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Dreams, Subconscious, and Visual Ideation: A Jungian Approach to Graphic Design

Vladimir Gjorgjieski, Mario Kaev

Abstract

This paper explores the profound relationship between Jungian psychology and graphic design, focusing on how the subconscious and archetypal imagery inform visual ideation. Jung believes that man produce symbols consciously as well as unconsciously in a form of dreams which are a great aspect of psychological importance. (Kejriwal & Nandagopal, 2015). Drawing on Carl Gustav Jung's concepts of the personal and collective unconscious, archetypes, dreams, and the process of active imagination, the study reveals how symbolic thought can provoke creative expression that transcends technical execution. Through a synthesis of psychological theory and design pedagogy, it examines how methods such as dream analysis and introspective visualization can be consciously applied in the design studio to access inner imagery and stimulate original outcomes. Case studies from contemporary educational practice, alongside the surrealist works of H.R. Giger, Salvador Dalí, and Vasko Tashkovski, illustrate the intuitive bridge between subconscious content and visual form. Ultimately, the paper positions graphic design not merely as a craft but as a site of individuation, where personal mythologies and collective patterns converge to produce meaningfully symbolic work. A Jungian approach thus affirms the role of design as both a mirror and a vessel of the psyche.

Keywords: Jungian psychology, graphic design, archetypes, subconscious, visual ideation, active imagination, symbolism, individuation, dream analysis, creative process

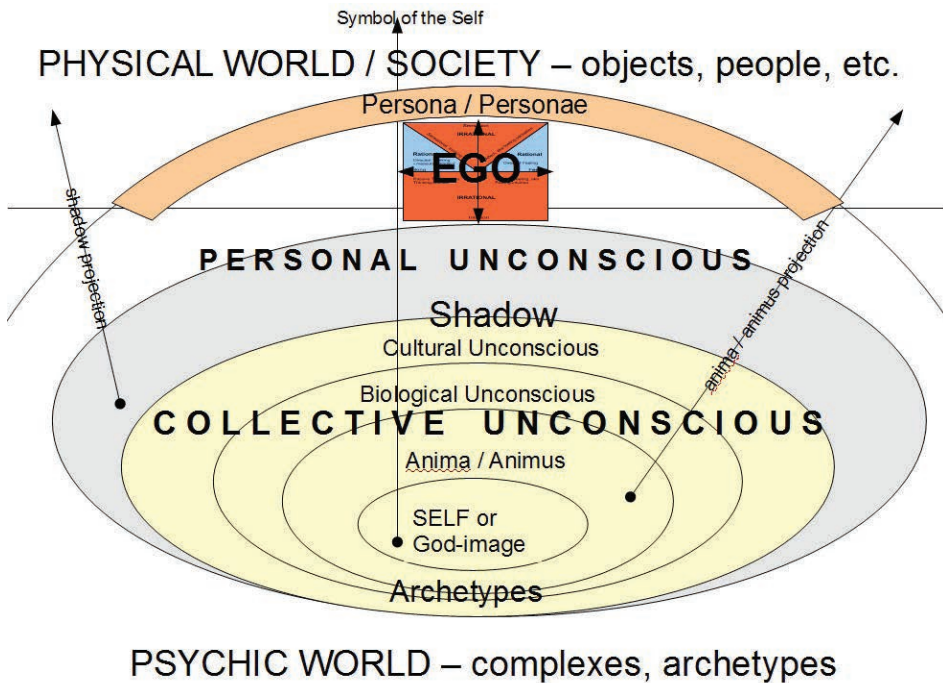
Introduction

Graphic designers often draw upon the imagination and the subconscious to generate novel visual ideas. A Jungian framework suggests that images emerging from the unconscious – whether in dreams, symbols, or intuition – can richly inform the creative process. Carl Gustav Jung’s depth psychology emphasizes the psychic realms beyond the ego: the personal unconscious (containing repressed and forgotten material) and the collective unconscious (a reservoir of universal images and instincts). In this paper, we explore how Jung’s theories of psyche, archetypes, dreams, and imagination can inform graphic design and design education. We examine the structure of the psyche, key archetypes (Self, Shadow, Anima/Animus, Persona, Hero, etc.), Jung’s view of dreams as unconscious communication, the method of active imagination as a design strategy, and the symbolic nature of art akin to dream interpretation. In this paper, we draw on the theoretical writings of Carl Gustav Jung and the applied research of educators Kuanhua Chen and Tien Ling. Chen and Ling, affiliated with Yuan Tze University in Taiwan and Cornell University in the United States, respectively, conducted a notable study on design education titled “Creativity-provoking design education based on Jungian Psychoanalysis Theory” (2010). Their work applies Jungian concepts directly to the studio environment, offering pedagogical models that show how design students can access unconscious imagery and cultivate individual creativity through depth-oriented methods. Their findings are highly relevant to this paper’s exploration of Jungian psychology in visual ideation and provide concrete examples of symbolic, introspective approaches to graphic design education and how depth psychology can provoke unique, expressive visual ideation.

The Structure of the Psyche: Consciousness and the Unconscious

Jung conceptualized the psyche as comprising three levels. The ego is the conscious mind – our waking awareness and identity. Beneath it lies the personal unconscious, a reservoir of memories, complexes, and ideas once conscious but now repressed or forgotten. Deeper still is the collective unconscious, a transpersonal layer shared by all humans. This collective unconscious contains inherited patterns of thought and instinct – what Jung called archetypes – that shape human experience across cultures.

Figure 1. *The Structure of the Psyche*



Jung described the collective unconscious as a form of “psychological inheritance,” filled with images and experiences “all humans share as a species”. These three levels interact continuously. Conscious attitudes and personal history (personal complexes) filter and shape how archetypal energies arise, while archetypes infuse the personal psyche with rich symbols and motifs. In art and design, for example, a creator’s personal concerns will blend with these universal images. Jung emphasized that the personal and collective layers constantly communicate. Symbols or images from dreams or the imagination may draw on both personal memories and collective archetypal patterns. Thus, a design can consciously express a client’s needs or a designer’s ideas (the ego-personal level), yet it may also resonate on a deeper level by activating archetypal imagery in viewers’ unconscious minds. Understanding this psychic structure alerts designers to the hidden layers behind creative ideas, suggesting that tapping into the personal and collective unconscious can enrich visual ideation.

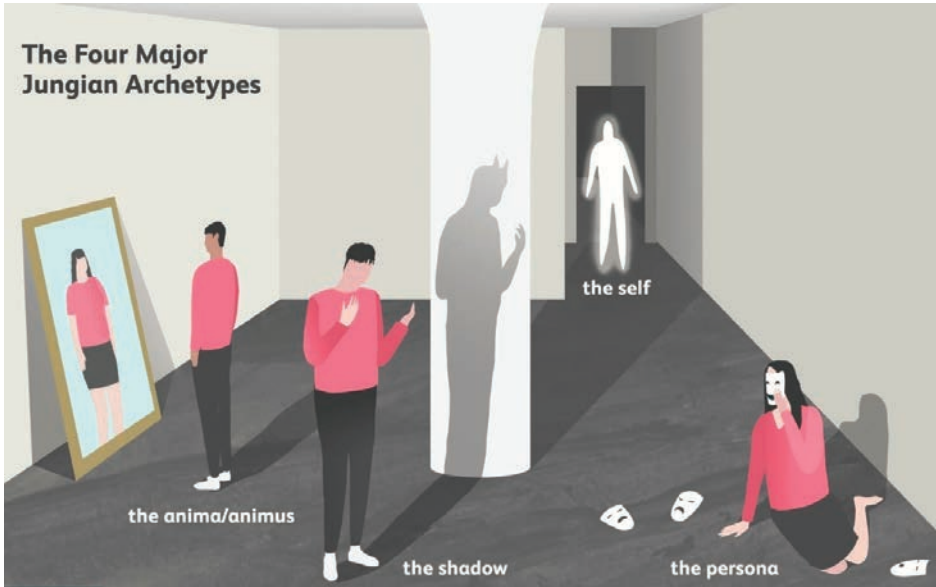
Jungian Archetypes: Universal Patterns of Imagery

At the heart of the collective unconscious are archetypes – innate, primordial images and motifs that recur across myths, dreams, and art. Jung described archetypes as “unconscious predispositions” or constellations of psychic energy that shape human experience. These archetypes are not images themselves but templates that generate familiar symbols. For example, the archetype of the Mother may produce symbols of nurturing (water, earth), or the Warrior archetype may manifest as weapons or battles. Jung taught that archetypal images are inherited much like instincts and organize “powerful ideas” within the psyche. Among Jung’s most central archetypes are the Self, Shadow, Persona, and Anima/Animus. The Self represents the psyche’s totality and the goal of wholeness. It is the archetype of unity that integrates conscious and unconscious aspects. In Jungian terms, the Self is often symbolized by a mandala or a figure of divinity, reflecting an inner organizing center.

The Persona is the social mask we wear – the persona archetype governs how we present ourselves. It embodies societal roles and conventions. Jung noted, “The persona is a complicated system of relations between individual consciousness and society – fittingly enough, a kind of mask”. In design, the persona might be seen in branding or in the public image a design communicates; it is conscious and outward-facing.

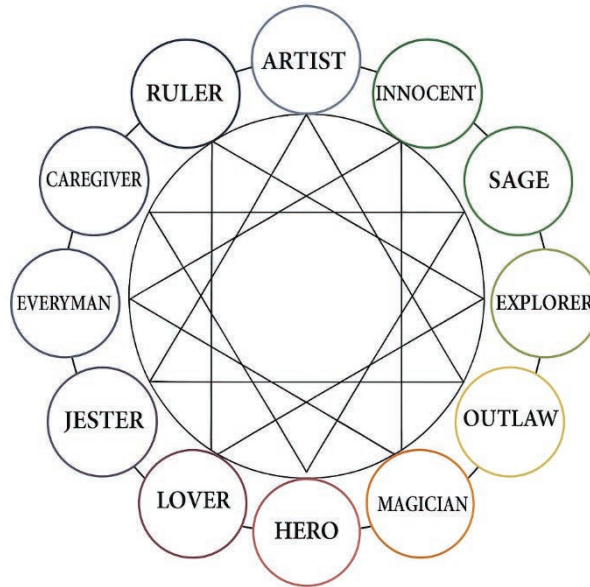
The Shadow archetype encompasses what we deny or exclude from consciousness: repressed desires, weaknesses, and instincts. It is “the darker side of the psyche,” containing chaos and potential (good or bad) that lie hidden. Shadows frequently appear in dreams and art as monsters, demons, or wild figures (cf. snakes or dragons). For designers, engaging with the shadow might mean acknowledging dissonant or disruptive elements in a creative process and transforming them into productive, novel forms.

The Anima (in men) and Animus (in women) are gendered archetypes reflecting the inner opposite. They serve as bridges between the conscious ego and the deeper unconscious. For instance, a male designer’s inner Anima might surface as feminine imagery, intuition, or emotional depth in his work. Jung believed that persona and animus/anima often work together: the persona negotiates with society, while the animus/anima connects that persona to the unconscious.

Figure 2. *The Four Major Jungian Archetypes*

Beyond these four, Jungians often speak of other archetypal figures: the Hero (the questing individual, a figure of transformation), the Trickster, the Wise Old Man/Woman, etc. These archetypes appear in folklore and popular culture, and design students are frequently taught to align brand personalities or design “tone” with such archetypes. Indeed, modern branding often uses Jungian archetypes as templates (e.g., a luxury brand as the “Ruler” archetype). In all cases, Jung stressed that archetypes are universal patterns. As one Jungian summary notes, “the archaic and mythic characters that make up the archetypes reside within all people... Archetypes symbolize basic human motivations, values, and personalities”.

Figure 3. *Jungian Archetypes*



In summary, Jung's archetypes provide designers with a symbolic vocabulary. Recognizing the Self, Shadow, Persona, Anima/Animus, Hero, and other archetypes in one's creative work allows one to draw on universal meanings. A self-portrait might consciously draw on the Persona archetype (presenting an outward image), while unconsciously suggesting the inner Self or Shadow. By deliberately invoking archetypal images – for example, using water to suggest renewal (Mother archetype) or geometric wholeness to evoke the Self – designers can tap the collective unconscious, giving their work psychological depth.

Dreams as the Language of the Unconscious

Jung considered dreams the primary mode in which the unconscious communicates with consciousness. Each dream is, in his words, “a direct, personal, and meaningful communication to the dreamer,” using imagery from both the personal and collective unconscious. Jung emphasized that while dream symbols (water, animals, colors, etc.) are drawn from the shared store of humanity, their combination in a particular dream is entirely individual. “No two dreams use the symbols of the unconscious in the same way,” Jung wrote, making each dream unique

and resistant to general interpretation. In other words, a serpent in one person's dream might symbolize danger or creativity depending on that person's context, even though serpents commonly appear in mythology across cultures.

For designers, studying dreams can unlock unexpected images and associations. Jung urged that analysts (and by extension, creatives) adopt a non-judgmental, exploratory stance toward dreams: one should not impose meaning but allow the dream's imagery to unfold naturally. In practice, this resembles how a designer might play with abstract ideas: giving attention to a dreamlike intuition without preconceived rules. In fact, Jung likened great artworks to dreams: "A great work of art is like a dream; for all its apparent obviousness it does not explain itself and is never unequivocal". Both dreams and art present images rather than arguments. As Jung said of dreams, they never deliver didactic messages ("You ought... the truth"), but rather "present an image... and we must draw our own conclusions". Similarly, a graphic design rich in symbolism will provoke interpretation rather than state a single message.

Thus, the symbolic nature of dreams is mirrored in art. Jung warned that to reduce a work of art to clinical analysis is a mistake (analogously, if a dream were forced into a narrow formula, either the dream or personhood is pathologized). Instead, both dreams and art require the perceiver to engage actively. One must approach the image and ask, "What do I feel and think in response?" rather than impose a predetermined meaning. This perspective encourages designers to treat their sketches, doodles, and inspirations as if they were dream symbols – to ask what personal and archetypal content they convey, and how they resonate on an intuitive level.

Active Imagination and the Creative Process

Jung devised active imagination as a method to bridge conscious intention and unconscious imagery. In active imagination, one consciously evokes an inner image or scenario (for example, a dream figure) and then "dialogues" with it, allowing the image to develop organically. Jung described it as a way to intentionally engage with the unconscious: one purposefully enters into a fantasy scene and interacts with its contents. The aim is not to control the imagination rationally, but to let unconscious images express themselves while one maintains awareness. Jung saw this as different from mere daydreaming – it is an interactive, creative process that respects the autonomy of the psyche's contents. In a design context, active

imagination can be seen as a strategy for visual ideation. Rather than sketching only what one already has in mind, a designer might use guided fantasy or meditation to conjure unexpected motifs. For instance, focusing on an unresolved design problem, the student could imagine a scene or character that embodies the problem and then draw it. Research suggests that when people apply active-imagination techniques to art, they tend to produce imagery reflecting collective archetypes. Erazo Andrade et al. (2022) implemented an active-imagination workshop with volunteers and found that “if the volunteers are committed to follow the steps of active imagination, they can create visual arts that reflect the collective unconsciousness”. In their study, participants generated drawings and paintings by entering a trance-like, meditative state and allowing images to unfold; the resulting artworks bore clear symbolic content tied to common archetypes. This aligns with Jung’s view that art and active imagination share symbolic language – both involve senses, feelings, and imagination unified, making them “one of the most effective tools to communicate” unconscious knowledge. Active imagination also fosters integration of opposites, a core Jungian concept. By entertaining paradoxical or hidden content (e.g., dialoguing with one’s inner critic), the creator can access suppressed energies. For example, a design student frustrated with a project might visualize that frustration as a figure and question it: “What do you want?” The figure might reveal insights or symbols (e.g., sudden imagery of a tiger or a maze). The designer then sketches that imagery. The art emerges from the unconscious content, guided by the student’s consciousness. In practice, a Jungian-influenced studio might explicitly teach active imagination. Chen and Ling (2010) describe assignments that resemble this: students spend extended periods introspecting on the concept of “Self” and then externalizing that in art. The process – from an intensive self-presentation to creating a visual portfolio – parallels the active imagination steps: first naming an inner image (the “self”) and then letting imagery flow out into form. In this way, the method becomes a deliberate design strategy: internal symbols are allowed to surface without censorship, yielding unique visual outcomes that would not emerge from purely rational planning.

Symbolism in Art and Individuation

The symbolic nature of artistic creation is central to both Jungian analysis and design. Jung insisted that art functions in the psyche much like dreams: using symbols to convey meaning that cannot be put into words or logical argument. Jung wrote, “Art by its very nature is not science, and science by its very nature is not

art... Art has something in reserve that is peculiar to it and can be explained only in its own terms". Thus, attempting to reduce art to technical mechanics is as misguided as treating a dream as a mere symptom. Instead, Jung suggested that art makes the unconscious visible: a painting or design can be seen as a dream from the unconscious. He summarized this idea: "A great work of art is like a dream... it does not explain itself and is never unequivocal". This means designers can view their creative images as symbols. Just as a therapist helps a patient explore dream imagery, an art educator might encourage a student to explore what their own drawings "say." In Chen and Ling's Creativity Studio, for example, students created a series of artworks expressing their inner Self. The instructors focused on stripping away "banal and superficial symbols" to reach the "core essence of students' inner creativity". The resulting works often became dreamlike assemblages. Chen and Ling note that when students are given freedom to express deeply, their work tends to "evolve into an amalgamation of intuitive choices" that present "a dream-like ambiguity between unforeseen expression and recognizable presentation of the student's self". In this way, each artwork is "the 'model' of a certain aspect of the student's mind". Importantly, Jung warned that symbols are fluid: there is no fixed "dictionary." The meaning of an image in art or a dream must be discovered in context. As Jung wrote of dreams, "every dream is a direct...communication to the dreamer" that uses common symbols "but in an entirely individual way". Likewise, a design filled with symbolic elements will be interpreted differently by each viewer. This openness is often celebrated in creative education: students are told that their unique, idiosyncratic symbol combinations have value precisely because they reflect their personal psyche. Thus, symbolic art becomes a key route to individuation – the Jungian process of integrating conscious and unconscious parts of the self.

Finally, this Jungian perspective implies that design should accommodate the "active imagination" of the viewer as well as the maker. A well-crafted visual identity (e.g., a logo or poster) will trigger unconscious associations (perhaps archetypal ones), inviting the audience to project meaning. Jungians note that good design often does exactly this: it relies on mythic or archetypal forms to resonate. As one Jungian design blog puts it, archetypal imagery can ensure that a design communicates ideal traits and appeals broadly, because humans share these mythic narratives. In short, by treating visual creativity as symbolic dreaming, designers can craft work that speaks to both mind and soul.

Creativity, Instinct, and Individuation

Jung saw the urge to create as more than a learned skill; he regarded it as an instinctual energy. In his essay on creativity, Jung classified the creative instinct alongside basic drives like hunger, sex, and the will to activity. However, he noted that creativity was unique and complex: “the creative instinct is something that deserves special mention”. It is “like an instinct... compulsive, but it is not common, and it is not a fixed and invariably inherited organization”. In other words, creativity arises from both nature and nurture – it is partly rooted in innate psychic energy and partly expressed through individual development. Jung emphasized that creativity can integrate other instincts: it has affinities with sexuality and activity, but it can also suppress them to drive artistic expression. He famously said, “Creation is as much destruction as construction”, acknowledging that creative impulses can be transformative or even overwhelming.

What does this mean for graphic design? First, it suggests that creativity cannot be taught like a technical skill – it must be fostered as an inner force. As Chen and Ling (2010) argue, “creativity...cannot be taught in a traditional sense; anything taught...would be just practical techniques, while true creativity must be inspired instead of instructed”. In their Jungian-inspired pedagogy, the instructor’s role is more like a midwife to the student’s creative instinct. They note that the teacher often acts as a therapist or consultant, helping the student “go deeper into their own territory of self-discovery”. When the instructor does not impose formulas but trusts the student’s inner process, creative breakthroughs often occur. Chen and Ling report that in such an environment, students’ work becomes “totally unique and unprecedented, reaching beyond any existing formalistic or symbolic cliché”. This outcome reflects Jung’s idea that the creative instinct drives us to individuate – to express aspects of the psyche that have not been seen before. In Jungian terms, the goal of creativity is part of individuation. The creative process confronts the artist with unconscious material (dream images, archetypes, shadow content), forcing integration. When a designer grapples with an ambiguous symbol or a chaotic sketch, she is effectively dialoging with a personal complex or archetype. By bringing it into the light (on paper or screen) and reflecting on it, the designer begins to reconcile the conscious self with the unconscious contents. Over time, this leads to greater self-knowledge and novel ideas. Jung maintained that only through such integration can art (and the person) become whole: “Man becomes whole...only when the conscious and the unconscious have learned to live at peace and to complement one another”. Thus, nurturing the creative instinct in design is not merely about producing original work; it is about psychological growth.

Applying Jungian Psychology to Design Education and Ideation

The foregoing concepts have practical import for how design is taught and practiced. A Jungian-informed studio emphasizes individual experience, symbols, and the process of self-revelation. The study by Chen and Ling (2010) provides a concrete example. In their first-year “Creativity Studio” for architecture students, the theme was the students’ own Self. Early assignments asked students to give a 30-minute personal presentation as an exercise in active imagination and depth exploration. Then, students translated that deep introspection into visual form over weeks. Importantly, the instructor did not critique style or impose design rules. Instead, the tutor acted like a Jungian analyst: “not a leading one, always encouraging the students to go deeper into their own territory of self-discovery”. Students were “given total freedom” to express inner creativity in their own manner. The result was telling: students’ projects became idiosyncratic, dreamlike art pieces. Chen and Ling note that works developed “a dreamlike ambiguity... [and] the work would be the ‘model’ of a certain aspect of the student’s mind”. In effect, each assignment was a form of active imagination with art. No two students’ outputs were the same – each student confronted personal symbols. This approach stands in stark contrast to traditional design education that emphasizes form or technique. Instead, Jungian design education prioritizes self-expression and symbolic depth. It treats the studio as a laboratory for individuation. Other literature also supports Jungian methods in art/design teaching. In these settings, students might engage in dream journaling, guided imagery sketches, or symbolic collage exercises. For example, Erazo Andrade et al. (2022) effectively used directed active-imagination tasks to produce art reflecting the collective unconscious. Similarly, educators have found that introducing concepts of archetypes and the Shadow can help students explore themes in their work that would otherwise remain hidden. By framing creativity as an inner journey, instructors help students break free of clichés: as Chen and Ling (2010) observed, this process “strips away banal and superficial symbols and metaphors, focusing on the core essence of students’ inner creativity”. In practical graphic design, a Jungian approach might manifest as encouraging designers to create personal mood boards, to sketch dream fragments, or to use automatic drawing to spark new forms. Workshops might pair visual art with reflective writing or group discussion to amplify unconscious imagery. When students understand that their psyche generates images of mythic power, they become more confident in exploring bold symbolism in brand identities, posters, or illustrations. Ultimately, Jungian-informed design education seeks to cultivate originality by nurturing each student’s unique unconscious imagery and creative instinct.

Surrealism, Symbolism, and the Bridge to Graphic Design

The Jungian understanding of the unconscious and archetypal symbolism shares remarkable affinities with the aims of Surrealism, a 20th-century artistic movement focused on unlocking the hidden content of the subconscious mind. Surrealist painters and thinkers, like Jung, believed that the unconscious mind could produce symbolic, dreamlike imagery more authentic and revealing than conscious reasoning. While often associated with fine art, some prominent surrealists also made forays into graphic design, leaving behind work that embodies Jungian themes of visual ideation through the unconscious.

Vasko Tashkovski

A Macedonian surrealist and painter, has also ventured into graphic design, using his visionary, psychologically charged style to create book covers, posters, logos, stage design and conceptual visual designs. His work integrates elements of fantasy, myth, and science fiction, reflecting a rich visual language rooted in subconscious symbolism. Like Jungian active imagination, Tashkovski's designs often present ambiguous forms and archetypal figures that compel viewers to interpret and reflect, making his work a compelling study in symbolic communication.

Figure 4. *Example of V. Taskovski's art*



Figure 5. Logos by V. Taskovski



Figure 6. Scenography design by V. Taskovski



H. R. Giger

The Swiss surrealist best known for designing the Xenomorph in *Alien*, was trained as a graphic designer and frequently worked in album covers, posters, and type layout. His dark biomechanical imagery, blending human forms with machines, draws deeply on Jungian Shadow content. Giger's ability to visually manifest fear, sexuality, and transformation in sleek, symbolic forms exemplifies the projection of unconscious archetypes into graphic and cinematic design. His poster work and typography often carry a haunting symbolism that merges dream, myth, and dystopian futurism.

Figure 7. Example of H.R. Giger's art (*Space Jockey/Engineer design for the first Alien movie*)

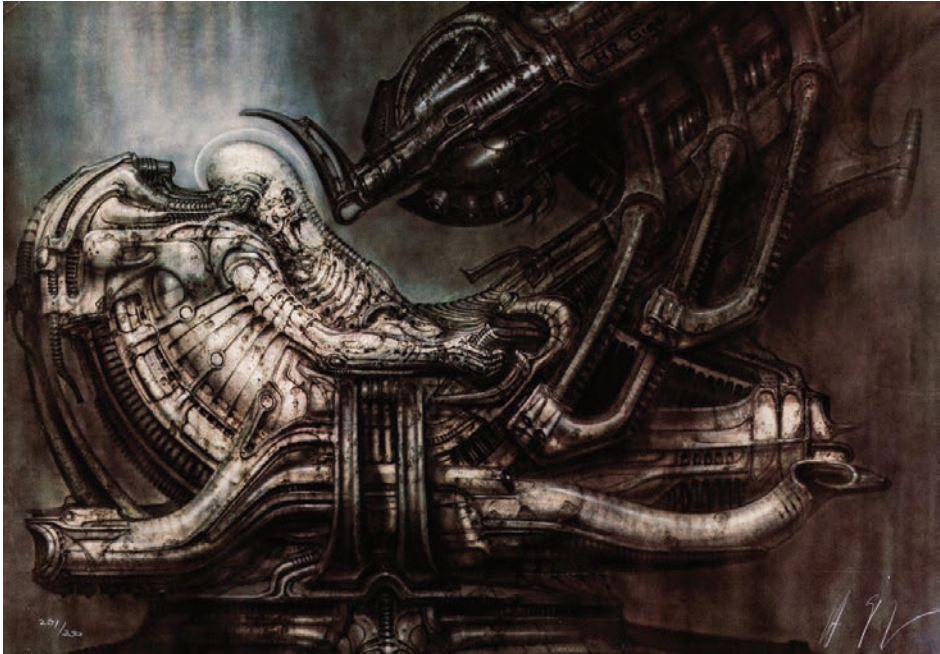


Figure 8. Example of album covers designed by H.R. Giger



Salvador Dalí

Salvador Dalí's design of the Chupa Chups logo in 1969 is a notable example of surrealism crossing into branding. Featuring a daisy-like shape and bold type, Dalí insisted it be placed on top of the candy for visibility. The logo reflects his signature blend of beauty, surprise, and subconscious symbolism. Known for dreamlike

imagery in his art, Dalí brought the same surrealist vision to commercial design, including several Vogue covers, embodying Jung's idea that symbolic art bridges inner and outer worlds.

Figure 9. *The Chupa Chups were drawn by Dalí on a napkin and done in less than an hour. The company still uses the logo to this day, although a slightly modernised version of it.*



Surrealism as a Precursor to Depth-Informed Design

Surrealism's techniques – such as automatism, juxtaposition, and dream transcription strongly resemble Jungian active imagination and dream work. Surrealism advocates breaking through the concept of logic and reality, completely abandoning the logical and impressionistic image of reality and combining instinct and reality, the subconscious and dreams, to reveal the deepest world of the human psyche (Fu, 2022). Graphic designers who draw from surrealist influences engage in a form of visual individuation, giving form to the unconscious. The surrealist legacy in design therefore offers both precedent and inspiration for a Jungian-informed practice. Whether through logo design, typographic experimentation, or layout composition, surrealist influence continues to guide designers toward tapping into deep symbolic reservoirs, much like Jung envisioned. Incorporating surrealist strategies or studying their application in graphic design (as Dalí did with Chupa Chups) shows how design can become a mirror of the unconscious, filled with symbolic meaning and mythic depth. These efforts confirm Jung's core belief: that meaningful design emerges when the artist accesses both the personal and collective unconscious to produce symbolic, evocative images.

Conclusion

Jung's analytical psychology offers a rich paradigm for graphic design and visual ideation. By acknowledging the multilayered psyche – the conscious ego, the personal unconscious, and especially the collective unconscious – designers gain a new source of inspiration. Archetypes and symbols can serve as a deep vocabulary for visual meaning, linking individual artworks to universal human themes. Dreams remind us that images communicate in ways words cannot, and that artistry arises from an interplay of conscious intention and unconscious mystery. The technique of active imagination shows how to harness this interplay deliberately, while Jung's notion of the creative instinct underscores that art-making is a vital, almost primal human drive. Educationally, treating the studio as a space for Jungian exploration – where the teacher is a guide, not a dictator, and creativity is an inner process to be respected – can “provoke” true creativity in students. In sum, a Jungian approach to graphic design means seeing each creative act as a dialogue with the psyche. It encourages bold self-expression guided by intuition, situating design within a mythic, symbolic context. When harnessed in design education, these ideas help students produce work that is not only original in form, but resonant with personal and collective meaning. Jung's own works, such as *Man and His Symbols* and *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, offer theory and examples of this symbolic imagination at play, and contemporary studies (Chen & Ling, 2010; Erazo Andrade et al., 2022) demonstrate its relevance to teaching and practice. Ultimately, Jung reminds us that creativity springs from the depths of the soul, and that great designs – like dreams – invite interpretation, evoke emotion, and reveal aspects of our inner world.

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