

THE INSEMINATION OF VENUS AS A MODERN TREE OF LIFE



An Interpretative review of a multimedia work created by Laura Schmidt

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Once we trembled beneath sacred boughs,
Watching gods inscribe their will on leaves,
While divine winds shook celestial branches
And fate dripped like dew from heaven's eaves.

Now the tree grows from our own imagining,
Its copper leaves dance to earthly air,
Venus transforms not by divine decree
But through the power we ourselves dare.

Where once we sought the gods' creation,
Now we are the force that makes stars bloom.
The moth bears witness with human eyes:
We are become the cosmic loom.

No longer supplicants beneath holy trees,
We are the garden, we are the grove.
Where once we quaked beneath the heavens,
We are become the force that moves the heavens.



Figure 1 – *The Insemination of Venus*, Laura Schmidt (2024). Mixed media (tooled leather, acrylic with hand-printed paper, torch-painted copper, soft pastel, polymer clay, 30 x 24 in., on canvas). The work incorporates kinetic elements, such as freely hanging copper leaves, and draws upon classical and mythological influences, including Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*. © 2024 Laura Schmidt

The Insemination of Venus as a Modern Tree of Life

The Genesis of this Essay

This essay emerged from a moment of realization while reading John Boardman's *Greek Art* (5th edition). In his discussion of a proto-Corinthian aryballos from c. 650 BC, Boardman describes how various animals pace aimlessly around the vase, but sometimes they are posed heraldically facing each other over a floral, which he characterizes as a version of the Eastern *Tree of Life* (Boardman 2016, 60). Seeing the phrase *Tree of Life* in this context—an incidental observation within a broader analysis of early Greek pottery—immediately evoked significant parallels within my mind with *The Insemination of Venus* by Laura Schmidt (figure 1). Until that moment, I had not explicitly recognized the presence of the motif in Schmidt's work, but in retrospect, it seemed not only plausible but essential to its interpretation.



Figure 2 - Poland, AR denar, ca. 985-995 AD, of Boleslaus the Brave. Suchodolski states that “on the obverse is a representation of an arrow tipped with an arrowhead. The arrow issues from a bundle of irregular lines which we can identify as a heavily stylized *Tree of Life*. The arrow, ever moving towards its target, is presumably a symbol of the Word of God” with a cross of the Byzantine style on the reverse (Suchodolski 2015, 72-73).

This realization was reinforced by my prior research which resulted from a *Tree of Life* motif appearing in Polish numismatics (figure 2), where an early Polish denar has been identified as bearing an allusive representation of this ancient arboreal symbol (Suchodolski 2015, 72ff., fig. 6). The combination of these two encounters—the Greek aryballos and the Polish coin—led me to explore *The Insemination of Venus* as part of the greater artistic and mythological tradition of the *Tree of Life*. ***This interpretation emerged not from any stated intention of the artist, but from***

recognizing deep resonances between Schmidt's work and this ancient pattern. Such engagement with enduring motifs, conscious or otherwise, often proves more powerful than deliberate reference, as it suggests the persistent vitality of these forms in human creative expression. This essay, then, is both an homage to the enduring power of that motif and an attempt to situate Schmidt's work within its vast historical and artistic continuum. In doing so, it examines both conscious artistic choices and deeper archetypal patterns that emerge in the work's engagement with this ancient symbol.

This analysis represents one of the first scholarly engagements with Schmidt's work. As an emerging artist, Schmidt brings fresh perspective to ancient motifs, and *The Insemination of Venus* demonstrates both technical innovation and deep symbolic resonance. The opportunity to analyze this work at the beginning of what promises to be a significant artistic career adds particular urgency to establishing a robust critical framework for understanding her contributions.

Introduction

This essay argues that Schmidt's *The Insemination of Venus* both engages with and transforms the ancient *Tree of Life* motif, shifting its traditional role from a passive conduit of divine energy to an active agent of creative insemination, where artistic imagination itself becomes the source of generative power. In this early work from an emerging artistic voice, we find not merely iteration but fundamental reimagining: a tree imbued not with passive divine energy but with the active force of creative imagination. That a new artist would engage so profoundly with this ancient symbol, spanning ancient to modern artistic and literary traditions, suggests both the enduring power of the motif and the possibility for its continued evolution through contemporary artistic practice.

Before exploring the work's deeper symbolic resonances, we must first consider its striking visual presence. *The Insemination of Venus* presents a nocturnal landscape dominated by a central tree with a distinctive textured trunk crafted from tooled leather. Within the trunk's hollow center, a female figure rendered in soft pastel—the Venus of the title—rests in a contemplative pose. Most strikingly, where her head should be, her form dissolves into or emerges from an ethereal burst of pale, ghostly forms that suggest both flowers and celestial matter. This ambiguous crown of organic-seeming shapes creates a visual rhyme with the copper leaves above, while its spectral quality contrasts with the more solid rendering of her body. The effect is of a figure caught in mid-transformation, where human form gives way to vegetative or stellar essence, making it unclear whether we are witnessing Venus's emergence from or dissolution into the tree's generative matrix.

The tree's branches spread expansively across the upper portion of the composition, adorned with leaves crafted from torch-painted copper that respond to air currents. These leaves possess a luminous, verdant quality that contrasts with the deep blues and blacks of the turbulent night sky, where a full moon hovers in the upper left corner. A striking moth, sculpted in polymer clay, rests

upon one of the branches near the trunk, serving as both observer and participant in the scene. Notably, the moth bears a human face—a surreal touch that transforms it from mere insect to a more complex symbolic presence. This anthropomorphized creature seems to bear witness to Venus's transformation, its human features suggesting consciousness and intent rather than mere instinctual attraction to the moonlight. The landscape below unfolds in a dramatic patchwork of reds, purples, and golds, creating an almost geological structure of color and texture. Dark, serpentine forms—perhaps roots or branches—weave across this varied terrain, anchoring the tree to its surreal environment. The overall effect is one of dynamic transformation, where the boundaries between figure, tree, and landscape seem to blur and shift, suggesting a moment of metamorphosis frozen in time.

This complex interplay of materials, forms, and symbolism invites deeper analysis of how Schmidt's work engages with and transforms ancient artistic traditions. The *Tree of Life*, spanning ancient to modern artistic and literary traditions, has served across cultures as an axis of existence—connecting earthly and divine realms while embodying cycles of renewal and transformation. In considering Schmidt's work through this lens, we recognize not merely an iteration of this ancient symbol but its fundamental reimagining: a tree imbued not with passive divine energy but with the active force of creative imagination. This reimagining of the *Tree of Life* resonates profoundly with Plato's vision of cosmic ordering in the *Timaeus*, where the Demiurge (δημιουργός) shapes pre-existing chaos through νοῦς (intellect). Just as Plato's divine craftsman does not create *ex nihilo* but rather imposes order on primordial matter, Schmidt's tree functions not as a passive conduit but as an active, intelligent structuring force. Plato writes:

Πᾶν τὸ γιγνόμενον ὑπ' αἰτίου τινὸς ἐξ ἀνάγκης γίνεσθαι (Plato, Burnet, 28a)
[Now everything that comes to be must of necessity come to be by the agency of some cause.]
(Plato, trans. Zeyl, 28a).

This process of ordered creation, where intellect (νοῦς) structures and transforms chaos into beauty, provides a philosophical framework for understanding Schmidt's transformation of the *Tree of Life* motif. Her tree, like Plato's Demiurge, actively shapes and organizes creative potential. The integration of Venus within this structure suggests that artistic imagination itself has become the ordering principle - the νοῦς that transforms possibility into reality.

The artist's incorporation of Venus, while directly referencing Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*,¹ aligns with the *Tree of Life*'s ancient associations with the divine feminine, fertility, and creative force—from Mesopotamian depictions of Inanna, goddess of love, war, and fertility, to the Egyptian

¹ Laura Schmidt, in personal correspondence with the author (October 15, 2024), describes *The Insemination of Venus* as “a meditation on the insemination of passion by imagination,” emphasizing its mixed-media construction (tooled leather, torch-painted copper, pastel, and polymer clay) and that Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* was a foundational reference point.

sycamore tree of Hathor, a sky and solar goddess associated with fertility and creation. Schmidt's innovation lies in transforming Venus, Roman goddess of love and fertility, from subject to participant in the creative process, enshrining her within the tree itself as an agent of artistic becoming. This transformation, and connection between divine feminine power and arboreal imagery, positions imagination itself as the *prima materia* of artistic becoming, resonating with ancient Near Eastern understanding where the Sumerian word *peš* signified both "palm frond" and "womb," suggesting an intrinsic link between vegetative and gestational creation (van Bakel).

Methodological Approach

When approaching art criticism, we must consider how works will be experienced in the deep future - when artists' biographies are lost, theoretical frameworks forgotten, and immediate cultural contexts have faded. What remains is the viewer's encounter with the work itself, mediated only by the enduring patterns of human meaning-making that persist across cultures and time. This is already how we experience much ancient art, and it is how future generations will experience our contemporary works.

This temporal perspective informs our methodological approach. While contemporary theoretical frameworks - including materiality and process (Lange-Berndt 2015), feminist reinterpretations of classical imagery (Pollock 2023), ecological art theory (Weintraub 2012), kinetic art theory (Rogers 2019), and craft theory (Adamson 2021) - offer valuable insights, this analysis focuses on situating Schmidt's work within the historical tradition of the *Tree of Life* motif, examining how it both draws upon and transforms patterns of meaning that have demonstrated their staying power across millennia of human artistic expression.

This methodology mirrors our actual experience of ancient artworks, where we must rely on visual analysis, material understanding, and recognition of persistent symbolic patterns to construct meaning. Just as we understand Mycenaean gold work or Assyrian palace reliefs primarily through their engagement with enduring symbolic patterns rather than their immediate theoretical or sociological contexts, this analysis examines Schmidt's work through the lens of persistent mythological and artistic traditions that transcend any single cultural moment.

This approach does not reject contemporary theoretical insights but rather prioritizes elements of artistic meaning that have proven most resistant to temporal erosion. By examining how Schmidt's work engages with the *Tree of Life* motif through this lens, we can better understand both its immediate significance and its potential for enduring relevance. The analysis thus focuses on three key elements:

1. Visual and material parallels with historical *Tree of Life* representations
2. Structural resonances that persist across cultural and temporal boundaries
3. Transformative innovations that suggest new possibilities for these enduring patterns

This framework allows us to recognize both conscious artistic choices and deeper archetypal patterns that emerge in the work's engagement with ancient motifs. Whether through deliberate reference or unconscious resonance, Schmidt's work demonstrates how contemporary artists can engage with and transform symbolic traditions that have maintained their power to generate meaning across millennia of human artistic expression. Before exploring the *Tree of Life* traditions that inform our analysis, however, we must first address what might seem the work's most obvious classical reference point.

Addressing Alternative Interpretations: Venus Anadyomene & The Insemination of Venus

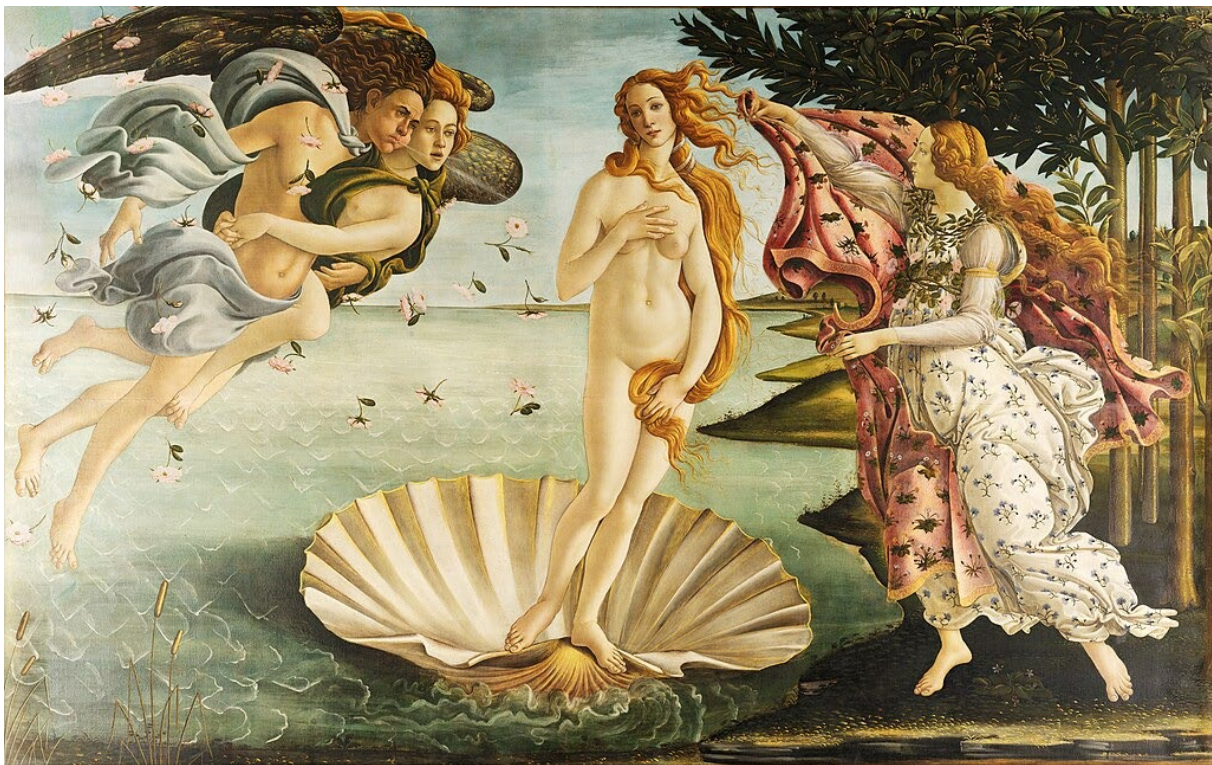


Figure 3 - Sandro Botticelli, *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1484–1486). Tempera on canvas. 172.5 cm × 278.9 cm (67.9 in × 109.6 in). Uffizi, Florence.

Before examining the work's profound engagement with *Tree of Life* traditions, we must address what might seem its most obvious classical reference point. Given Schmidt's acknowledged inspiration from Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (figure 3), some might argue that *The Insemination of Venus* functions primarily as a reconfiguration of the *Venus Anadyomene* (Venus Rising from the Sea) motif. This tradition, originating in Hellenistic Greece and most famously depicted in Apelles'

lost painting described by Pliny the Elder (Natural History 35.91),² shows Venus emerging from the sea foam, wringing water from her hair.³ The motif achieved renewed prominence through Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, emphasizing the goddess's emergence as a moment of perfect beauty revealed.

However, Schmidt's work departs from this tradition in several crucial ways that point toward deeper resonances with *Tree of Life* imagery. First, where the *Venus Anadyomene* tradition presents Venus emerging from the sea in a single moment of revelation, Schmidt's work emphasizes ongoing transformation. The kinetic copper leaves and Venus's ambiguous crown, where human form dissolves into or emerges from flowering, celestial matter, create a continuous state of becoming that contradicts the static emergence typical of *Anadyomene* imagery. This dynamic quality aligns more closely with *Tree of Life* traditions, particularly the perpetual motion of the Norse *Yggdrasil* and the continuous regeneration of the Egyptian *Ished Tree*.

Second, the traditional *Anadyomene* motif focuses on Venus's beauty and completion—the goddess fully formed and triumphant. Schmidt's piece, in contrast, emphasizes process and metamorphosis. Her Venus is not emerging triumphant but undergoing transformation, more akin to the metamorphic traditions associated with sacred trees in classical mythology. The figure's integration with the tree structure, particularly in how her form terminates in vegetative or celestial emanations, suggests a fusion of divine and natural elements that echoes ancient *Tree of Life* imagery.

Most significantly, the work's structural organization—with its vertical axis, branching forms, and integration of divine figure with arboreal form—aligns directly with core characteristics of *Tree of Life* imagery across cultures. The piece's architectural elements mirror the cosmic structuring seen in traditions from Mesopotamian to Norse mythology. The integration of divine figure and tree structure particularly echoes the Mycenaean tradition of goddess-tree fusion, suggesting an archetypal engagement with *Tree of Life* iconography rather than merely adapting the *Anadyomene* motif.

Having established why the work transcends simple classification as a *Venus Anadyomene* variation, we can now examine how it engages with and transforms the rich traditions of the *Tree of Life* across cultures and time. This broader symbolic framework better accounts for the work's dynamic qualities and structural organization while illuminating its profound engagement with ancient patterns of transformation and renewal.

² “His Venus Rising from the Sea, known as the Venus Anadyomene, was consecrated by the late Emperor Augustus in the Temple of his father Caesar; a work which has been celebrated in certain Greek lines, which, though they have outlived it, have perpetuated its fame. The lower part of the picture having become damaged, no one could be found to repair it; and thus did the very injury which the picture had sustained, redound to the glory of the artist. Time, however, and damp at last effaced the painting, and Nero, in his reign, had it replaced by a copy, painted by the hand of Dorotheus.”

³ “Nuda Venus madidas eximit imbre comas”[And naked Venus wrings her dripping locks] (Ovid 1907, *Ars Amatoria*, Book III, 224).

The Insemination of Venus as a Modern Tree of Life

The *Tree of Life* motif, spanning ancient to modern artistic and literary traditions, has always resonated deeply with the human imagination. It represents the axis of existence—the connection between the earthly and the divine, the cycle of birth and renewal, and the interplay of knowledge, creativity, and transformation. In considering *The Insemination of Venus* through this lens, we recognize a powerful reimagining of this ancient motif: a tree imbued not merely with life but with the insemination of passion by imagination.

The artist's incorporation of Venus, inspired by Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, aligns seamlessly with this theme. Schmidt's engagement with Botticelli's work goes beyond mere citation or homage.



Figure 4 - Cylinder seal image showing ritual fertilization of the sacred tree, Neo-Assyrian period (883-612 BC). Gray chalcedony, 3.3 x 1.4 cm. Two *apkallu* (antediluvian sages) flank and fertilize the sacred tree with ritual implements (*mulillu* cone and *banduddu* bucket) beneath the winged sun disk of Ashur. The scene, with its accompanying astral symbols and divine emblems, exemplifies the ancient Near Eastern understanding of trees as conduits of divine creative force—a concept Schmidt intuitively reimagines through artistic imagination. © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 65.1422

Where Botticelli's Venus emerges fully formed from the sea, representing ideal beauty and divine love, Schmidt's Venus undergoes a more complex transformation. By incorporating the figure into the *Tree of Life*, Schmidt transforms Botticelli's static moment of emergence into an ongoing process of becoming. The shell that serves as Venus's platform in Botticelli's work finds its analog in Schmidt's tree structure, but where the shell represents a vehicle of transport, the tree becomes an active agent of transformation. This reimagining shifts Venus from a figure of achieved perfection to one of continuous evolution and growth, more aligned with the generative symbolism of ancient *Tree of Life* traditions (figure 4) than with Renaissance ideals of divine beauty.

The *Tree of Life*, particularly in its most ancient forms, has often been intertwined with the divine feminine, fertility, and creative force—whether in Mesopotamian depictions of Inanna, the biblical *Etz Chaim*, or the Egyptian sycamore tree of Hathor (who bore, amongst her titles, *Mistress of the Sycamore in All Her Places*). Here, Venus is not merely a subject; she is enshrined within the tree itself, transformed from a classical figure of beauty into something organic, growing, and gestational.

To fully appreciate how Schmidt reimagines this ancient motif, we must first examine its varied manifestations across cultures and time periods. The *Tree of Life's* remarkable persistence in human artistic and religious expression provides essential context for understanding Schmidt's contemporary interpretation. Beginning with its earliest appearances in Mesopotamia, we can trace the symbol's evolution through the ancient world.

Ancient Depictions of the Tree of Life

Sumerian and Akkadian Traditions: The Earliest Sacred Trees (c. 3100–1600 BC)



Figure 5 – Cylinder seal showing banquet scene with sacred date palm, Akkadian or Ur III period (c. 2200–2100 BC). Greenstone; diameter: 1.45 cm; height: 2.71 cm. British Museum, No. 89326. CC BY-NC-SA 4.0

The concept of a sacred tree as a divine and cosmic axis appears throughout Mesopotamian mythology, with each culture developing its own account of a *Tree of Life* and humanity's quest for its fruit. The god Enki establishes this motif in one of its earliest forms, planting a fruitful tree at the bottom of the sea that grows to cover both sky and earth, standing beside his altar as a divine shield (Karagiannis 2015, 459). This cosmic scale would characterize many later *Tree of Life* representations.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* provides several crucial early references to sacred trees. The *Huluppu Tree* episode shows the goddess Inanna planting a tree on the banks of the Euphrates, intending to cultivate it into a throne. However, over time, the tree is infested by a serpent, a bird, and a dark force, necessitating Gilgamesh's intervention to purify the tree (George 2020, 131ff). This narrative mirrors later traditions where sacred trees serve as contested spaces between divine forces and chaos. The epic also recounts Gilgamesh's ritual journey to find the plant of life, including his encounter with Siduru-Sabatu, the goddess of Wisdom and "Keeper of the Fruit of Life," who denies him eternal life. Another Akkadian tablet describes how Ishtar gives Gilgamesh a magical drum and drumstick made from a *Tree of Life* she planted in her garden (Karagiannis 2015, 459).

This quest for divine trees and their fruit appears repeatedly in Mesopotamian mythology. The myth of Etana tells of a hero who, aided by an eagle, flies to heaven to obtain the plant of birth (Karagiannis 2015, 459). In Babylonian traditions, the god Eridu's earthly dwelling place lies behind a tree, while Marduk appears as "a dispenser of the plant of life" (Karagiannis 2015, 459). These mythological accounts were reflected in religious practice: Sumerian temples included sacred groves and gardens where trees symbolized fertility, divine favor, and kingship. The temple of Nippur, dedicated to Enlil, the chief god of the Sumerian pantheon, featured a sacred tree-like structure that may have functioned as a precursor to later depictions of the *Tree of Life*.

During the Akkadian and Old Babylonian periods (c. 2330-1600 BC), the sacred tree motif evolved into an increasingly structured cosmological symbol. Akkadian cylinder seals often depict trees flanked by protective deities or mythical creatures, reinforcing the idea of the *Tree of Life* as a bridge between divine and mortal realms. During the Akkadian and Old Babylonian periods (c. 2330-1600 BC), the sacred tree motif evolved into an increasingly structured cosmological symbol. Akkadian cylinder seals often depict trees flanked by protective deities or mythical creatures, reinforcing the idea of the *Tree of Life* as a bridge between divine and mortal realms.

One such example is the so-called Adam and Eve Seal (figure 5), a cylinder seal from the Akkadian or UR III period. The seal's central date palm stands between a divine figure-distinguished by its horned headdress-and a human figure, marking the tree as a liminal mediator. Though nineteenth-century scholars interpreted this scene as a biblical prefiguration of Eve's temptation, recent scholarship identifies it instead as a banquet scene, where the tree serves as a ritualized axis of divine-human interaction. This reinterpretation reinforces how the *Tree of Life* motif functioned as a structural intermediary rather than a moral symbol, a concept Schmidt later expands upon in *The Insemination of Venus*, where the tree actively generates rather than passively mediates transformation.

This early Mesopotamian imagery would influence later civilizations, particularly the Hurrians, Babylonians, and Assyrians, in their representations of sacred trees as sources of cosmic order, knowledge, and divine authority.

The Hurrian and Urartian Tree of Life (c. 2000–600 BC)



Figure 6 – Impression from a Hurrian seal depicting the *Tree of Life* (Sacred Tree) found in the city of Urkesh. Seated deities are depicted along with Sacred Tree with pomegranate fruit at the top. In the center of the seal the image of a ritual sacrifice of a bull (already beheaded). (Tarontsi 2024, 49, picture 18)

The Hurrians, an ancient Near Eastern civilization, developed a structured *Tree of Life* motif (figure 6), later inherited by the Urartians, Mitannians, Assyrians, and Babylonians (figure 7). More than a simple representation of vegetation, the Hurrian *Tree of Life* functioned as a cosmic axis, a divine conduit, and a symbol of sovereignty (Tarontsi 2024, 25ff).



Figure 7 - Mitannian seal impression (c. 1500–1360 BC), depicting the worship of the *Tree of Life*, a motif inherited from Hurrian religious and artistic traditions. The scene reflects the deep Hurrian cultural influence on Mitanni, where sacred trees, hybrid creatures, and fertility goddesses played a central role in religious iconography. The scene from the seal depicts worship by hybrid half-human, half-bull figures. At the center, a quadripartite representation of the Mitannian goddess of fertility is shown kneeling in each of the four cardinal directions. She holds sacred branches in both hands, engaged in an act of prayer or veneration. Source: Tarontsi 2024, 53, picture 23.

Uartian artistic traditions elevated the *Tree of Life* to an even greater hierarchical significance, particularly in bronze work, seals, and monumental carvings. The Uartian *Tree of Life* was frequently placed at the center of religious and royal iconography, often accompanied by winged mythological beings, lions, and priests engaged in veneration. In some cases, it was flanked by roaring lions or surmounted by a winged sun-disc, reinforcing its association with divine authority, fertility, and perpetual energy (Tarontsi 2024, 26-29).

As the *Tree of Life motif* evolved through Uartian traditions, it laid groundwork for perhaps its most formalized expression in Assyrian royal art. Where Uartian representations emphasized dynamic movement and hierarchical relationships, Assyrian artists would develop a more ritualized interpretation, focusing on the tree as a site of divine fertilization and royal legitimacy.

The Assyrian Sacred Tree (9th–7th Century BC, Nimrud and Nineveh Reliefs)

Building upon earlier Hurrian and Uartian traditions, the evolution of the *Assyrian Sacred Tree* marks a crucial development in Near Eastern tree symbolism, representing perhaps the most sophisticated and politically integrated form of the motif. The *Late Assyrian Tree* emerged during the second millennium under Tukulti-Ninurta, but it was the rise of the Neo-Assyrian Empire (934–608 BC) that catalyzed its spread throughout the Near East. The motif became ubiquitous across media, appearing in stone monuments, brick edifices, royal garments, jewelry, cylinders, official seals, and wall paintings (Karagiannis 2015, 459).

The tree's iconography evolved significantly over time. Originally depicted as a plant between two animals, 14th-century Assyrian seals show it flanked by antithetically posed sphinxes and lions. During the Neo-Assyrian Period, the tree's fruit gained new prominence, and the motif became inextricably linked with both kingship and the god Assur. The standardized design featured a base with a central trunk, crowned either by a palm-like top or with horizontal and intersecting lines resembling an almond tree. Often, two deities stood beside the tree, with a winged disk above representing Assur (Karagiannis 2015, 460)



Figure 8 - Neo-Assyrian Tree of Life Panel (c. 865–860 BC). Gypsum wall panel relief from the reign of Ashurnasirpal II, depicting a sacred *Tree of Life*, flanked by eagle-headed protective spirits (*apkallu*). These divine beings, acting as fertilizers of the tree, symbolize the bestowal of divine energy, order, and renewal upon the cosmic axis. The intricately detailed tree, often associated with fertility, wisdom, and divine kingship, embodies the Assyrian conceptualization of cosmic harmony and sacred transmission of life-force. Currently housed in the British Museum (Museum No. 124583), this relief exemplifies the Neo-Assyrian artistic tradition of merging mythology with royal ideology.

The *Assyrian Sacred Tree* appears frequently in Neo-Assyrian royal reliefs, particularly under Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BC), where it is often flanked by winged figures performing ritualistic gestures (figure 8). While some scholars have identified it as a *Tree of Life*, Mariana Giovino notes that its interpretation remains contested, with alternative theories suggesting it represents either a stylized date palm or a constructed cult object (Giovanni 2007, 2-3). However, its prominent role in royal iconography and association with divine fertilization strongly support its connection to creative force and generation.

The tree's relationship to royal power is particularly significant. The king served as both owner and guardian of the sacred tree, and in Ashurnasirpal II's throne room, it became a central imperial symbol. Scholars have suggested that this arrangement reflected the king's role as "vice-regent of Assur," positioning him as intermediary between divine and earthly realms. Furthermore, the tree's association with Ishtar, goddess of fertility and war, made it a symbol of ecstatic worship and cosmic connection, representing divine presence in the physical world. (Karagiannis 2015, 460)

The ritual scenes surrounding these trees deserve particular attention. The winged figures, identified by some scholars as *apkallu* (divine sages), perform specific gestures with cone-like objects and buckets. These objects likely represented date palm spadices and holy water, suggesting a ritual of divine pollination that merged agricultural practice with cosmic significance.

This has led at least one scholar to observe that "the tree had a dual function in Assyrian art. Basically it symbolized the divine world order maintained by the Assyrian king, but inversely it could also be projected upon the king to portray him as the Perfect Man" (Karagiannis 2015, 460). This ritualization of fertility and growth, combined with its role in divine-royal legitimacy, provides an intriguing precedent for Schmidt's transformation of the tree into an agent of creative insemination. As the *Tree of Life* motif spread westward into Mediterranean and Levantine cultures, these Assyrian innovations in cosmic and political symbolism would be transformed yet again, adapted to new cultural and religious contexts.

Mediterranean and Levantine Developments

While the *Tree of Life* motif originated in Mesopotamian cultures, its transmission across the Mediterranean and Levantine regions led to distinctive new interpretations. As trade routes and cultural exchange flourished during the Bronze Age, each civilization transformed these arboreal symbols according to their own cosmological and political needs. The Egyptian *Ished Tree*, the Mycenaean-Greek sacred tree cults, and the Hebrew *Etz Chaim* represent three profound reimaginings of the motif, each contributing unique elements that would influence later traditions and resonate in Schmidt's contemporary interpretation.

The Egyptian Ished Tree of Thoth and Hathor

The *Ished Tree* (iSd), also known as the sacred Persea tree, held a central role in Egyptian religious thought, particularly within the solar cult of Heliopolis. The tree was believed to record the names of kings for eternity, functioning as a cosmic register of divine kingship. This function of the tree as both recorder and structuring force resonates with Plato's later conception of cosmic ordering in the *Timaeus*, where form is imposed upon chaos through νοῦς (intellect), shaping an otherwise undifferentiated existence into an intelligible structure.

The image of the tree frequently appears in temple reliefs, where gods—particularly Thoth or Amun-Ra—inscribe the names of rulers on its leaves, an act symbolizing royal legitimacy and eternal kingship. As Bayoumy notes, the *Ished Tree* was closely associated with the cult of Ra and the cycles of cosmic renewal. The scene selected to illustrate this section—Seti I kneeling beneath the *Ished tree*—captures this essential function (figure 9). Here, the pharaoh participates in the divine act of renewing cosmic balance (*ma'at*), while gods such as Thoth or Amun-Ra inscribe his name, ensuring his rule is aligned with the divine will (Bayoumy 2020, 9).

The Egyptian *Ished Tree* represents one of the earliest and most sophisticated adaptations of Near Eastern tree symbolism. Where Mesopotamian traditions emphasized the tree as a cosmic axis,



Figure 9 – Painted-bas relief from the Temple at Abydos of Seti I beneath the *Persea Tree*: The Egyptian *Tree of Life* (c. 1290–1279 BC). Located on the west wall of the Second Hypostyle Hall, this relief exemplifies New Kingdom theological thought, wherein the pharaoh's legitimacy and afterlife were affirmed through sacred inscriptions upon the Tree of Life.

Egyptian culture transformed it into a living register of divine kingship. This reconceptualization of the tree as both witness and recorder of royal legitimacy marks a crucial development in the motif's evolution from passive symbol to active participant in divine order.

While Egyptian tradition emphasized the tree's role in legitimizing kingship, Mycenaean-Greek culture would develop a radically different interpretation, one that would prove particularly significant for Schmidt's work. In Greece, the tree became increasingly associated with feminine divine power, marking a crucial shift from the predominantly masculine associations of Near Eastern and Egyptian traditions.

The Mycenaean-Greek Tree of Life (c. 1600-500 BC)

The Mycenaean-Greek interpretation of the *Tree of Life* represents a crucial transformation in the motif's evolution, particularly in its association with the divine feminine. While Near Eastern traditions typically depicted the sacred tree in relation to male deities or rulers, it was in Minoan-Mycenaean art that tree cult scenes were first associated with a female deity (Kourou 2001, 34). The sacred tree in these scenes was usually a fig or olive tree, though palm trees appeared in representations where the female deity was not depicted (Kourou 2001, 34).

Most significantly, Mycenaean representations introduced an unprecedented degree of fusion between deity and tree. Their tree cult scenes display “extremely strong realism often directly implying a personification of the Great Goddess as a tree,” as evidenced by a ring from Mycenae where “the female figure assumed as the Great Goddess is shown seated under the tree and she seems to be almost identified with it” (Kourou 2001, 34). This fusion of divine feminine and arboreal form found particularly striking expression in a gold pin from Mycenae, where a female figure stands in a “grandiose posture” with flowering branches springing directly from her head, representing “the personification of the sacred tree” (Kourou 2001, 34) (figure 10).

This unprecedented merging of divine figure and natural form foreshadows aspects of Platonic thought, where the material and ideal realms interact through mediating forces—a concept that



Figure 10 - Minoan-Mycenaean gold figure from Mycenae, likely the finial of a pin, depicting a goddess with flowering branches sprouting from her head. Kourou identifies this iconography as “the personification of the sacred tree” (Kourou 2001, 34). Housed in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

Schmidt's work reimagines through the lens of artistic creation, transforming the tree from a passive vessel to an active site of generative imagination.

This tradition survived and evolved through the Bronze Age collapse and into Classical Greek culture, though in transformed ways. By the Early Iron Age, while the explicit cult of the Great Goddess had faded in most of the Aegean world beyond Crete, aspects of her role were absorbed into the attributes of various Olympian deities (Kourou 2001, 38). The tree remained a crucial symbol of divine presence, though now typically as an attribute of specific gods rather than as a direct manifestation of deity. For instance, the olive tree became associated with Athena on the Athenian Acropolis, surviving until the Persian invasion when, according to Herodotus, it miraculously regenerated after being burned (Kourou 2001, 51).

We note however, that the tradition of goddess-tree fusion found parallels across the ancient Near East, notably in the Assyrian figure of Mullissu, who as both birth goddess and divine mother was identified with the date palm. Like the Mycenaean Great Goddess, Mullissu's association with the tree emphasized both fertility and divine authority, a dual significance that Schmidt's work reframes in terms of creative power.

The transformation of the tree motif through Classical Greek art offers crucial context for understanding Schmidt's contemporary reinterpretation. A significant shift occurred in late Archaic Athens, where tree imagery became deeply intertwined with political and cultural identity. During the sixth century BC, "Athenian aristocracy endeavours to sustain power by promoting its important past," leading to a renewed interest in Mycenaean traditions and their artistic expression (Kourou 2001, 48). This cultural movement produced new interpretations of tree symbolism that would influence all subsequent Western art.

A particularly significant development was the transformation of the goddess-tree fusion into more complex narrative forms. The most famous example is Exekias's cup depicting Dionysus aboard a ship with a vine tree, representing a new approach to tree symbolism in Greek art (Kourou 2001, 49-50)(figure 11). Where earlier traditions showed static representations of goddess-tree unity, this



Figure 11- Dionysos in a ship, sailing among dolphins. Attic black-figure kylix, discovered in Vulci, attributed to Exekias, circa 530 BC. The scene, painted on the interior tondo, depicts Dionysos reclining in a boat, from which grapevines sprout, symbolizing his divine power and the fecundity he brings. Dolphins surround the vessel, referencing the myth in which the god transforms Tyrrhenian pirates into dolphins. Staatliche Antikensammlungen, Munich, Inv. 2044.

evolution toward dynamic narrative forms parallels Schmidt's transformation of the traditional *Tree of Life* into an active agent of artistic insemination.

The tree motif also became increasingly associated with sites of transformation and metamorphosis. In Classical Athens, "ancestor cult frequently takes the form of hero cult and again it is related to a tree cult" (Kourou 2001, 52). These scenes often featured a tree combined with a climbing snakeAuguste, creating "the best iconographic coverage of the cycle of life and death" (Kourou 2001, 53). Schmidt's work engages with this tradition of the tree as a locus of transformation, though she shifts the emphasis from physical to creative metamorphosis.

This evolution through Greek art demonstrates how the *Tree of Life* motif maintained its core significance as a symbol of transformation while

adapting to new cultural and philosophical contexts. Schmidt's work continues this tradition of reinterpretation, transforming ancient symbols of divine and natural power into a modern meditation on artistic creation and imagination.

The Hebrew tradition developed alongside these Mediterranean interpretations but took the symbolism in a distinctly metaphysical direction. Where Greek culture emphasized the tree's role in divine-human fusion and Egyptian tradition focused on royal legitimacy, Hebrew thought transformed the tree into a complex symbol of divine wisdom and cosmic structure.

The Hebrew Menorah and Etz Chaim (*Tree of Life*) in Biblical and Rabbinic Tradition

The biblical *Tree of Life* (*The Holy Bible, Jerusalem Bible*, Genesis 2:9) stands in the *Garden of Eden* as a counterpoint to the *Tree of Knowledge*, representing a form of divine wisdom that is not merely intellectual but existential, bound to the sustaining force of the universe. This concept found



Figure 12 - 4th-6th century. An early Jewish bronze stamp from late Roman to Byzantine period. The rectangular device with Jewish symbols in raised relief, including a large seven-branched Menorah on a tripod base at the center, a shofar to the left, a lulav and shovel to the right; a ring handle on the reverse. Size: 2¼ in. (5.7 cm.) long. Christie's, Sale 2755, Lot 167.

material expression in the Temple Menorah, whose form explicitly echoed the *Tree of Life's* symbolism of divine fertility and life-giving power (figure 12). The Menorah's design, with its seven branches indicating completeness and its almond-blossom decorations, represented a stylized tree that merged cosmic and terrestrial symbolism (Karagiannis 2015, 464).

The evolution of these tree-based symbols took on particular significance after the Babylonian Exile (586 BC). With the loss of the Ark of the Covenant, the Menorah gained new importance as a physical manifestation of divine presence, standing beside the Torah as a symbol of spiritual enlightenment. During this period, the *Tree of Life* concept became increasingly associated with celestial ascension. In texts like II Enoch, the tree stands "in the middle of Paradise" where "the Lord rests," while III Enoch places the divine presence (Shekinah) "under the tree of life, on a cherub, in the Paradise" (Karagiannis 2015, 466).



Figure 13 - Illustrated Etz Chaim from a 17th-century Ashkenazi Kabbalistic work based on the teachings of the Ari HaKadosh, as transcribed by Rabbi Chaim Vital. Eastern Europe, second half of the 17th century.

In kabbalistic traditions, the *Etz Chaim* is the framework of divine emanation (the *Sefirot*), illustrating the metaphysical process of creation and the continuous unfolding of existence (figure 12). This abstract conceptualization developed alongside increasingly cosmic interpretations of the Menorah. Philo of Alexandria, drawing on older traditions, interpreted the Menorah's seven branches as representing the planetary system, with its central lamp symbolizing the sun's illumination of the planets. This astronomical symbolism reinforced the *Tree of Life's* role as a conduit between earthly and celestial realms, a concept

evidenced materially in finds like the first-century Magdala Stone, where tree imagery, celestial symbols, and the Menorah are integrated into a single theological statement (Karagiannis 2015, 467-468).

The Insemination of Venus' emphasis on insemination through imagination finds a counterpart here—imagination as an act of divine creation, a vehicle for insight rather than mere fantasy. Just as the Menorah evolved from a simple cultic object to a complex symbol of spiritual and cosmic transformation, Schmidt's tree functions as both physical structure and metaphysical agent.

As classical civilizations gave way to new religious frameworks, the *Tree of Life* underwent further transformations that reflected changing theological and philosophical perspectives. The cosmic trees of ancient traditions did not disappear but were reinterpreted through Christian, Norse, and Islamic worldviews, each culture adapting the motif to express their distinct understanding of divine order and human relationship to creation. These medieval and religious transformations would prove crucial in the symbol's ongoing evolution.

Medieval and Religious Transformations

The Christian Tree of Life: From Eden to Salvation



Figure 14 - Orthodox icon of *Jesus Christ The Vine* or the *Tree of Life*. Copy of an icon from the 13th century. Benaki Museum, Athens.

The Christian tradition transformed the *Tree of Life* motif through a complex theological evolution, moving from the Edenic tree of Genesis to the Cross as the ultimate *Tree of Life*, and finally to Christ himself as the living vine. This evolution is powerfully captured in the 13th-century Orthodox icon of *Jesus Christ the Vine* (figure 13), where Jesus occupies the central position of a tree whose branches support the twelve apostles, representing the organic growth and divine ordering of the Church.

The transformation of tree symbolism in Christian thought parallels Schmidt's artistic metamorphosis of the motif in several crucial ways. Early Christian hymns note the redemptive power of the cross as the *Tree of Life*:

*De parentis protoplasti/Fraude Factor
condolens/Quando pomi noxialis/Morte morsu
corruit/Ipse lignum tunc notavit/Damna ligni ut
solveret"* [When the first parent fell through the bite of

the deadly fruit, the Creator, grieving at the deception, marked out the tree to undo the damage of the tree] (Fortunatus, *Crux Fidelis*).

Schmidt's work similarly presents the tree as a site of transformation, where form dissolves and reconstitutes itself. Her Venus, like the Christian tree, becomes simultaneously a point of dissolution and reconstitution.

The patristic tradition's understanding of the *Tree of Life* as both historical reality and spiritual metaphor provides an important precedent for Schmidt's multivalent treatment. Augustine writes: *De Genesi ad litteram* (VIII.4.8):

Illud plane quod sequitur: Et lignum vitae in medio paradisi, et lignum scientiae dignoscendi bonum et malum, diligentius considerandum est, ne cogat in allegoriam, ut non ista ligna fuerint, sed aliud aliquid nomine ligni significant. Dictum est enim de sapientia: Lignum vitae est omnibus amplectentibus eam. Verumtamen cum sit Ierusalem aeterna in coelis, etiam in terra civitas qua illa significaretur, condita est; et Sarra et Agar quamvis duo Testamenta significarent, erant tamen quaedam etiam mulieres duae; et cum Christus per ligni passionem fluente spiritali nos irriget, erat tamen et petra, quae aquam sitiendi populo ligno percussa manavit, de qua diceretur: Petra autem erat Christus. Aliud quam erant illa omnia significaverunt, sed tamen etiam ipsa corporaliter fuerunt.

[That statement which follows: “And the *Tree of Life* in the middle of Paradise, and the *Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil*” must be examined more closely, lest we be compelled to take it as an allegory and assume that these were not actual trees but something else signified by the name tree. For it has been said of wisdom: “It is a *Tree of Life* to those who embrace it” (Proverbs 3:18). Nevertheless, just as the eternal Jerusalem is in heaven, yet there was also a city established on earth to signify it, and just as Sarah and Hagar, though representing the two Testaments (Galatians 4:24), were also actual women, and just as Christ refreshes us spiritually through the outpouring of His passion on the wood of the cross, yet there was indeed a rock that, when struck with wood, produced water for a thirsty people (Exodus 17:6) about which it was written, “And that rock was Christ.” (1 Corinthians 10:4) so too, all these things signified something beyond themselves, but they also existed physically] (*De Genesi ad litteram*, VIII.4.8)

This dual understanding of the tree as both a material reality and a higher metaphysical truth closely parallels Plato’s theory of forms, wherein visible manifestations serve as shadows or reflections of an eternal, ideal reality—just as Augustine sees the *Tree of Life* not merely as an object in Eden, but as a symbol of spiritual transcendence. This dual nature—material yet metaphysical—further resonates with Schmidt’s treatment of her tree as both physical structure (with its tactile leather trunk and kinetic copper leaves) and metaphysical agent of transformation.

The *Tree of Jesse* tradition, exemplified in the magnificent 12th-century window at Chartres Cathedral (figure 14), represents a crucial development in this dual understanding. Rising from the recumbent figure of Jesse, the tree’s branches support the earthly ancestors of Christ while simultaneously manifesting their transcendence of mere physical lineage. The window’s sophisticated use of colored light to create an atmosphere of spiritual transfiguration parallels Schmidt’s use of kinetic elements to suggest ongoing transformation. Just as the changing light through Chartres’ stained glass brings the *Jesse Tree* to shifting life throughout the day, Schmidt’s copper leaves respond to air currents, creating a dynamic interplay between physical structure and ephemeral movement. Both works thus present the tree not as a static symbol but as an active

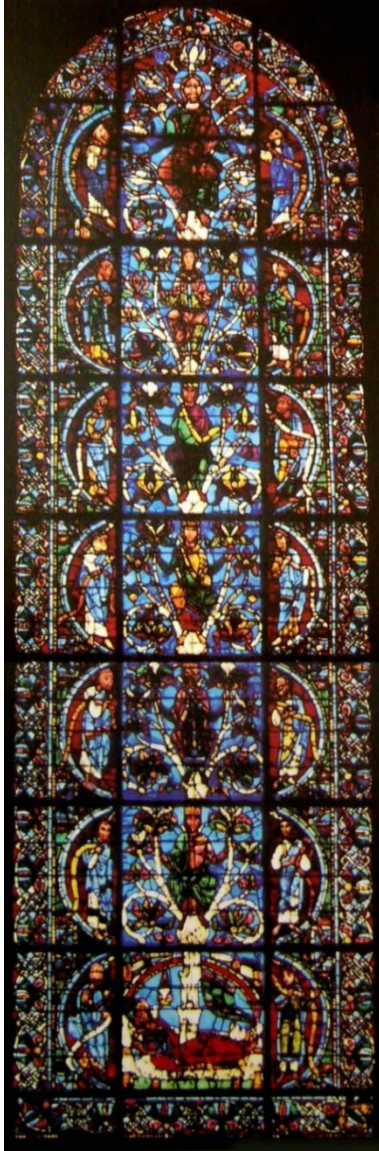


Figure 15 - *Tree of Jesse* window (c. 1150-1155 AD), Chartres Cathedral. This stained-glass window, standing approximately 40 feet high, depicts Christ's genealogy as described in the Gospel of Matthew. The composition rises from the sleeping figure of Jesse at the base through the kings of Judah, culminating with the Virgin Mary and Christ enthroned. The deep blues and reds characteristic of medieval stained glass create a luminous effect that emphasizes the tree's spiritual vitality while demonstrating the technical mastery of the Chartres workshop. The window exemplifies the medieval fusion of genealogical record with divine transformation. *Public Domain*

medium of transformation, where divine or creative power manifests through natural forms and forces.

The concept of divine insemination finds particular resonance in medieval interpretations associating Mary with the *Tree of Life*, particularly in the writings of Bonaventure in his exposition *The Tree of Life*:

“Picture in your mind a tree whose roots are watered by an ever-flowing fountain that becomes a great and living river with four channels to water the garden of the entire Church. From the trunk of this tree, imagine that there are growing twelve branches that are adorned with leaves, flowers and fruit. Imagine that the leaves are a most effective medicine to prevent and cure every kind of sickness, because the word of the cross is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16). Imagine that there are twelve fruits, having every delight and the sweetness of every taste (Wisd. 16:20). This fruit is offered to God’s servants to be tasted so that when they eat it, they may always be satisfied, yet never grow weary of its taste. This is the fruit that took its origin from the Virgins womb and reached its savory maturity on the tree of the cross under the midday heat of the Eternal Sun, that is, the love of Christ. In the garden of the heavenly paradise-God’s table-this fruit is served to those who desire it” (Bonaventure 1978, 120-121).

This image of the feminine divine as both container and generator of transformative power directly parallels Schmidt's positioning of Venus within her tree. Where medieval tradition saw Mary associated with the living tree and inseminated by divine grace to bear the fruit of salvation, Schmidt presents Venus as both recipient and source of creative force.

Perhaps most significantly, the Christian tradition's emphasis on the *Tree of Life* as an agent of transformation rather than mere sustenance aligns with Schmidt's reimagining of the motif. In *Revelation's* final vision, the *Tree of Life* bears "twelve manner of fruits" and leaves "for the healing of the nations" (22:2), suggesting ongoing generation rather than static presence. Similarly, Schmidt's tree does not simply preserve or display its divine figure but actively participates in her transformation.

This dynamic quality reaches its fullest expression in the the gospel, where Christ declares "I am the vine, you are the branches" (John 15:1,5), presenting divine energy not as hierarchical bestowal but as organic circulation—a concept that resonates with Schmidt's treatment of creative force as inherent rather than imposed. Just as Christ's vine imagery suggests divine power functioning through natural processes rather than against them, Schmidt's tree works through natural forms and forces (exemplified by its breeze-responsive copper leaves) to achieve supernatural transformation.

These parallels suggest not direct influence but a deeper resonance between Christian interpretations of the *Tree of Life* and Schmidt's contemporary reimagining. Both traditions transform the ancient motif from passive conduit to active agent, from symbol of paradise lost to instrument of ongoing transformation. In doing so, they demonstrate the continuing vitality of the *Tree of Life* as a framework for understanding transformation and creative power.

While Christian tradition ultimately emphasized the *Tree of Life* as an instrument of divine order and salvation, Norse mythology presents a more dynamic and conflicted vision in *Yggdrasil*, one that resonates differently but no less powerfully with Schmidt's work. Where Christian iconography transformed the tree into a symbol of divine harmony, as seen in both the Chartres *Jesse Tree* and the Orthodox Christ-Vine, Norse mythology maintained and elaborated upon the ancient Near Eastern concept of the cosmic tree as a site of continuous struggle and transformation. This shift from instrument of salvation to arena of cosmic conflict provides another crucial framework for understanding Schmidt's dynamic treatment of the tree motif.

The Norse *Yggdrasil* (Poetic Edda, 13th Century)



Figure 16 - The Överhogdal Tapestries (c. 1040–1170 AD), Viking Age textile art that have been interpreted as depicting the *Yggdrasil*, the *World Tree* or *Tree of Life* of Norse mythology. The tapestries contain a mixture of Norse and Christian imagery, including stylized animals, Odin's horse Sleipnir, ships, and human figures moving in procession. The prominent tree left of center has been interpreted as the cosmic ash *Yggdrasil*, connecting the nine worlds. *Public Domain*

The cosmic ash tree, *Yggdrasil*, presents perhaps the most dynamic vision of the *Tree of Life* in medieval tradition (figure 15). Unlike the Christian tree, which evolves toward divine harmony, *Yggdrasil* exists in perpetual tension, its very vitality emerging from constant conflict. The tree's three roots extend to different cosmic realms—Urðarbrunnr, where the Norns weave fate (*Völuspá* 19; *Gylfaginning* 15); Mímisbrunnr, source of wisdom (*Völuspá* 28; *Gylfaginning* 15); and Hvergelmir, where the dragon Niðhöggr gnaws at the roots (*Grímnismál* 35; *Gylfaginning* 15). This tripartite structure creates a cosmic drama of creation, wisdom, and destruction. In this regard, *Yggdrasil* stands in sharp contrast to Plato's vision of a cosmos ordered through *voûç* (intellect), where harmony is imposed upon primordial chaos. Instead, the Norse tree embodies an unresolved dualism, where life and destruction are inextricably linked, echoing the mythic struggle of forces rather than an intellectual structuring of reality.

The tree's dynamic ecosystem, where the dragon Niðhöggr attacks its roots while an eagle perches at its summit, with the squirrel Ratatoskr running between them carrying messages (*Grímnismál* 32, 35; *Gylfaginning* 16), mirrors Schmidt's interest in the tree as a site of active transformation rather than static symbolism. Like her kinetic copper leaves responding to air currents, *Yggdrasil* shudders with cosmic forces, marking transitions between ages (*Völuspá* 47). This emphasis on the tree as both sufferer and survivor of transformation aligns with Schmidt's presentation of Venus as simultaneously dissolving and emerging within her arboreal structure.

The Islamic Tree of Life: From Dynamic Tension to Eternal Order



Figure 17 - *Tree of Life* floor mosaic from Hisham's Palace (8th Century AD): Located in Jericho, this renowned mosaic from the Umayyad period depicts a fruit-bearing tree flanked by two gazelles on one side and a lion attacking another gazelle on the other. The mosaic is part of the audience room floor in Hisham's Palace. *Public Domain*

While the *Tree of Life* entered Islamic art through earlier Near Eastern traditions—particularly Mesopotamian and Sassanian Persian imagery—Islamic artists gradually transformed its conceptual framework from one of dynamic tension to one of geometric harmony and divine balance. This evolution is powerfully illustrated in the renowned *Tree of Life* mosaic from Hisham's Palace in Jericho (8th Century AD) (Figure 16). Here, in this early Umayyad work, we see a transitional moment: the mosaic depicts a fruit-bearing tree flanked by peaceful gazelles on one side and a lion attacking another gazelle on the other, suggesting the persistent tension between peace and conflict inherited from earlier traditions. Yet even in this narrative scene, the careful symmetry of the

composition and the regularized pattern of the fruit-laden branches hint at the geometric order that would come to characterize later Islamic interpretations. The tree itself, while still naturalistic, displays a rhythmic organization that prefigures later abstraction.



Figure 18 – Isfahan *Paradise Garden* carpet (17th century). This silk and wool carpet exemplifies the geometric abstraction of the *Tree of Life* motif in Islamic art. Its quadripartite design reflects the four rivers of paradise described in sacred texts, while its central medallion and abstract vegetal patterns transform natural forms into expressions of divine order. *Public Domain*

This transformation of the motif from dynamic force to eternal principle reaches its full expression in later works, as seen in the Isfahan *Paradise Garden* carpet (17th century) (Figure 17). Here, the naturalistic tree and its attendant drama have been completely transformed into abstract geometric patterns that reflect divine harmony—a transformation that signals not just a stylistic evolution but a fundamental reconception of the tree's symbolic function. Unlike its Mesopotamian predecessors or Norse counterparts, which often show the tree in struggle or dynamic flux, the fully developed Islamic *Tree of Life* stands fixed, eternal,

and unmoving. Whether stylized as a cypress in Persian carpets, rendered as a flowering tree in Ilkhanid miniatures, or abstracted into the central axis of architectural decoration, it functions less as a conduit for transformation than as a blueprint of divine harmony.

However, Schmidt's interpretation moves in a dramatically different direction. Where Persian and Islamic traditions depict the tree as a fixed embodiment of divine reality, Schmidt's tree is a generator of reality. In *The Insemination of Venus*, the tree is neither symmetrical nor still—it is in motion, its kinetic copper leaves responding to unseen forces, its tooled leather trunk suggesting organic growth rather than geometric perfection. Venus, rather than emerging into a perfected paradise, is caught in the process of becoming, her form dissolving into or materializing from the tree's structure. This reimagining rejects the Islamic vision of the *Tree of Life* as a perfected cosmic map and instead aligns more closely with traditions that view the tree as an agent of transformation.

This distinction reflects a deeper philosophical divide. The Islamic *Tree of Life* tradition, in its refinement of earlier Near Eastern motifs, expresses a fundamentally Neoplatonic vision where creation unfolds according to an eternally structured order. In contrast, Schmidt's tree operates more like the Platonic Demiurge of the *Timaeus*—a force that does not simply mirror a higher order but actively shapes raw potential into new forms. Her Venus is not a recipient of eternal sustenance but a figure caught in metamorphosis, mirroring the tree's role as generator rather than emblem.

Thus, while Schmidt's work engages with the long history of the *Tree of Life* motif, it specifically challenges the Islamic tradition's emphasis on divine stasis. Instead, her vision reconnects with

more dynamic interpretations found in earlier Near Eastern and, as we shall see, later Mycenaean traditions—where the tree serves as an active force of creative transformation rather than a symbol of paradisiacal preservation.

Having traced the *Tree of Life* motif through its ancient origins and medieval transformations, we can now appreciate the foundation upon which Schmidt builds her contemporary reinterpretation. Her technical execution of *The Insemination of Venus* demonstrates how contemporary materials and methods can reinvigorate ancient *Tree of Life* symbolism, whether through deliberate choice or archetypal resonance. This mixed-media approach—incorporating tooled leather, acrylic paint, hand-printed paper, torch-painted copper, soft pastel, and polymer clay—creates a complex materiality that both references and reimagines traditional representations of sacred trees.

Innovating the Tree of Life: Materials, Motion, & Metaphor

Schmidt's technical execution of *The Insemination of Venus* demonstrates how contemporary materials and methods can reinvigorate ancient *Tree of Life* symbolism, whether through deliberate choice or archetypal resonance. Her mixed-media approach—incorporating tooled leather, acrylic paint, hand-printed paper, torch-painted copper, soft pastel, and polymer clay—creates a complex materiality that both references and reimagines traditional representations of sacred trees.

Dynamic Materiality and Cosmic Motion

The work's most distinctive technical feature—its incorporation of freely hanging copper leaves—actively engages with and transforms ancient *Tree of Life* traditions of cosmic motion. In Norse mythology, Yggdrasil's leaves shuddered with prophetic significance, shaken by the wings of the eagle Hræsvelgr ("Corpse Swallower") who sat at its crown creating the winds of the world. Similarly, Mesopotamian traditions depicted the sacred tree's leaves moving with divine breath, as seen in the 9th century BC relief from Nimrud where divine figures direct sacred winds toward the *Tree of Life*. Schmidt translates these ancient metaphors of divine wind into physical reality through copper leaves that respond to actual air currents, transforming passive mythological motion into active participation. Her choice of torch-painted copper proves particularly significant—where Assyrian sacred trees were adorned with precious metals to reflect divine light, Schmidt's variable patinas create an ever-changing play of color and shadow that responds to both light and motion. This technical innovation thus accomplishes what ancient artisans could only suggest: a tree that actually moves with cosmic forces, making viewers active participants in its animation.

The choice of torch-painted copper for the leaves proves particularly significant when considered against historical *Tree of Life* traditions. The variable patinas created through torch-painting echo the metallurgical symbolism found in Persian and Islamic traditions, where precious metals often represented divine radiance. However, Schmidt's use of modern torch-painting techniques

introduces an element of controlled randomness that speaks to contemporary ideas about artistic process and material transformation.

Schmidt's kinetic elements engage not only with the cosmic motion of mythological world trees like *Yggdrasil*, but also with ancient astronomical traditions that saw sacred trees as celestial markers. In Mesopotamian astronomy, the Date-Palm Panicle constellation served as a cosmic reference point, linking terrestrial fertility with celestial order (cf. van Bakel; Xing). Schmidt's moving copper leaves transform this ancient fusion of earthly and celestial motion into a dynamic expression of creative force.

Structural Integration and Sacred Space

Schmidt's construction of the tree's trunk from tooled leather represents a sophisticated engagement with ancient traditions of sacred trees as cosmic pillars. The *Assyrian Sacred Tree*, which served as a locus for divine fertilization rituals, was often depicted with an intricately textured trunk suggesting both organic vitality and architectural permanence. Schmidt achieves a similar duality through her leather-working technique—the material's organic properties and tooled texture create a tangible connection to natural growth while maintaining the formal dignity associated with sacred trees in royal iconography.

The technical process of leather tooling itself resonates with ancient practices of sacred tree veneration. Just as Mesopotamian priests would carefully tend to sacred trees, marking their bark with ritual incisions and precious inlays, Schmidt's methodical working of the leather creates a surface that records both artistic intention and material response. The resulting texture recalls the bark patterns of the Egyptian *Ished Tree*, where divine names were inscribed to ensure eternal legitimacy. However, where Egyptian tradition saw the tree as a passive receiver of divine inscription, Schmidt's tooled surface suggests active growth and transformation—each mark and fold in the leather contributing to an organic structure that seems to emerge from within rather than being imposed from without.

Figure and Environment

Schmidt's rendering of Venus in soft pastel represents a technical choice deeply rooted in ancient traditions of divine-tree fusion. The Mycenaean gold pin from the Shaft Graves at Mycenae (c. 1600 BC) shows a female figure whose head dissolves into flowering branches, representing what Kourou identifies as "the personification of the sacred tree" (2001, 34). Schmidt's use of soft pastel—a medium known for its ability to create subtle transitions and blended boundaries—transforms this ancient static fusion into a dynamic process. Where the Mycenaean artist used solid gold to represent an achieved state of goddess-tree unity, Schmidt's pastel technique captures the moment of transformation itself, creating areas where Venus's form simultaneously emerges from and dissolves into the tree's structure.

This technical approach particularly resonates with the Hurrian tradition, where sacred trees were depicted as sites of divine manifestation rather than mere symbols. The malleable nature of pastel, its ability to be both precisely drawn and atmospherically blended, allows Schmidt to suggest multiple states of being simultaneously. Just as Hurrian relief carvings showed divine figures emerging from sacred trees through careful gradations of depth, Schmidt's pastel technique creates subtle transitions between figure and ground that suggest ongoing transformation rather than completed metamorphosis.

The placement of Venus within the tooled leather trunk further engages with Egyptian traditions of tree goddesses. In Egyptian iconography, Hathor and Nut were often depicted emerging from sacred sycamores, their bodies partially obscured by the tree's form. Schmidt's technical innovation lies in making this emergence ambiguous—the pastel rendering of Venus, contained within but distinct from the leather trunk, suggests both protection and transformation. The contrast between the soft, powdery pastel and the firm, tooled leather creates a material tension that embodies the dynamic relationship between divine presence and natural form found in ancient traditions.

Material Synthesis and Transformation

The work's sophisticated synthesis of materials—from two-dimensional pastel and acrylic paint to three-dimensional leather and copper—transforms the traditional *Tree of Life's* role as mediator between divine and earthly realms into a physical reality. This technical approach directly engages with ancient Near Eastern traditions where sacred trees were depicted through multiple materials and techniques. Assyrian palace reliefs, for instance, combined carved stone with precious metal inlays to suggest divine radiance. Schmidt's layering of materials achieves a similar effect through contemporary means—each medium contributes to a graduated transition from representation to reality that mirrors the tree's traditional mediating function.

The interplay between materials creates what ancient Sumerian texts described as *me-lám* (divine radiance) through modern means. This material dialogue manifests the Platonic interplay between idea and form, where creative νοῦς [intellect] does not merely reflect a pre-existing order but actively shapes raw potential into structured reality. Just as Plato's Demiurge in the *Timaeus* imposes organization upon chaotic matter, Schmidt's synthesis of materials transforms static elements—copper, pastel, and leather—into a dynamic structure of metamorphosis and creative generation.

While this synthesis of materials creates a physical manifestation of transformation, one element in particular crystallizes these themes and merits closer examination.

The Metamorphic Moth: Transformation and Mediation

The inclusion of a polymer clay moth transforms ancient traditions of sacred tree inhabitants into a contemporary meditation on artistic metamorphosis. In Norse mythology, various beings inhabited *Yggdrasil*—the eagle Hræsvelgr, the serpent Níðhöggr, and the messenger squirrel

Ratatoskr. Similarly, the Sumerian Huluppu Tree hosted three beings: a serpent, a bird, and the dark maid Lilith. Schmidt's moth, crafted from polymer clay, engages with these traditions while transforming their meaning.

The choice of polymer clay for the moth is particularly significant when viewed against historical traditions. Like the ancient process of lost-wax casting used in creating sacred objects, polymer clay undergoes irreversible transformation through heat. This technical parallel suggests deeper connections between ancient and contemporary approaches to material transformation as a vehicle for meaning. The moth's anthropomorphized features, carefully modeled in the clay, recall the hybrid beings that often attended sacred trees in Mesopotamian art, while its permanent material state contrasts with the kinetic copper leaves, creating a dynamic tension between stability and change that mirrors ancient cosmic dramas.

The moth's presence evokes multiple metamorphoses from classical tradition. Most directly, it recalls Ovid's account of Daphne's transformation into the laurel (*Metamorphoses* 1.548-567), where the tree becomes both refuge and prison. Similarly, the tale of Philemon and Baucis (*Metamorphoses* 8.611-724) presents tree transformation as a reward for devotion, their intertwining branches symbolizing eternal unity. The Heliades' transformation into poplars (*Metamorphoses* 2.340-366) connects tree metamorphosis with grief and artistic creation, as their amber tears become objects of beauty. Most pertinently, Myrrha's transformation into the myrrh tree (*Metamorphoses* 10.298-502) presents arboreal metamorphosis as both punishment and salvation, resulting in creative generation through the birth of Adonis.



Figure 19 – Enlargement of the polymer moth from Schmidt's *The Insemination of Venus*. Symbolic Mediator, Messenger or Witness? Which role or roles predominate?

The moth's role gains deeper significance when viewed through the lens of Plato's *Timaeus*. If Schmidt's tree functions as a Demiurgic force - actively organizing and transforming creative potential - then the moth serves as messenger and witness to this process, much as νοῦς (intellect) mediates between chaos and order in Plato's cosmology. The moth's material permanence in polymer clay, juxtaposed with its symbolic association with transformation, creates a physical manifestation of this mediating role. Like the Demiurge's imposition of form upon chaos, the moth embodies the moment where creative potential crystallizes into artistic reality. This reading elevates the moth from decorative element to essential participant in the work's transformation of the *Tree of Life* motif from passive conduit to active creative force.

Schmidt's choice of polymer clay for the moth is particularly significant - a modern material that, like Venus herself, undergoes transformation through artistic intervention. The moth's material

permanence in polymer clay, contrasted with its symbolic ephemerality, mirrors Venus's own state of perpetual becoming within the tree's embrace. Its presence suggests that the creative process, like metamorphosis, requires both protection and exposure, both stability and change.

The moth thus functions not merely as decorative element but as a key symbolic mediator, embodying the transformative power that the *Tree of Life* traditionally channels. Its placement within the work creates a visual dialogue between classical transformation narratives and contemporary artistic process, suggesting that creative metamorphosis remains a vital force in modern artistic practice. Additionally, the moth's presence, whether consciously chosen or intuitively placed, connects to deep-rooted patterns of transformation in *Tree of Life* imagery across cultures.

Having examined both the historical traditions and Schmidt's technical innovations, we can now synthesize these perspectives to understand how *The Insemination of Venus* transforms the *Tree of Life* motif. The work's material and symbolic elements do not simply coexist but actively inform each other, creating a dialogue between ancient symbolism and contemporary artistic practice that reconfigures our understanding of this enduring pattern.

The Creative Access: The Tree of Life Reimagined

The Insemination of Venus engages with the historical traditions of the *Tree of Life* through specific formal, material, and symbolic choices that both reference and transform this ancient motif. By examining these elements in relation to their historical precedents, we can discern how Schmidt has created a distinctive contemporary interpretation that extends beyond visual homage.

Form and Structure: Reconfiguring Traditional Patterns

The structural organization of *The Insemination of Venus* creates a visual dialogue with historical *Tree of Life* representations while introducing crucial modifications. Traditional depictions—from Assyrian palace reliefs to medieval manuscript illuminations—typically present the tree as a symmetrical, externally-accessed structure with clear hierarchical organization. Schmidt's composition deliberately disrupts these formal conventions through several key innovations.

Most significantly, Schmidt places Venus within the tree's trunk rather than beside or beneath it. This spatial rearrangement transforms the traditional relationship between divine figure and arboreal structure. In Assyrian reliefs from Nimrud, divine figures stand outside the sacred tree, applying fertilizing elements to its exterior. Similarly, in Egyptian depictions, Pharaohs kneel beneath the *Ished Tree* while Thoth inscribes their names upon its leaves. Even in Mycenaean art, where the fusion between deity and tree reached its most intimate expression, the goddess typically stands beside or under the tree rather than within it.

By embedding Venus within the hollow center of the tooled leather trunk, Schmidt creates a visual ambiguity absent from historical precedents. This positioning makes it unclear whether Venus is emerging from or dissolving into the tree, suggesting transformation rather than static presence. The asymmetrical composition, with the moon positioned in the upper left corner and the humanoid moth on a branch near the trunk, further disrupts the rigid symmetry typical of ancient *Tree of Life* imagery, particularly evident in Persian and Islamic traditions.

This structural reconfiguration engages directly with the Mycenaean gold pin that shows a female figure with flowering branches emerging from her head. However, where the Mycenaean piece presents goddess-tree fusion as an achieved state—a fixed iconic representation—Schmidt captures the moment of metamorphosis itself, emphasizing process over completion.

Material Innovations: From Symbol to Experience

Schmidt's selection and treatment of materials transforms the *Tree of Life* from symbolic representation to experiential reality. The kinetic copper leaves, responding to actual air currents, represent a significant technical innovation that converts traditional metaphors of divine breath into physical movement. In Norse mythology, *Yggdrasil's* leaves shuddered with prophetic significance as the eagle Hræsvelgr created the world's winds from its crown. Similarly, Mesopotamian traditions depicted divine figures directing sacred winds toward the *Tree of Life*. Schmidt makes this metaphorical movement literal through leaves that actually respond to environmental forces.

The torch-painted copper creates variable patinas that change with lighting conditions, echoing but transforming the metallurgical symbolism of historical *Tree of Life* representations. In Assyrian palaces, sacred trees were adorned with precious metals to reflect divine light in a fixed manner. Schmidt's torch-painted copper creates dynamic, shifting reflections that suggest continuous revelation rather than fixed divine presence.

The tooled leather trunk represents another material innovation with symbolic implications. Traditional *Tree of Life* depictions—whether in stone reliefs, metalwork, or manuscript illuminations—present the tree's trunk as a solid, impenetrable structure. Schmidt's tooled leather creates a malleable, organic texture that suggests growth and adaptability rather than permanent stability. This material choice aligns with but transforms the Egyptian tradition, where the texture of the sacred sycamore's bark symbolized the permanence of royal inscription. In Schmidt's work, the leather's texture suggests not permanence but organic evolution.

These material choices collectively transform the viewer's relationship to the *Tree of Life*. Where historical representations positioned viewers as external observers of divine presence, Schmidt's kinetic elements and textural surfaces create a participatory experience. The viewer becomes aware of their own physical presence through the movement of the copper leaves in response to air currents, including those created by the viewer's own body. This shift from symbolic representation to embodied experience marks a significant departure from historical *Tree of Life* traditions.

Symbolic Transformations: Reimagining Ancient Motifs

Schmidt's work engages with specific symbolic elements from *Tree of Life* traditions while reimagining their significance. The anthropomorphized moth, crafted from polymer clay and positioned on a branch, transforms the traditional motif of sacred tree inhabitants. In Mesopotamian traditions, particularly the *Huluppu Tree* episode in Gilgamesh, the sacred tree housed three beings: a serpent at its base, a bird in its crown, and the dark maid Lilith in its trunk. Norse mythology populated *Yggdrasil* with the eagle Hræsvelgr, the serpent Níðhöggr, and the messenger squirrel Ratatoskr. These inhabitants represented cosmic forces external to human experience, embodying natural cycles and elemental powers.

Schmidt's moth, bearing an uncannily human face, transforms this tradition by suggesting conscious observation rather than instinctual habitation. Unlike the cosmic animal forces of ancient tree symbolism, the anthropomorphized moth suggests a witnessing presence, introducing an element of reflective consciousness absent from historical precedents. This transformation of the tree inhabitant from natural force to conscious observer suggests a shift in the tree's symbolic function from cosmic structure to site of aesthetic contemplation.

The placement of Venus within the tree represents another significant symbolic transformation. In classical tradition, Venus typically emerges from the sea rather than from vegetation, as in Botticelli's famous depiction. By positioning Venus within an arboreal structure, Schmidt creates a visual parallel with traditions of tree-nymphs (dryads) and metamorphosis narratives from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The most relevant of these is the tale of Myrrha, who, after an incestuous relationship with her father, was transformed into the myrrh tree, from which her son Adonis was later born. This double transformation—human to tree, then tree generating new human life—provides a classical precedent for Schmidt's fusion of Venus with the tree structure.

However, Schmidt's Venus undergoes a different kind of transformation than these classical precedents. Where Daphne's metamorphosis into the laurel represented an escape from divine pursuit, and Myrrha's transformation served as both punishment and salvation, Venus's integration with the tree suggests neither flight nor retribution but creative synthesis. The ambiguity of whether she is emerging from or dissolving into the tree structure suggests transformation as a positive creative force rather than a response to trauma or divine intervention.

The nocturnal setting, with its full moon and deep blue-black sky, engages with astronomical aspects of *Tree of Life* symbolism. Philo of Alexandria interpreted the Menorah's seven branches as representing the planetary system, with its central lamp symbolizing the sun's illumination of the planets. Islamic traditions associated the *Tree of Life* with celestial order and divine perfection. Schmidt's nocturnal landscape, with its prominent moon, transforms these astronomical associations from representations of cosmic order to suggestions of imaginative potential. The night sky becomes not a symbol of divine perfection but a space of creative possibility, mirroring the ambiguous, transformative state of Venus within the tree.

Technical Integration: Unifying Disparate Traditions

Schmidt's technical approach creates unexpected connections between historically separate *Tree of Life* traditions. The integration of copper, leather, pastel, and polymer clay brings together material elements that echo different cultural interpretations of the sacred tree. The copper leaves evoke the metallurgical traditions of Near Eastern and Persian sacred trees, where precious metals represented divine radiance. The tooled leather trunk suggests the organic vitality of Greek and Celtic tree cults, where the living tree itself embodied divine presence. The pastel rendering of Venus references the Renaissance tradition of ideal beauty, while the polymer clay moth introduces a contemporary material that has no historical precedent in sacred tree imagery.

This technical synthesis creates visual and conceptual bridges between traditions that historically remained distinct. Where ancient cultures developed their *Tree of Life* imagery in relative isolation—Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Norse, and Greek traditions evolving along separate paths—Schmidt's work creates a syncretic vision that suggests underlying connections between these diverse interpretations. This technical integration operates not as appropriation but as recognition of the motif's persistent archetypal power across cultural boundaries.

The comprehensive nature of this technical synthesis distinguishes Schmidt's work from previous artistic engagements with the *Tree of Life*. Renaissance and medieval artists typically referenced specific traditions—the *Jesse Tree* in Christian iconography, or classical metamorphosis narratives in secular work. Modern interpretations often reduced the tree to decorative pattern or simplified symbol. Schmidt's integration of multiple technical approaches creates a complex material presence that respects the motif's rich historical significance while creating new possibilities for its contemporary relevance.

Toward a New Understanding

Through these formal, material, symbolic, and technical innovations, *The Insemination of Venus* positions the *Tree of Life* not as a fixed historical symbol but as an evolving framework for understanding transformation itself. Schmidt's engagement with this ancient motif goes beyond citation or homage to create a distinctive contemporary interpretation that responds to our changed relationship with creative and natural forces.

The work's title itself suggests this transformative approach. While "insemination" traditionally implies fertilization from an external source, Schmidt's visual presentation suggests a more complex process where transformation emerges from within the tree's own structure. This apparent contradiction between title and visual representation creates a productive tension that invites viewers to reconsider traditional understandings of creative genesis.

Through these formal, material, symbolic, and technical innovations, *The Insemination of Venus* positions the *Tree of Life* not as a fixed historical symbol but as an evolving framework for understanding transformation itself. This reimagining invites us to consider the broader

implications for how we understand our relationship to creative power and the enduring significance of ancient motifs in contemporary consciousness.

Conclusion (An Interpretation)

The *Tree of Life* motif, spanning ancient to modern artistic traditions, has served as humanity's central framework for understanding our relationship to creative and transformative power. Through careful analysis of its evolution across cultures and time, we recognize in Schmidt's *The Insemination of Venus* not merely another iteration but a fundamental transformation of this ancient symbol.

Where traditional *Trees of Life* functioned as passive conduits of divine energy, Schmidt's tree becomes an active agent of creative transformation. This shift manifests in multiple dimensions: from static representation to dynamic movement, from external ritual to internal generation, from divine bestowal to self-generating creativity.

This transformation reflects a larger awakening in human creative consciousness:

Once we trembled beneath sacred boughs,
Watching gods inscribe their will on leaves,
While divine winds shook celestial branches
And fate dripped like dew from heaven's eaves.

Now the tree grows from our own imagining,
Its copper leaves dance to earthly air,
Venus transforms not by divine decree
But through the power we ourselves dare.

Where once we sought the gods' creation,
Now we are the force that makes stars bloom.
The moth bears witness with human eyes:
We are become the cosmic loom.

No longer supplicants beneath holy trees,
We are the garden, we are the grove.
Where once we quaked beneath the heavens,
We are become the force that moves the heavens.

Schmidt's work thus completes a transformation in creative consciousness that began millennia ago with the first Mesopotamian sacred trees. Where those ancient symbols positioned humans as recipients of divine power channeled through cosmic vegetation, *The Insemination of Venus* reveals our emergence as generative forces in our own right. The insemination the title references is not divine fertilization of passive matter but imagination's capacity to continuously reimagine and regenerate itself.

The anthropomorphized moth, bearing witness with human eyes, stands as testament to this profound shift. We have moved from observers of divine creation to conscious participants in creative becoming. The ancient pattern completes its evolution not through rejection of tradition but through its fundamental transformation—revealing that the creative power we once attributed to divine sources now manifests through our own imaginative force.

This transformation suggests that ancient motifs persist not as static symbols but as evolving frameworks that adapt to changing human consciousness. The *Tree of Life* endures precisely because it provides a structure malleable enough to accommodate radical reinterpretations while maintaining recognizable continuity with tradition. Schmidt's work demonstrates that such reinterpretations are not mere variations on established themes but vital reimaginings that reveal new dimensions of ancient patterns—suggesting that our relationship to archaic symbols remains dynamic, generative, and profoundly transformative.

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