

Paths to Perception

A Search for Meaning in M. C. Escher's Prints

“I think I have never yet done any work with the aim of symbolizing a particular idea, but the fact that a symbol is sometimes discovered or remarked upon is valuable for me because it makes it easier to accept the inexplicable nature of my hobbies, which constantly preoccupy me.”

– M. C. Escher

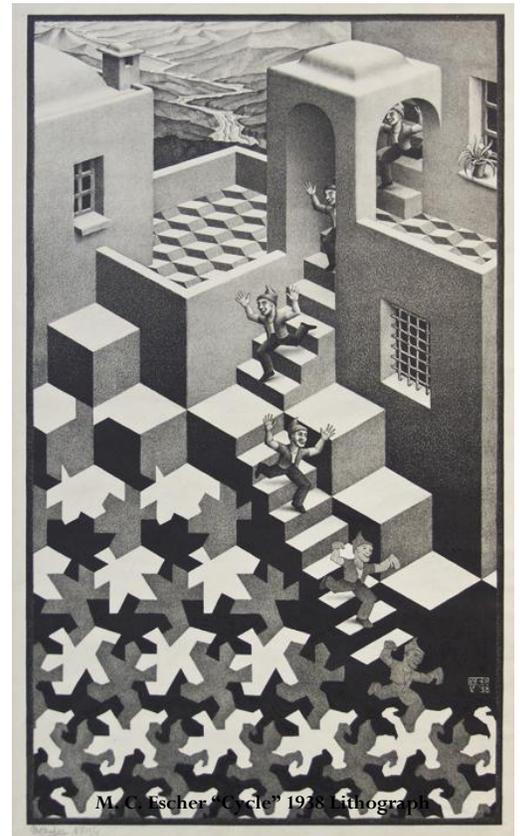
To express the deepest mysteries or fundamental truths of creation and consciousness is a quest worthy of the highest arts. To understand even a small piece of the puzzle of perception is a task to fill a lifetime. When we begin to see the patterns that underlie the paradoxes of existence, then we catch a glimpse of revelations we may never fully comprehend.

M. C. Escher said little about the meaning of his artwork and the attraction of his images was a great mystery to him. Nevertheless, he was compelled by what he described as ‘a hopeless mania’ to create pictures of objects both perfect and impossible, of scenes quite fantastic and yet completely believable, and to describe in great detail things we might not otherwise be aware of. I believe that Escher’s artwork continues to resonate in the century after it was created because his pictures illustrate themes that are fundamental to our consciousness. This essay will explore several of Escher’s prints that hold keys to understanding why the artist was intrigued by such unusual imagery and why his creations continue to fascinate such a wide audience today.

In M. C. Escher’s first great illusionary lithograph, “Cycle” from 1938, we see a boy running from a tower and down some steps. His arms are rather awkwardly waving and he’s smiling, perhaps in secret reverie. Where is he coming from and going to? His journey is short and yet this passage encompasses his entire world. As he descends the stairs a transformation occurs that is as miraculous as any myth. In a few steps he metamorphoses into marble and what was once an actor becomes his stage. Beyond the tower is a serene landscape, perhaps part of the Tuscan countryside or maybe a small portion of paradise. This is the setting for Escher’s story: an extraordinary adventure in a miraculous world.

“Cycle” can be seen as an archetypal image of the universe created from our own being. Is everything our imagining? Where does our interior landscape end and the countryside begin? What is the essential difference between body and stone, and why can we find soul in one and not the other? By illustrating such fascinating questions, perhaps Escher proposes that everything from the distant hills to our outstretched hands is a part of a complex, ever-changing and often invisible cycle.

One might ask whether Escher actually intended for his pictures to have such plots and for philosophical connections to be drawn from artworks that are complex, often rather technical, and only occasionally overtly picturesque. I propose that such mysteries are the essence of great art, and are inherent in the nature of revelation. The artist can be a messenger bringing each viewer a looking glass through which one may discover things unknown to either the author or his audience.



M. C. Escher created his first print in 1916 while World War I was ravaging and re-ordering Europe, and his final woodcut, "Ringsnakes," was completed in 1969, in the month of the Apollo moon landing and the summer of Woodstock. It would be hard to underestimate the cultural and sociological changes that occurred during that half-century, and while I doubt that it was Escher's intent to create commentary on these events by making pictures unlike any that had been seen before, it can be said that his images reflect the complexity, ambiguity, and restructuring of twentieth-century society.

While philosophers wrote of existentialism and surrealism, printmaking gave Escher a vocabulary that enabled him to express ideas that he could articulate in no other way. Even though Escher did not write extensively about the meanings of his prints, and even though he himself may not have been fully aware of the implications of his imagery, still his prints gain power by having been created during a particularly dramatic era of transition by an exquisitely gifted artist who searched beyond the outward appearance of his subjects in an effort to illustrate the miraculous patterns that unify and bring order to a complex and incomprehensible universe.

Just as no single description can fully explain history, no one viewpoint can show the entirety of a subject. Cubist painters combined profiles and perspectives within a single image in order to present a more comprehensive view of their subject, however the result frequently obscured the original portrait. Escher's visions are grounded in the strict mechanical rules of architecture and engineering, and his fantasies are as real as the world he saw around him while still capturing the unexpected consequences of changing realities. Escher masterfully illustrated these themes in his 1947 woodblock print "Other World," a triumph of both technical craftsmanship and visionary imagery.



M. C. Escher "Other World"
1947 woodcut and engraving
in brown, green, and black

Three similar figures perch within three windows. This is a simorgh, a creature that came to us through Middle Eastern mythology as the embodiment of human form within the figure of a bird. The legendary simorgh was believed to be so old that it had seen the destruction of the world three times over. Escher actually owned this figurine; it had been a gift from his father-in-law, who acquired it in Azerbaijan and gave it to his daughter and Escher when the newlyweds lived in Italy. Escher kept this small treasure in his home throughout his life and featured it in several important artworks. In this print we see three views of the same creature within three windows that are reflections of one another, connected within a fantastic room constructed with the lines and grids of a mechanical world drawn on graph paper. This precision reinforces the reality of the scene and sets the stage for our voyage beyond this world and into another.

Through the windows we see three scenes that each makes perfect sense and yet is disconnected from the others. In mid-century, when Escher created this print, so many cities had been made unrecognizable by war, and so many people looked out their windows and saw once-familiar scenes that had become alien and unknown. Perhaps Escher felt that his world had been transformed into another world, or many worlds only unified by ambiguity.

From the top of the picture we can look down on the creature and view a cratered moonscape from above, as if we were floating in the heavens. Gazing straight ahead we can look out toward the horizon over the pockmarked landscape and into the dark sky beyond. A comet flashes across the blackness leaving a spray of stars in its wake. The Earth hovers above the horizon, near the center of the picture, commanding our focus. Our planet is distant, far removed, and the magical creature has turned away and looks at us, the viewer, instead of

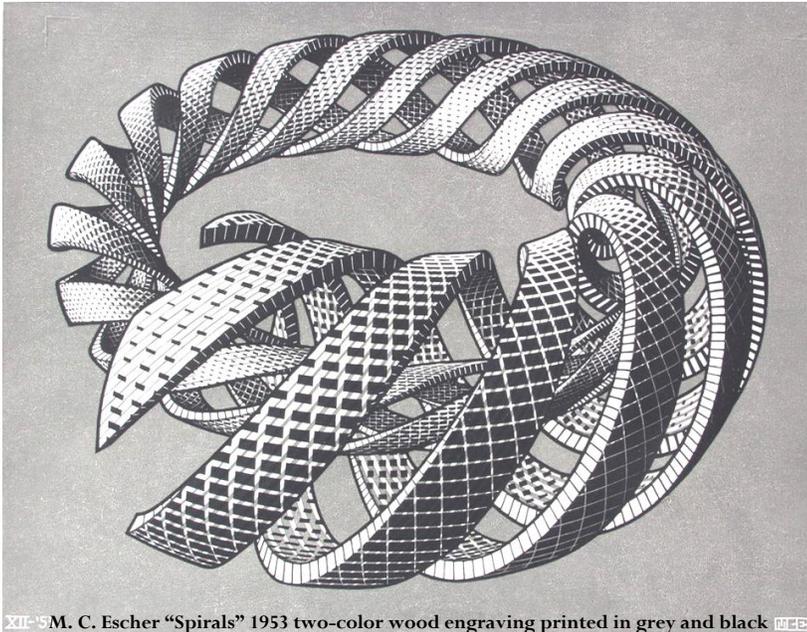


M. C. Escher's Simorgh figurine

out towards the planets. This messenger confronts us, and it may be our destiny to make sense of these worlds if we dare venture beyond these walls.

And now look up from the bottom of this strange and wonderful picture. We are staring out into the infinite cosmos, where we can see the rings of Saturn and the spiral arms of a distant nebula. Just what is out there we

don't know, but we know we are part of this greater universe part of this cosmic adventure. We have come a long way, yet there are deep mysteries before us. Three horns hang in archways, rather like shofars, should we be ready to sound them and go forth. Perhaps the trumpet-player is the simorgh, but there is ambiguity in that since two creatures face towards horns but one – the one nearest earth - faces away. The world might change in the blink of an eye and strange sights might be seen through familiar windows. We envision journeys that fill us with excitement as well as trepidation. We have discovered something that is difficult to know or to express, and I believe we have heard the artist's voice.



The artist can give substance to that which is visible to him alone. To express the complex beauty of a perfect shape might be seen as the function of mathematics more readily than the task of a printmaker. An equation, after all, is a way of understanding the relationship between things, and geometry is the most precise way to describe the fundamental structure of forms. In his 1953 wood engraving "Spirals" Escher has illustrated the evolution of a perfect and complex object, an unwinding banded cone floating against a grey background.

We see similar shapes within a nautilus shell and in the spirals of distant galaxies, but it is a difficult task indeed to make all of this

visible by carving channels in a block of wood. Undoubtedly, these spirals are a somewhat surprising subject for an artwork, requiring months of planning and tedious exacting woodcarving and printing. This is a design intensely challenging in both concept and execution, and it is this complexity which may be at the heart of "Spirals" beauty. Escher's inspiration may well have been his desire simply to make this difficult object exist, and to undertake the task of actualization with his chisels, ink and paper, guided by his imagination, experience, and craftsmanship. Creating such perfection is a sublime art and understanding it fully challenges our senses and our intellect.

Escher's spiral cornucopia is constructed of four parallel bands, each shaded with a subtle and systematic arrangement of lines and lozenges. Escher's technique is deceptively simple, since the print is created by pressing two inked woodblocks onto a sheet of paper. How these two blocks create the three shades in the print – black, grey, and white – is a surprisingly complex and highly technical puzzle, as is the precise geometric arrangement of spiraling lines and shapes.

Escher's inks make visible simultaneously the inside and the outside of the bands which lead us toward infinity. If we search for the very beginning of this growing form, we can find the tip of the spiral placed precisely between two bands at the right, its extreme apex exquisitely visible just before our view is blocked by the circling outer rind. The curves both wrap around and spring out of loops which we can imagine having no beginning and no end; this is clearly part of a growing and evolving thing, somehow both organic and mechanical, an illustration of a object as well as of a creative idea. It is as if an ever-evolving spiral has been frozen for a moment so that we may observe it close-up. We witness here a small piece of the infinite created from two blocks of wood, cut with chisels, covered with ink and pressed to paper by Escher in his studio. Lines and spaces of black, grey and white create something impossibly perfect and fantastically dimensioned on a white sheet of paper within a picture frame.



M. C. Escher "Crystal" 1947 mezzotint, signed and numbered 4/25
technique as well as a complex symbolic act.

"So it appears that one can even be symbolizing without knowing it," wrote Escher. We might wonder what Escher's intentions were in as he worked tirelessly to create a mezzotint print of a crystal floating among rocks in 1947 (the same year as "Other World.") Mezzotint is an ancient and frustrating technique, perhaps the most technically challenging craft a printmaker might attempt. First a metal plate must be roughened and textured evenly so that one achieves a velvety surface that, if rubbed with ink and pressed to paper, would print the deepest tones imaginable. From this blackness the printmaker must burnish and polish his image, for smoother surfaces will hold less ink and appear lighter in the final printing. To create an image such as Escher's 'Crystal,' is triumph of both vision and

Escher himself was perhaps unaware of what compelled him to create this image, but considering the effort involved in bringing these shapes out of the inky darkness, he must have felt strong urges to see his vision appear on paper. The central image is a cube-octahedron; that is, a double four-faced pyramid perfectly intersecting a cube. It is a wonderfully complex structure, difficult to realize in its solid form and almost impossible to create with transparency in mezzotint the way Escher has done.



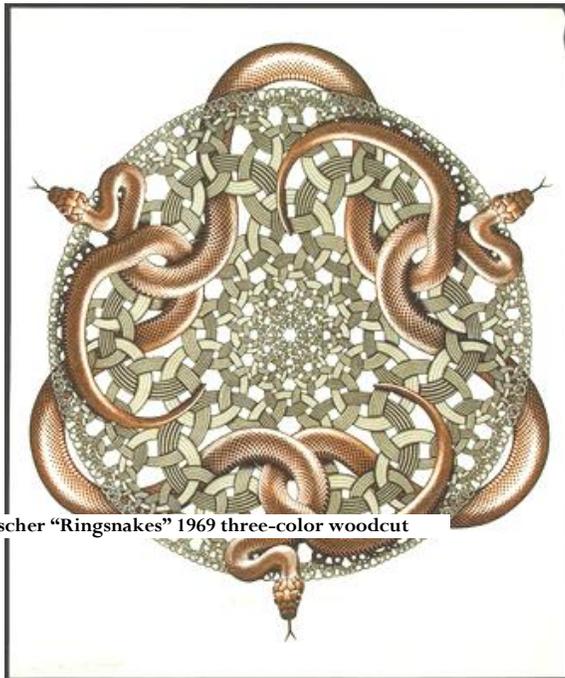
Cube Octahedron

Where do we find such perfect crystal forms? One answer lies in the background of this print, in the smooth and irregular rocks that are strewn at random as if they were washed up on some imaginary shore by the tide. If we were to look closely at these rocks, perhaps examine them with a high-powered microscope, we would indeed see atoms and molecules arranged with the complexity of a cube-octahedron and more. These miraculous forms are hidden from our sight, yet always present if only we can look closely enough. There are wonderful contrasts here as well as harmonies: the crystal is translucent, reflective, and made up of perfect lines and planes; the rocks behind are solid opaque, irregular lumps that hide their inner structures. The fact that crystalline perfection is part of the rocks is as much a mystery as the fact that fish can sometimes fit together with birds, a boy can become a building, and three worlds can be made visible within a single room. Escher wrote of this: "The laws of the phenomena around us – order, regularity, cyclical repetitions and renewals – have assumed greater and greater importance for me. The awareness of their presence gives me peace and provides me with support. I try in my prints to testify that we live in a beautiful and orderly world, and not in a formless chaos, as it sometimes seems." So there we have it: the essence of Escher's philosophy in his own words.

Fundamental forms such as crystals and atoms are known to us and yet often lie beyond our sight. The search for harmony, logic, and the universal rules of order is both alluring and terrifying. As Faust found, there are some secrets that are better left unknown, and some mysteries best left behind the shadows. And so we find serpents weaving through perfect interlocking rings in Escher's final creation, his 1969 woodcut "Ringsnakes." After a lifetime spent making things visible that we see with our minds as well as our eyes, Escher faced a monumental struggle to bring his last artwork to completion. His health failing, he feared he would not live long enough to carve and print the three woodblocks that were required to create this masterpiece. "Ringsnakes" is complex in structure, execution, and meaning; expressing the duality of natural and perfect forms, the unity of all creation, and a sublime realization of the infinite.

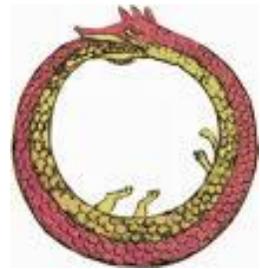
Escher frequently expressed the infinite in his art. His woodcut ‘Smaller and Smaller,’ for example, presents us with ever-diminishing lizards as we approach the center of the design. Traveling in the other direction, the figures in Escher’s series of ‘Circle Limit’ woodcuts reduce in size towards their edges. “Ringsnakes” combines and completes these transformations, creating a cycle that is unified and universal. Whether we begin at the center of

the figure or approach from its outer edge, first we find the smallest rings. These may be seen as the seeds of creation. Escher, empowered with the wisdom of experience, did not have to carve impossibly tiny rings to give us the sense of the infinite; the smallest circles serve as symbolic links of a never-ending chain. Each ring intertwines with others, both larger and smaller. It is the nature of many things to be both growing and shrinking simultaneously. As we advance in wisdom and age, so also we may decline in innocence and lose the possibilities of youth. Mists rise from the seas and fall as rain. In mythology, a phoenix can be reborn from its ashes and a serpent might swallow its own tail and regenerate. In the universe of rings that Escher creates we can watch evolution unfold. We might see this as an allegory of creation from the first dust of atoms at the edge of space to the complexities of a living planet. As it happens, only where Escher’s rings reach their largest size can they be inhabited by living creatures. And so, when the world is ripe, when nature’s web is fully grown, there we find snakes.

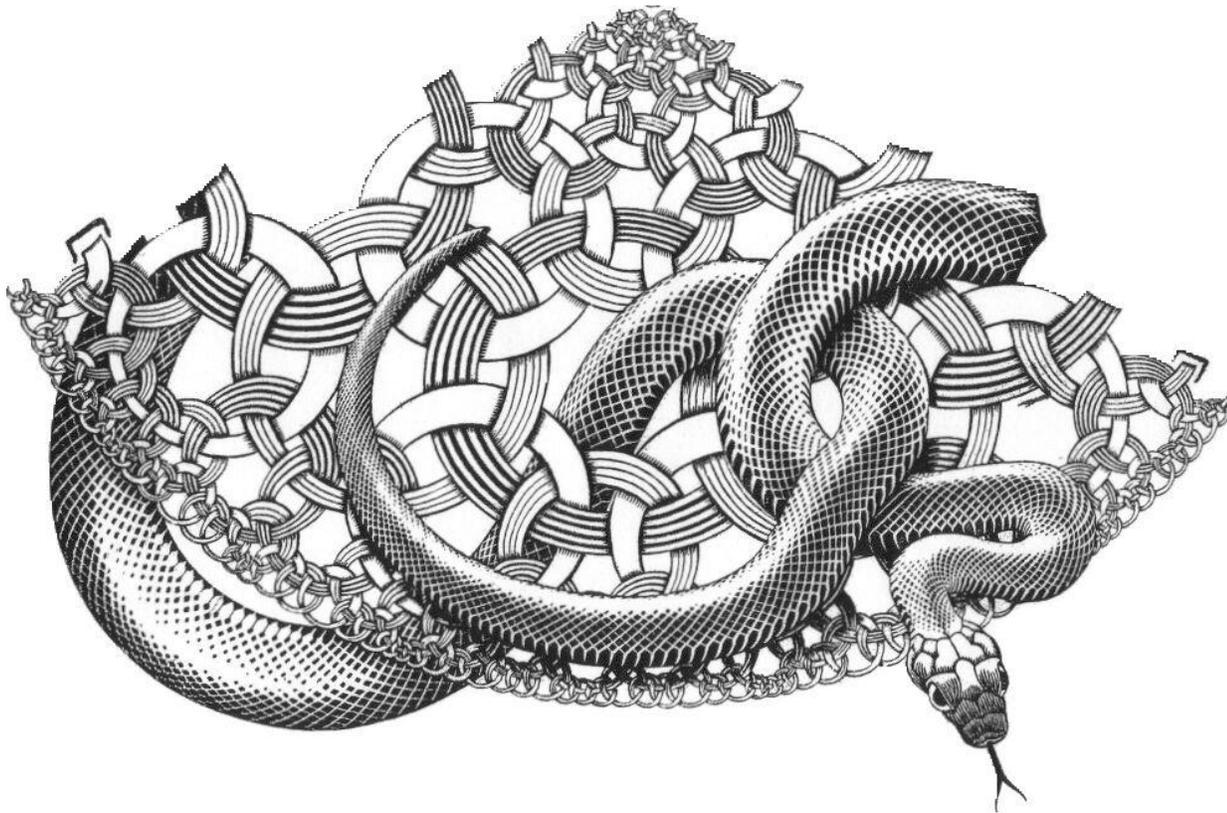


M. C. Escher “Ringsnakes” 1969 three-color woodcut

From the serpent in the Garden of Eden to the cobra on Cleopatra’s crown, the snake has always been a powerful symbol of temptation, wisdom and duality. It is said that Moses turned his staff into a snake to overpower Pharaoh, and the Egyptian replicated his magic, producing snakes on both sides of their epic struggle. Snakes can have wondrous powers. Related to the phoenix, the mythological ouroboros was a serpent that swallowed its tail to be continually re-born from its own essence. The shape of the ouroboros is closely related to the never-ending patterns Escher describes in many of his prints. Escher’s snakes circle endlessly, seeming to carry with them the gift and burden of wisdom as well as the contradictory powers of our desires. If the snake can be seen as a symbol for all that is conscious and alive, both wonderful and terrifying, then it is appropriate that in this print they weave in and out of such perfect and conceptualized rings. We can see the universe as composed of both the essential formulas that govern molecules and of our cryptic consciousness that struggles to understand itself. We are rather chaotic humans within a universe where perfection is invisible yet pervasive. The linked chains of “Ringsnakes” illustrate a pathway to and from infinity, interwoven with serpentine creatures whose writhing undulations unite them as they circumnavigate the cosmos and weave together perfection with the ever-changing power of life.



The Ouroboros



The 120° segment of M. C. Escher's woodcut 'Ringsnakes' which he printed three times around to create the final image

To create this circular woodcut with maximum symmetry and a minimum of woodcarving, Escher carved wedge-shaped printing blocks that completed the print with three impressions. Since "Ringsnakes" is printed with three colors, each color required three printings covering one-third of the image at a time. The edges of each block were fashioned irregularly so that their seams are hidden by the image's borderlines. Escher pressed three impressions from each wood block – three times around this wheel of creation – printing nine inked segments making three layers of color into one unified picture telling a story that Escher worked a lifetime to create.

We can never know how much of this message Escher consciously intended, but we do know that this final woodcut inspired him to continue work as the frailties of age crept over him. "Ringsnakes" stands as the triumphant legacy of an artist who labored tirelessly in solitude and with endless diligence to express the wonders our eyes perceive and our mind struggles to comprehend. The patterns Escher composed give us paths along which we can discover even more than the artist himself may have been aware of, for the doors he opened ultimately reveal what we find reflected in the mirrors of our own perception.

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This essay is dedicated to Hans deRijk, who has shared Escher's magic with the world through his prose and has shared his friendship so very generously with me. Special thanks always to my wife, Esta, who stayed awake while I wrote the first draft of this essay and has been my constant companion on this journey.