiritual authority are diverse and historically contingent, reflecting the plural and contested nature of religion and spirituality (Alma and ter Avest 2019, 93). Yet Weber's theory of charismatic authority remains foundational. Charismatic authority arises, Weber posits, when followers recognise a person as possessing "a certain quality of individual personality, by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or exceptional powers or qualities" (Weber 1947, 328–41, 358). This mode of authority is validated not by office or tradition but by the perception of a personal gift (charisma), potentially revealed through ecstatic states, visions or miraculous acts (Weber 1947, 358–9). This Weberian frame aligns with Fröbe's visionary claims and attendant self-mythologisation as Magna Mater. In letters, Fröbe (1938b, 1; 1938c, 1) recounted the aforementioned waking trance experience, where she was overwhelmed by a vivid influx of mythological imagery associated with the Great Mother. She interpreted the event as an initiatory rite of profound significance in the correspondence. Such experiences position Fröbe (1952, 7; 1939a, 1–11) as a figure whose authority at

Eranos springs, in part, from direct contact with an allegedly hidden yet transformative force—a notion supported by her New Age convictions. Ensuing formal analyses of her cultivation of the Great Mother persona exemplify Fröbe's Weberian mode of charismatic spiritual authority. This mode entailed her claimed extraordinary insight, legitimised through purported personal revelation, alongside the authority she granted herself as Eranos's host and chief organiser.

Fröbe's context, however, complicates Weber's model. As outlined, her charisma is expressed through event orchestration, letter-writing, image curation and art-making rather than overt prophecy. This destabilises Weber's masculinist model of the prophet. Weber (1947, 358; 1963, 46–7) theorises that followers obey a charismatically qualified leader on the basis of personal trust in *his* revelation, heroism or exemplary qualities; a formulation emphasising a proclamation-centred model of authority and reflecting Weber's gendered framing. While he provides a foundational account of charisma as legitimacy, grounded in recognition of an extraordinary personal quality, Baier's (2010, 107–19) notion of a "field of spiritual power" reconfigures this dynamic. Baier situates charisma within a network of interdependent relations. In this light, Fröbe's visionary authority is best understood not as an isolated gift but as a mediated and negotiated phenomenon, embedded in the social, aesthetic and spiritual exchanges that animated Eranos (Baier 2010, 107–19).[4] Through her practices of hosting, art-making and curation, Fröbe's self-identification as Eranos's Great Mother embodied what Hedenborg White (2020, 248, 257, 299, 316) defines as a symbolic mode of feminine agency—in which feminine figures, practices and bodies become sources of creative and spiritual authority rather than objects of representation.[5] Hedenborg White (2020, 297–98) explores how women[6] have historically reclaimed symbols of feminine creative power, inhabiting femininity as a consciously reworked position of agency. Through the recuperation and sacralisation of feminine imagery associated with sensuality, embodiment and creation, historical discourses and practices have articulated a form of symbolic and spiritual sovereignty (Hedenborg

4 Although Baier (2010, 107–19) situates his discussion of spiritual authority within Christian and Buddhist contexts, his reflections on its relational and dynamic nature provide a valuable framework for understanding Fröbe's visionary practice as an expression of feminine spiritual authority.

5 Hedenborg White (2020, 223, 335) posits that within the discourses and practices of Euro-American esotericism, feminine symbolism has frequently been articulated in relation to the masculine: idealised as passive receptivity, condemned as transgressive sexuality, or denied recognition as an autonomous locus of power. The history of "Western" esotericism, she writes, has often left gender under-theorised, rendering the feminine a derivative or oppositional category. Yet certain esoteric discourses and practices, which she studies, reconfigured feminine symbolism as a site of spiritual creativity and power, transmuting it from a position of marginality to one of generative authority (Hedenborg White 248–57, 297–8).

6 By "women" I include all individuals who identify with or are socially positioned within feminine or woman-aligned subjectivities, acknowledging the fluidity and diversity of gendered experience across historical and cultural contexts.

White 2020, 248–57). In this light, Fröbe's multi-modal self-affiliation with the Great Mother can be read as a strategic enactment of archetypal self-sufficiency—a performative mode of authority grounded in aesthetic production, which redefined the "feminine" as a creative, self-authorising epistemic principle (Hedenborg White 2020, 335).

This dynamic resonates across histories of Euro-American occultist artists, whose practices mobilised claimed visionary insight and amplifications of feminine symbolisms as instruments of self-assertion and spiritual agency. As Joy Dixon (2001, 63–6, 150–3) shows, Theosophists at the turn of the twentieth century reframed the "divine feminine" as both a cosmic principle and locus of women's agency. In Dixon's (2001, 63–6, 152–3) analysis, the divine feminine was a spiritual and epistemic resource enabling women to claim religious authority through personal revelation over institutional sanction. "Theosophical feminism", Dixon (2001, 153) argues, "offered women a new basis for authority in the spiritualised body and its capacity for visionary insight."[7] Amy Hale (2021, 12–16) demonstrates how twentieth-century women used art, ritual and myth to create autonomous zones of knowledge, approaching "esotericism as a vehicle for both personal and societal transformation". Hale (2021, 14) discusses "how women have subverted and strategically reinforced 'femininity' as both an essential and liberatory trait". Alex Owen (2004, 11, 142–4) argues that "occult modernism" interwove science, art and mysticism into a new idiom of spiritual inquiry, offering women a legible framework for visionary experience. Claudie Massicotte's (2023, 1–23) study of Hélène Smith illuminates women's trance experiences, mediumship and visionary performances as crucial sites for theorising subjectivity at the turn of the twentieth century. Fröbe's (1938b, 1; 1938c, 1) initiatory waking-trance encounters with the Great Mother and her ensuing identification with this archetype reverberate within these histories, articulating visionary experience as a mode of legitimate knowing and spiritual authority that resists containment—within either scientific discourse or the subjective realm of personal revelation.

Fröbe as Eranos host and Great Mother

Fröbe's orchestration of the Eranos Conferences reflected meticulous organisation and devoted hospitality as she maintained direct control over finances, invitations, catering, structure and scheduling (Hakl 2013, 108). In 1939 she described herself as the "servant of a leading Idea", deeming her Eranos leadership a spiritual imperative.[8] Fröbe (1939b, 8) claimed to subordinate her "personal will" to Eranos's group dynamic in her hosting approach. Under her guidance, she asserted, Eranos resisted affiliation with any school or organ-

7 Within Theosophical discourse, Dixon (2001, 63–6, 150–3) writes, the feminine was not merely a metaphor for receptivity or compassion, but the creative matrix of the universe. By claiming access to this universal principle through visionary or psychic experience, women Theosophists positioned themselves as interpreters of divine truth, circumventing institutional hierarchies and traditional clerical mediation.

8 Orig. text: "In der Eranos-Arbeit stehen wir im Dienste einer leitenden Idee. Unser Dank gebührt den Vortragenden, die mit uns dieser Idee dienen" (Fröbe-Kapteyn 1939c, 6). Trans. in Sorge 2012, 401.

isation, preserving its independence as a space for open, cross-disciplinary discussion (Fröbe-Kapteyn 1939a; 1939b). Fröbe (1939b, 1–9) painted Eranos as a fluid, supposedly non-hierarchical site of epistemic improvisation shaped by "its unseen conductor and the law that governs its movements". Through the Conference, Fröbe (1939a, 1–11; 1939b, 1–9) alleged to reimagine the scholarly gathering, bringing the symbolic, mythological and imaginal into productive tension with the historical, psychological and philosophical. "The speakers at every meeting" she declared, "are a unit, bound by their individual relationship to the central theme and to that dynamic force that we call Eranos" (Fröbe-Kapteyn 1941b, 2). Yet a glaring tension arose between Fröbe's (1939b, 8) New Age foregrounding of group collaboration and her incontestable authority over Eranos's operations. Through her sole decision-making power, she clearly instated herself as Eranos's authoritative figure (Hakl 2013, 108). Fröbe's (1939b, 8) leadership thus operated through both institutional authority and what she described as the spiritual "service" of hosting: a mode of spiritual authority and epistemic agency aestheticised through archetypal self-figuration, curatorial practice and visionary art-making.

As Giovanni Sorge (2012, 392–94) argues, Fröbe's charismatic presence extended beyond administration to a form of ritualised hosting which sacralised the Eranos Conference space. Eranos attendee Scholem (1979, 473) recalled that Fröbe was perceived as a mystical figure by many participants who often referred to her as Eranos's "*Ur-Mutter*" and "Great Mother."[9] In March 1960 Fröbe wrote to Jung, "I am aware that my relationship to the [Eranos] speakers is always that of a mother to her son, as all the speakers are continually telling me, whether they understand anything of psychology or not" (Hakl 2013, 295). Via journal entries from his time at Eranos, Mircea Eliade (1976, 95) conjured an image of Fröbe as a hierophantic presence convening a cosmological and imaginal environment into being. Likewise, Corbin described her as "the one who let the call go out from the centre, who worked the miracle and who caused a divine gift to flow into our souls" (Jambet 1981, 264). In Fröbe's (1939b, 1–9) syncretic occult cosmology, as custodian and conduit of a trans-personal force guiding Eranos, she assumed the role of a maternal initiatory figure at the nexus of its mythic and intellectual life. The Great Mother was not merely a Jungian or Neumannian[10] archetype in Fröbe's (1938b; 1938c; 1938d) cosmology, but a polyvalent figure of her own reconstruction and redefinition, shaped by extensive research on ancient mythological artefacts and mystery traditions. In a letter to Joseph Campbell, she wrote,

> anyone who has come in contact with archetypal energy will know that he

9 Scholem (1979, 463) writes, "When we, Adolf Portmann, Erich Neumann, Henry Corbin, Ernst Benz, Mircea Eliade, Karl Kerényi and many others—scholars of religion, psychologists, philosophers, physicists and biologists—were trying to play our part in Eranos, the figure of Olga Fröbe was crucial—she whom we always referred to among ourselves as 'the Great Mother.'"

10 For Jung's and Erich Neumann's interpretations of the Great Mother archetype, see Jung 1959, 147–256, and Neumann 1955, 13–59 respectively.

> is up against something immensely powerful, immensely alive and creative, in fact the creative forces themselves. The lectures move around a centre, not represented by any personality but by an idea that we call Eranos. It stands for the Quest, or for the Self, or the Way of the Soul. *Au fond*, it escapes definition, being a paradox and an irrational thing. (McGuire 1989, 143)

This vision of Eranos, animated by what she described as "archetypal energy" and "creative force", reflects Fröbe's (1938b, 1; 1938c, 1; 1939b, 1–11) maternal symbolic self-conception and the sacral dimension she attributed to the gatherings. Across published and unpublished writings, this fusion of archetypal association with personal myth-making coloured Fröbe's constructed presence as Eranos's institutional and spiritual authority.[11]

Fröbe's (1938c, 1) embodiment of the Great Mother archetype found vivid expression in a letter to her friend Cary Baynes. In this document, she recounted the trance that occurred during her Crete pilgrimage as a "psychosomatic collapse", experienced while seeking out Magna Mater imagery for her Archive. As noted, Fröbe (1938c, 1) presented the episode as a transformative encounter, an affirmation of her mythic vocation to figuratively inhabit the Great Mother, while simultaneously recognising the peril of being entirely subsumed by the archetype. Fröbe (1938c, 1) confessed that the encounter brought her to the very threshold of "archetypal possession". Underscoring the mystagogic[12] intensity of her self-identification, Fröbe (1938b, 1) wrote to occultist Dion Fortune earlier that year, interpreting the same experience as an initiatory rite into the Magna Mater's cult. In this letter to Fortune, she enclosed copies of *Visions* drawings. Through her narrations of this episode to confidants, Fröbe (1938b; 1938c) staged a personal initiation and symbolic claim: *to become the archetype was to author its meaning.* What follows examines the material and symbolic dimensions through which her identification with the Magna Mater unfolded as a mytho-cosmological performance—a multi-modal expression of feminine spiritual authority.

The Magna Mater in the Eranos Archive

From 1934, Fröbe (1936a, 1) established the Eranos Archive for Research in Symbolism on her Ascona property. Largely self-funded yet financially assisted by ETH Zürich on behalf of Jung,[13] the Archive held

11 Sorge (2012, 383–404) describes Fröbe's self-presentation and perception by others as *la grande madre di Eranos, underscoring* the mythic and maternal symbolism surrounding her authority. Fröbe's personal charisma, attention to detail and hospitality, he argues, gave "Eranos the character of a modern sanctuary of the spirit", linking practical organisation with sacral significance (Sorge 2012, 393).

12 Derived from the Greek *mystagōgia* (μυσταγωγία) meaning "leading the initiate into the mysteries", the term "mystagogic" is used here to denote a process of initiation into experiential or esoteric knowledge. The word encapsulates the transformative and initiatory dimension of Fröbe's visionary self-identification, situating her experience within a lineage of esoteric practices that encompass revelation, ritual and non-ordinary states of consciousness (Geest 2020).

13 The document cited (Fröbe-Kapteyn 1936a) is an invoice from Fröbe to Jung. Fröbe

Figure 1. Several of the folders under "Die Grosse Mutter" archetypal indexing category in the Eranos Archive, Warburg Institute. Image: Chloë Sugden, reproduced courtesy of the Photographic Collection, Warburg Institute, London, all rights reserved.

Figure 2. *Athen. Akropolis Museum. Medusa. 6 Jahr.v.Chr.* Item no. 87. Folder: "Die Gross Mutter: Die Gorgo." Image: Chloë Sugden, reproduced courtesy of the Photographic Collection, Warburg Institute, London, all rights reserved.

over 6,000 black-and-white photographs and photostatic copies of images and artefacts (Duits 2024). Over decades, Fröbe (1948, 1) determinedly travelled across Europe and America to acquire the images. Their thematic breadth spans Christian mysticism, alchemy, Hermeticism, Hindu and Tibetan Buddhist iconography, Jewish mysticism, Egyptian funerary symbolism, Islamic cosmology, and Graeco-Roman and Mesopotamian mythology. Following her own archetypal taxonomy, Fröbe (1941a, 1–3; 1941b, 1–3) undertook the meticulous organisation of the photostats into thematic folders, an endeavour of monumental scope.[14] Fröbe's (1941a, 1–3; 1941b, 1–3) expansive visual repository was conceived as a tool for experimental symbolic juxtaposition and cross-disciplinary inquiry. In the 1950s, Fröbe donated her entire meticulously compiled Archive to London's Warburg Institute, where it remains intact as part of the

> requests ETH Zürich's reimbursement for travel and image reproduction expenses, incurred as she travelled abroad to locate, then commission or copy images of artworks and artefacts for the Eranos Archive.

14 A joint statement reads: "For the past five years, Frau Fröbe-Kapteyn has been working in the winters in the great libraries and museums of Europe and America. She is collecting photographs of religious art for the Eranos Archive of Images, which she also founded" (orig. text: "Seit fünf Jahren arbeitet Frau Fröbe-Kapteyn im Winter in den grossen Bibliotheken und Museen Europas und Amerikas. Sie sammelt Photographien der religiösen Kunst für das ebenfalls von ihr gegründete Eranos-Bilderarchiv"). See Fröbe-Kapteyn et al. 1948, 1.

Photographic Collection (Gronning et al. 2007, 245–67). The C. G. Jung Institute in Küsnacht, Switzerland, also holds approximately 6,500 copies of the original Archive images (Leuenberger-Kajs 2024). Entering her Archive at the Warburg, I encounter not a rigidly ordered system but an open, exploratory environment, as Fröbe (1941b, 1–3) sought to resist archival and curatorial frameworks that imposed prescriptive or dogmatic orders. The images are neither mounted nor embedded within didactic sequences. With only brief typescript notes on provenance, Fröbe arranged the predominantly monochrome photostats in loosely assembled folders, each identified by its archetypal theme.[15] Lining a wall of the Photographic Collection, the folders remain in their original boxes.

In her correspondence with Ximena de Angulo-Roelli, Fröbe (1941b, 1–3) explicitly rejects conventional systems of organisation—"cross-indexing" she writes, "is quite hopeless"—advocating instead an intuitive, thematic model that mirrors her archetypal method. Fröbe (1941b, 1–3) contrasts her user-oriented design with the obscurity of institutional precedents such as Princeton's Christian Art Archive. By privileging thematic syntheses over inflexible classifications, Fröbe (1941b, 1–3) encourages users to compare symbolic imagery across cultural and historical contexts. Her method echoed both Jungian[16] and Warburgian approaches to visual symbolism. While Jungian archetypes inform the categorical framework of the Archive, Fröbe's (1941b, 1–3) resistance to chronological hierarchy, her cultivation of intuitive pattern-recognition, and her attunement to cross-cultural resonance closely parallel Warburg's concept of the *image series* (*Bilderreihe*) (Zöllner 2020, 1078–83). Mutable and dynamic, Fröbe's Archive functions as an epistemic instrument akin to the Warburgian *Bilderatlas*, conceived to evoke generative affinities and dissonances across the visual symbolisms of diverse cultures and epochs Fröbe 1941b, 1–2).[17] Fröbe's consistent reliance on black-and-white reproductions, whether for the Archive or in the art copies exchanged through private correspondence (Fröbe 1952, 1; 1939b), exposes her belief in the

15 Fröbe (1941b, 1–3) writes: "On the inside of every volume of these compilations the number of the corresponding Mappe [folder] should be printed. The pictures will not need an extra index, at least not for a long time. Each Mappe will be labelled with the name of the archetype it contains, visible without taking it out of its compartment, labelled perhaps Mythology, or Christianity, or pre-Christian, or Mother Cults, etc."

16 Jung's theory of archetypes is one of the most foundational yet controversial aspects of analytical psychology, seeking to establish universal psychic structures that manifest across cultures and historical periods (Roesler 2012, 223). Jung continually altered his archetype theory, eventually framing archetypes as pre-existent, inherited structures within the collective unconscious—psychic dominants shaping symbolic expression (Jung 2014, [1960, 1919], 129–39). Contemporary scholarship has demonstrated the cultural contingency of symbolic meaning, emphasising that symbols acquire their force within specific historical, social and interpretative contexts (Wallach 1992, 134; von Raffay 2000, 142; Merchant 2009, 334).

17 Warburg's *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* (1924–29) is an incomplete yet inventive project, which scholars argue reconceptualised how cultural memory and symbolic imagery operate (Zöllner 2020, 1078–83).

primacy of symbolic form rather than material fidelity. As Frederika Tevebring (2023) observes, the Archive constitutes a "sacral order of images", grounded in Fröbe's (1932, 1) conviction that images are not inert representations but active agents of spiritual and cultural transmission.

Significantly, Fröbe (1948, 1) dedicated twelves boxes of the Archive's eighty-four folders to the Great Mother theme (fig. 1), a gesture that consolidated her self-identification with its symbolic force. Among these materials, for example, is a photostat of a gorgoneion mask reproduced from a sixth-century BCE relief in the Acropolis Museum, Athens (fig. 2). Fröbe filed the image within a folder bearing the title "The Great Mother: The Gorgon" (*Die Gross Mutter: Die Gorgo*). The gorgon, Anemona Ovidiu (2010, 25–49) notes, exemplifies the archaic visual logic of the apotropaic face: at once arresting and repellent, her grotesque features ritualise the feminine as threshold and force. The photostatic medium's chiaroscuro amplifies her uncanny gaze, as her visage functions not simply as *apotropaion* but as a vessel of liminal, unconstrained symbolic feminine power (Steiner 2021, 76–114). By classifying the *gorgo* as a manifestation of the Great Mother, Fröbe establishes an allegorical lineage that evokes a regenerative yet terrifying and annihilating power of the maternal (Ovidiu 2010, 25–49). In Barbara Creed's (2024, 120–3) formulation of the *monstrous feminine*, the gorgon's gaze represents archaic maternal potency prior to masculinist containment. Fröbe's placement of the gorgoneion under the mantle of the Magna Mater may be read as an epistemic manoeuvre, recasting maternal feminine symbolism as monstrous and non-compliant (Ovidiu 2010, 25–49). In resistance to definitions of the feminine as lack, Fröbe redirects the Archive's interpretative gaze towards what Hedenborg White (2020, 257) terms "an/other subject", an uncontainable maternal self generated through her own mythopoetic logic. By refiguring the gorgo, Fröbe overturns masculinist symbolic hierarchies, fashioning a relational mytho-cosmology that values metamorphic transformation over classificatory closure. Fröbe's (1932, 1) belief in the autonomous symbolic agency of images extends into her own artistic production. Nowhere is this more evident than

Figure 3. Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, *Die Verkündigung (The Annunciation)*, 1932. "Meditation Plate" series, c. 1926–34. Tempera, India ink and gold leaf on cardboard. Item no. 0.35BIBO. Folder 35002. C. G. Jung-Institut Bildarchiv, Küsnacht, Switzerland. Image: Chloë Sugden, reproduced courtesy of the C. G. Jung-Institut Bildarchiv, all rights reserved.

in the *Visions*, which transpose her archival logic of symbolic juxtaposition into a deeply interior and visionary mode.

Fröbe's Visions series: initiation and embodiment

Prior to creating her *Visions*, Fröbe (1932, 1–2) described her earlier *Meditation Plates* series of artworks (1926–34; fig. 3) as visualisations of non-ordinary states of consciousness or NSCs.[18] She alleged that the source of these *Meditation Plates*, geometric abstractions, was a symbolic dimension "that constantly exists, or perhaps eternally exists", perceivable only during deep meditation (Fröbe-Kapteyn 1932, 1–2). Six years later, in 1938, she narrated a pivotal transformation in her art from geometric abstraction to a more expressive, allegorical style (Fröbe-Kapteyn 1938a, 1; 1938c, 1). The 315 *Visions* drawings (figs. 4, 5 and 7) span twelve albums bound in blue. They are known as Fröbe's *Blue Book* (Bernardini and Merlini 2024, 44–51). The pencil and chalk pastel illustrations externalise the torrent of imagery that, according to Fröbe (1938b, 1; 1938c, 1), overwhelmed her perception during the Cretan trance. Their immediacy reflects the claimed urgency of Fröbe's revelation and the absorption of her visionary experience. Loosely sketched yet symbolically dense, the *Visions* operate as cosmographic inscriptions of Fröbe's (1932, 1; 1938b, 1) inner life—maps through which she situates herself within her mytho-cosmological imaginary.

The *Vision* in fig. 4, for instance, symbolically depicts Fröbe's (1938b; 1938c) alleged initiation into the Magna Mater's archaic cult. Crossing still waters towards a jagged cave is a veiled figure, probably Fröbe as initiate (1944b, 6; 1938b, 1; 1938c, 1). The picture plane splits into two symbolic zones. To the left, a boat ferries the initiate and a serpentine staff beneath a radiant sun disc, to the right, a cave looms in shadow. Overhead, an unevenly canopied tree with sparse, twisting branches evokes the form of a Mediterranean Aleppo pine. This stylised tree may portray the Tree of Life, a folder category in Fröbe's Archive (Tevebring 2023). Across socially, ritually and cosmologically diverse societies, the Tree of Life often arises as a mediator of transcendence: "a link between cosmic zones" or an "entrance to the heavenly realm", as a visual metaphor of the soul's passage beyond the material world towards divine integration (Rival 1998, 1–36). The drawing's sole burst of colour, the pastel yellow solar motif represents the Central Spiritual Sun, a New Age symbol permeating Fröbe's œuvre.[19] In Fröbe's integrative

18 Esoteric traditions often regard non-ordinary states of consciousness (NSCs) as states of higher awareness, rather than mere neurological deviations. In Theosophical currents NSCs are historically linked to supersensible planes of consciousness, where initiates access hidden dimensions of knowledge and transformation (Wittman 2018, 26). Regarding the historical development of these views, Olav Hammer (2004, 54, 374, 415) identifies the 1930s as a key moment when psychological models became central to esoteric reformulations of consciousness and personality.

19 In *Initiation, Human and Solar*, Bailey (1922, 13–18) presents the "Central Spiritual Sun" as a dynamic force at the heart of "cosmic evolution". The programme of the Theosophical summer school that she co-organised with Fröbe (1930–32) evinces their shared engagement with this cosmology (Bailey and Fröbe-Kapteyn 1930, 1–10).

Figure 4. Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, *Untitled*. "Visions" Series I, no. 9, March 1934. Pastel and pencil on onion skin paper, mounted on cardboard. Eranos Foundation Archives, Ascona-Moscia, item no. OFK-V-001-022. Image: Eranos Foundation Archives, all rights reserved.

cosmology, distinct from the physical sun, the Spiritual Sun signifies the highest level of "mystical consciousness".[20] As the radiant source of "divine will" and "initiatory fire," the Spiritual Sun illuminates the aspirant's passage through successive stages of spiritual transformation (Bailey 1922, 13–18). Framed by this dominating heliacal form, the cave-bound raft may also connote passage from one realm to another, echoing Ra's solar barque in Egyptian cosmology. Rita Lucarelli (2024, 143) explains that this solar boat is a metaphysical vessel of transformation, carrying the sun god through darkness each night to be reborn at dawn. The barque symbolises the soul's cyclical journey through death towards renewal. More broadly, across Egyptian, Greek and Norse mythologies boats are vessels for the dead or the initiate (Ahmed 2016, 126–41). The solar barque glides across mythic waters in fig. 4 carrying a caduceus, the serpentine, winged staff often associated with Hermes and Mercury in modern readings, as boundary-crossers in the Greek and

20 Here "mystical consciousness" refers to a mode of awareness characterised by a direct, often ineffable experience of ultimate reality, unity or the divine. It is distinct from ordinary waking consciousness and is described as intuitive, non-rational, and transformative (Forman 1999, ix-x, 1–8, 11–30).

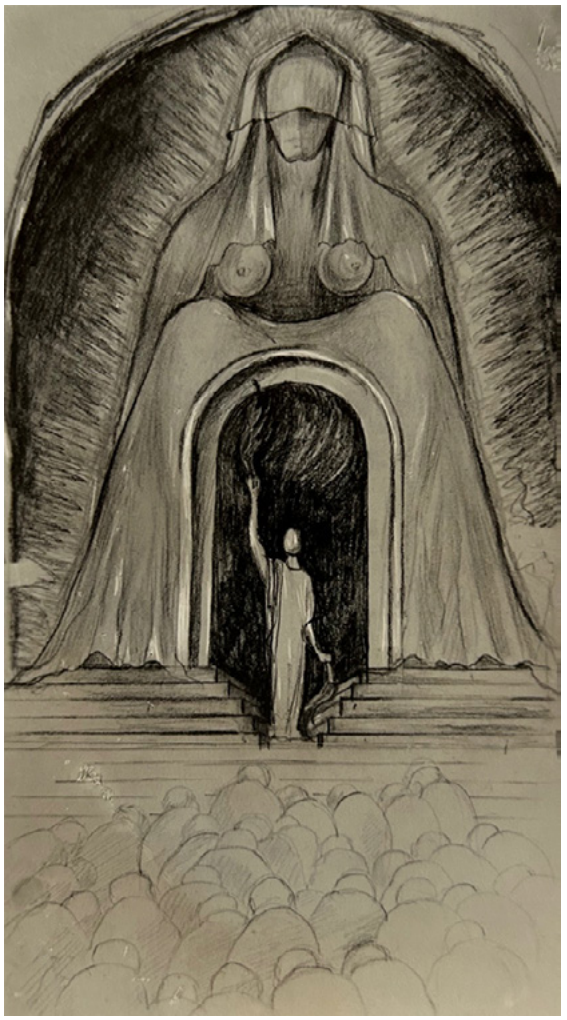

Figure 5 (on left). Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, *Untitled*. "Visions", Series I, no. 10, March 1934. (Fröbe's black-and-white photograph of the original sketch of pastel and pencil on onion paper.) Item no. 035.BIAJ. Folder 35002. C. G. Jung-Institut Bildarchiv, Küsnacht, Switzerland. Image: Chloë Sugden, reproduced courtesy of the C. G. Jung-Institut Bildarchiv, all rights reserved.

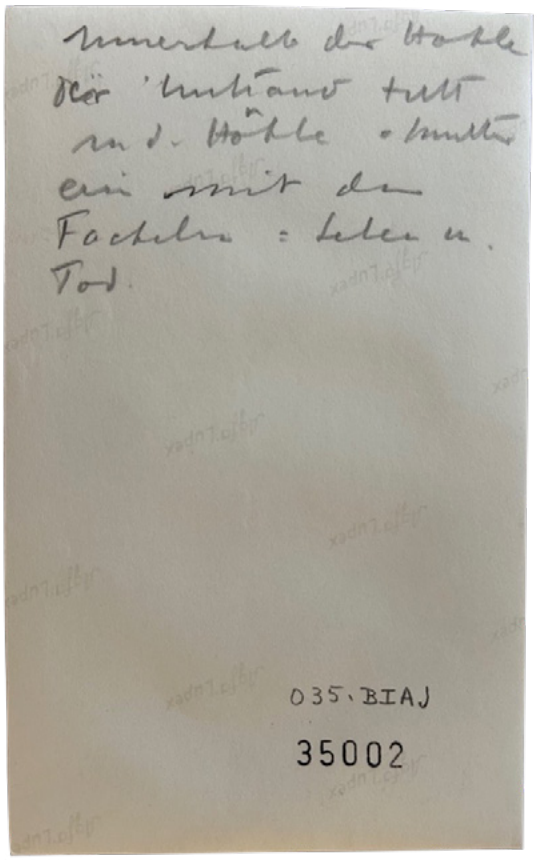

Figure 6 (on right). Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, note to C. G. Jung on the back of a photo reproduction of a sketch (fig. 5), c. 1934–38. Item no. 035.BIAJ. Folder 35002. C. G. Jung-Institut Bildarchiv, Küsnacht, Switzerland. Image: Chloë Sugden, reproduced courtesy of the C. G. Jung-Institut Bildarchiv, all rights reserved.

Roman pantheons.[21] Fröbe (1938c; 1938b) probably invoked the caduceus to further signify the initiate's liminal passage, their transit between worlds, ritual thresholds and states of being.

Set opposite the golden arc of the Central Spiritual Sun and framed by a mandorla-shaped rock face, the cave is darkened by dense, frenetic graphite strokes. Narrow, upright and craggy, the opening resembles a vertical wound carved into the landscape. From the Eleusinian Mysteries to Mithraic and Platonic initiations, the cave functions as both tomb and womb, a space where transformation occurs in darkness (Çimen 2024, 1–21). In earlier matriarchal cosmologies, the cave was inseparable from sacred feminine interiority, approached as a womb-like enclosure of cosmological renewal through which life passes cyclically (Spretnak 1975, 73–87). Ünsal Çimen notes that later Neoplatonic interpretations, notably Porphyry's, reframe the cave as chaotic matter subordinate to the immaterial clarity of the noetic. Çimen (2024, 5-14) critiques this shift as a form of symbolic violence, a metaphysical rewriting of the *womb-space* that once housed divine intelligence. Fröbe's use of the cave motif across the *Visions* resists Porphyry's abstraction, affirming the visceral, embodied womb-cave cosmology.

Fröbe posted a photo reproduction of a second drawing in Series I of the *Visions* (fig. 5) to Jung between 1934 and 1938. This copy of the original forgoes colour yet retains symbolic intensity. In the drawing, the cave becomes the generative interior of the Great Mother, serving as a central element within the *Visions*' mythological architecture. At once temple and living presence, her vast body encloses the arched aperture through which Fröbe-as-initiate emerges. Both cave and womb, this threshold signifies rebirth from the sacred maternal source (Spretnak 1975, 73–87). An energetic field of radiating lines surrounds the Great Mother, her cavernous interior yielding to luminescent light. Emerging from the womb-chamber transfigured as a robed hierophant, Fröbe as initiate holds her head aloft, a flaming torch raised triumphantly in her hand. Bowing in reverence, indistinct figures below bear witness to the initiate's ascent. Fröbe's handwritten caption (fig. 6) on the reverse of the reproduction reads:

> Innerhalb der Höhle
> Der Initiand tritt
> In der Höhle = Mutter
> ein mit den
> Fackeln = Leben u.
> Tod.

This can be translated as:

> Inside the cave
> The initiate enters
> Into the cave = Mother
> one with the
> torches = life and
> death.

21 Originating in Mesopotamian iconography and later adopted in Greco-Roman antiquity, the caduceus symbolised peace, negotiation and commerce. Unlike the Rod of Asclepius, associated with healing, the caduceus was not linked to medicine or initiation. In later Hermetic, alchemical and esoteric traditions, its twin serpents came to signify duality, balance, transcendence and the guardianship of sacred knowledge, aligning with Mercury's role as a messenger and boundary-crosser in Roman religion (Kitch 2015, 87–95; Wilcox and Whitman 2012, 218–20).

Figure 7. Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn, *Die Grosse Mutter*. "Visions", out-of-series, not numbered [no. 309], June 1937. Pastel and pencil on onion skin paper, mounted on cardboard. Eranos Foundation Archives, Ascona-Moscia. Image: Eranos Foundation Archives, all rights reserved.

The inscription "The initiate enters / Into the cave" lends further weight to fig. 4 and 5 as renderings of an initiatory rite of passage. The text "Mother / one with the torches = life and death", paired with the fiery torch raised by the initiate (fig. 5), summons the symbolic arc of spiritual death and renewal lying at the heart of ancient mystery traditions.[22] From the Eleusinian Mysteries and Orphic rites to the cult of the Dioscuri and Mithraic initiations, flame serves as a polyvalent symbol, embodying both the trials of initiatory passage and the ensuing revelations (Belayche and Massa 2021, 1–37). Further, the towering Magna Mater's veiled, faceless presence might suggest a deity whose mysteries can only be encountered through direct, initiatory experience. This reading is based on Fröbe's engagement with the ancient Egyptian myth of the veiled Isis of Sais, a figure she explored through the Eranos Archive and Conferences.[23]

22 The Eranos conferences investigated the symbolic and initiatory structure of mystery religions. 1938 lecture titles included "Kult der Magna Mater", and "Die gnostische Vorstellung der Sophia" (Fröbe 1938d, 1). On mystery cults in visual representation, see: Belayche and Massa 2021, 1–37.

23 Eranos lectures explored the cult of Isis (*Kult der Isis*) (Fröbe-Kapteyn 1938d, 1). On the metaphor of the veiled Isis, see Hadot

Another later work of the *Visions* series (1937, fig. 7) exposes a more painterly tendency, characterised by softer contours and a higher saturation of vibrant pastel hues. Myriad golden-robed initiates emerge from and return to the central, womb-like aperture of the enormous Mother, her monumental scale once more evoking both architecture and organism. Coupled with the dynamic flow of initiates, the verticality of the image suggests a cyclical motion of spiritual descent and rebirth, now on a collective scale. The composition's ethereal blues, greens and radiant golds mark a drastic chromatic transition from muted graphite of the other drawings. The brilliant colours in fig. 7 accentuate a narrative shift from Fröbe as initiate's solitary, introspective processes of transformation to a collectivised group initiation. No longer just a guide for the isolated seeker, the Magna Mater is a cosmic axis through which many pass in synchrony. The scene's ritualistic symmetry and heightened colour palette lend it the quality of a visionary spectacle, a theatrical choreography of spiritual transcendence.

Synthesis: image, archive and spiritual authority

Across the Archive and *Visions*, the Great Mother emerges as a polyvalent form through which Fröbe synthesised the mythological, cosmological and initiatory dimensions of her research, claimed NSCs and creative imagination—into an allegorical figuration of maternal, transformative embodiment. From veiled seeker to hierophant, from solitary passage to cosmic procession, Fröbe staged a ritualised drama across the *Visions*. Emblematically communicating her alleged visualisations in trance, as exemplified, Fröbe's (1938b, 1) *Visions* unfold as an initiation arc, conveyed via the associative potency of the images' forms. The *Visions*' symbolic forms function as what Hans Belting (2001, 22–34) terms "image acts": *culturally saturated symbols* that do not merely represent but *actively mediate* between the visible and the hidden, or the material and the metaphysical. Across the *Visions*, Fröbe's archetypal lexicon of torches, caves, boats, suns, trees, gorgons, mother goddesses, fire and caducei activates a highly accessible symbolic grammar, historically linked to rites of passage, spiritual illumination and transformative experience (Belting 2001, 23–34). In the Archive and *Visions* images discussed, though historically and culturally contingent in use and reception, Fröbe's legible symbolic lexicon invites resonant yet open-ended meanings across temporal, cultural or spiritual registers (Belting 2001, 23–34).[24] Mobilising "culturally saturated symbols", Fröbe transmutes the interior and ineffable nature of her trance experience and cosmological imagination into a communicable visual idiom, rendering the private visionary realm publicly intelligible. While W. J. T. Mitchell (2005, 5–17)

2006, 233–46. On how the Great Mother's facelessness resonates with the sacrament of the Bridal Chamber, see Jorgensen 2020, 403.

24 For Belting (2001, 22–34), images are not passive representations but performative agents. Rather than simply depicting, they *do*. They mediate between the visible and the transcendent, the material and the immaterial. Grounded in anthropological and art-historical analysis, the notion of *image acts* underscores the culturally situated, performative dimension of images.

cautions against the ideological closure of codified symbols, Fröbe reanimates them as generative agents of meaning. In her practice, they congeal into a mythopoetic syntax through which the figure of the Great Mother emerges as the organising principle of her syncretic cosmology.

Charles Long (1987, 60–80, 120–40) and Jeffrey Kripal (2007, 521–4) suggest that symbolic figures akin to Fröbe's Magna Mater can function not only as cosmological referents but as epistemological tools, allowing the visionary subject to articulate metaphysical experience. Fröbe's self-mythologisation gains its potency from the symbolic logic binding her artistic practice, archival assemblages and the thematic design of the Eranos Conferences. In her multivalent invocation of the Great Mother, she gestures not toward a singular goddess but a metasymbolic synthesis, a convergence of maternal divinities and initiatory symbolisms. Through her *Visions* and Archive indexing, Fröbe condenses hierophants, mother goddesses and monstrous figures into a single esoteric value, continuously *intensifying* and *resignifying* maternal feminine archetypes as an experimental mode of self-assertion (Hedenborg White 2020, 248–57). In her trans-disciplinary practice, Fröbe thereby situates the Magna Mater as a generative matrix for artistic, intellectual and spiritual investigation at Eranos. Working within the mythological architecture of her Great Mother, she performs a distinctive form of spiritual leadership—transforming the traditionally feminised role of hosting into an aesthetic and cosmological act that materialises and narrates an esoteric cosmogenesis.[25]

Presenting her visionary experiences and Eranos gatherings as manifestations of an "indestructible" cosmic current and heralds of a dawning Age of Aquarius, Fröbe's (1939b, 8; 1941a, 3; 1952, 7) spiritual authority appears recognisably Weberian (1947, 358–59) in its charismatic foundation, yet drawing on Baier (2010, 107–19), is better understood as a relational field of spiritual power, unfolding through her work across various media, events, networks and material practices. Synthesising Weber's and Baier's models of spiritual authority with gendered modalities—as articulated by Hedenborg White, Dixon, Hale, Owen and Massicotte—illuminates Fröbe's Great Mother self-association as a conscious enactment of archetypal self-sufficiency.[26] Fröbe was a cultural nucleus through which the scholarly, spiritual and imaginal forces of Eranos converged, securing her position as a formative yet underacknowledged figure in the history of esoteric modernism.[27] If the future of esotericism

25 "Esoteric cosmogenesis" here refers to a mystical or occult account of the origin and structure of the cosmos, grounded in symbolic, initiatory and/or metaphysical principles.

26 On gendered strategies of spiritual self-authorisation in modern esotericism, see: Hedenborg White (2020, 248–57, 316), Dixon (2001, 63–66, 150–53), Hale (2021, 12–16), Owen (2004, 11, 142–44) and Massicotte (2023, 1–23).

27 "Esoteric modernism" here references the synthesis of occult traditions, mystical epistemologies and avant-garde artistic movements during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Not simply a stylistic movement, *esoteric modernism* designates a philosophical and epistemological project which treated mystical and occult traditions as legitimate frameworks for studying consciousness, the nature of reality and avant-garde artistic expression (Bauduin 2015, 217–34; Kokkinen 2013, 7–36).

studies lies in embracing trans-disciplinary methodologies and epistemic inventiveness (Asprem and Strube 2021), Fröbe's opus stands as a prescient and enduring model. ■

Dr **Chloë Sugden** is an independent Australian art historian. Her work explores the entanglements of visionary art-making, syncretic occult cosmologies and image-archiving practices in the *fin-de-siècle*. She earned her doctorate at ETH Zürich with a dissertation entitled *Olga Fröbe-Kapteyn's Art and Archive: A Study in Cosmogrammatic Form* (2025), funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Her research engages Warburgian approaches to archiving, image analysis and curation. Current projects explore how visual strategies, most notably cosmograms and image atlases, materialise, mediate and amplify esoteric epistemologies.

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