

# Experiential Astrology: Bringing It Alive!

by Barbara Schermer

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*When I can't find words to express what I mean, I get up and dance it.*  
— Zorba the Greek (Nikos Kazantzakis)

In the beginning, astrology was *alive*. Our ancestors had a relationship to the natural world, and the contemplation of the heavens was a vital, primal communion that brought meaning to life.

Today in the West, we have an impoverished relationship to the heavens, weakened by a too-strict adherence to the Newtonian–Cartesian scientific worldview. We who have an interest in astrology have been carried along with the technological tides of our times, often to our benefit, with new methods of computation and research, but also to our detriment in that we have forgotten that our original encounter with the heavens was immediate, direct, and alive.

Experiential astrology seeks to remedy this by putting us back into direct contact with our horoscopes. With means such as images, metaphor, story, myth, ritual, music, and dramatic and artistic expression, we can move into more direct contact with the planetary archetypes and, in so doing, rediscover the depths of ourselves. Astrology then becomes not just a tool for intellectualizing, but a way of self-knowledge and a means to vital, primal communion with that which is beyond.

Experiential astrology can be done in groups, but frequently, for many of us, getting together with others is not so easy. There are experiential techniques you can do yourself, which include artistic techniques such as making imageboards for the planets; creating an astrological mandala, a planetary mask, or a healing image of your chart; or more active techniques like dancing your planets.

## Using Imageboards to Explore Your Chart

Making personal imageboards of your own planets will give you a new tool for self-study, contemplation, and ritual. These colorful, symbolic picture displays can become a visual extension of your chart, giving you a means to arouse thoughts and feelings and deepen your inner process.

Begin by creating an imageboard for each of the ten planets in your horoscope. Cut appropriate pictures, words, or phrases from magazines, or draw or paint whatever evokes your planets, their signs, and house positions. For a conjunction of two or three planets, make an imageboard that blends all energies. I have one imageboard for my Sun–Uranus conjunction. It's yellow with a radiant sun, lightning bolts, and spiraling galaxies, images of computers, books, words, a television, used plane tickets, weird Aquarian-looking people, an office desk with the word “Serve” above it, a woman deep in thought, and the words, “Soothe your nervous system,” “Focus your energy,” “Breathe,” and “Learn to be patient.” I look at this whenever I need to remind myself of what my Sun–Uranus means to me.

Once you have made your planetary imageboards, find an open space and place them around you on the floor in the order they appear in your chart. Sit in the center (Ascendant/Descendant and MC/IC axes) and face your Midheaven (MC). Now, take up each imageboard, moving around the circle from planet to planet. Are there any that you're feeling out of touch with now? Which of them feel less accessible? What planets being activated by transits or progressions are affecting your current life circumstances? What planetary energies give you problems right now? Which ones help out? What effects have you been noticing ... or ignoring? How are you feeling about them?

First, focus on the planets that are your greatest strengths. Use a piece of paper and a crayon or marker to draw what these current strengths look and feel like. Talk with these planets. What do you have to say to each of them? What do they have to say to you? How can they come forward and help you to achieve the balance you're seeking?

Now, focus your attention on a current problem and note any planets affecting you in a disruptive way. Take out a piece of paper and draw what the problem looks and feels like. If it's a transit of Saturn conjunct your natal Mercury, put those two imageboards directly in front of you. Imagine that a specific archetypal image is standing behind each imageboard. For example, Mercury might be Hermes the messenger, and Saturn might be Father Time, Chronos, or a wise old crone.

Try speaking with these images, allowing yourself to give your own inner archetypes a voice. What do you have

to say to Saturn? to Mercury? What does Mercury have to say to Saturn? What do they have to say to you? Ask each what he or she can do to help you feel more balanced. How would these two planets affect each other if they were in trine instead? In what ways can you act as if your difficult conjunction were a trine? Reaffirm your control with the planets that are now your strengths.

Acknowledge each planet you have interacted with, giving thanks for what they've shown you. Treat them as you would any valued relationship. This may seem like a silly exercise, but experience will prove that it isn't. It is a good way to establish a more conscious relationship with your inner voices.

The only limits to the power of astrological archetypes are those imposed by the consciousness using them. Each astrological symbol is a living organic entity within you that is bottomless. By consciously entering into this life-enriching symbol and its mystery, you are interacting, expanding, and deepening your relationship with it. You no longer live out its energy in an unconscious and perhaps compulsive way.

If you're having trouble getting a planet to talk with you, this planetary energy is probably the one you are most suppressing from your awareness. If you feel anger or discomfort toward any of them, this, too, may signal conscious or unconscious suppression. To return to a sense of wholeness, these planets may be the most crucial ones to learn to relate to.

## **Your Horoscope as an Artistic Mandala**

The mandala is a universal expression of wholeness that arises from the integration of the human psyche. Natural mandalas appear around us in the forms of snowflakes, spiraling galaxies, tree rings, and the annual unfolding of the seasons. In their book, *Mandala*, Jose and Miriam Arguelles speak of the Earth itself as a living mandala, "... a structural matrix through and from which flow a succession of changes, elemental forms, and primal surges, each surpassing the other in an infinite variety of organic structures and impulses,

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crowned by the supreme attribute of reflective consciousness."<sup>1</sup>

Since time immemorial, the mandala has been depicted as a circle with a centerpoint. The horoscope, a circle with a centerpoint, is your personal mandala and can be a living and vibrant tool for contemplation. Symbolically, the centerpoint is the point of intersection through which all life flows. Maintaining contact with the center helps us to keep our psychic equilibrium.

To make your birth mandala, you'll need a large poster board (30" x 40"), a pencil, felt-tip markers, colored construction paper, magazines, perhaps photos of yourself and of people important to you, and a glue-stick. To set the mood, you might want to play some soft, meditative music. Then, clear your workspace of distractions and place your poster board in front of you. Now, use your pencil to draw a circle two feet in diameter. This gives you the basic form you'll need to make your mandala.

Next, focus your attention on the centerpoint and become aware that this is the focal node through which your life force comes. It is the vital living part of you that moves out in ever-widening waves toward the perimeter of the chart. Meditate on this point. Take your time. The more fully you enter into the creative process of the mandala, the more deeply you will enter your chart. Imagine yourself spiraling down into this point. What do you see emerging there? A rose, a star, a black hole, a being of light, a yantra, a word? In your mind's eye, see the center of your mandala. Merge with your image, pick up your marker, and create it fully.

Become aware of the planetary forces on the periphery of your attention. Which planet do you most notice? Focus your attention on it. What colors, words, phrases, and images come to mind? If your Moon is in Virgo, you might begin by coloring the house it sits in green. You might draw a large moon and include a photo of a mother and children, or anything that seems to evoke this planetary energy. When you finish, turn your attention to another planet that calls you until you've represented each planet in the horoscope. Don't think too much about what you're doing. Add whatever feels spontaneous and right. Put your mandala in a visible place and contemplate what you have drawn. Perhaps you can ask friends for feedback. What do they see in your mandala? This contemplative, artistic process will elucidate the current workings of your psyche.

Try drawing a birth mandala each year near or on your birthday. You will concretely observe your psyche unfolding as it changes through time. It will reveal much to you about the feeling, depth, and direction of your inner process from year to year.

## **Making Masks to Experience Your Chart**

Mask-making can be a fun way to experience your chart in three dimensions. Alone or with a group, masks move you into more intimate contact with the pure planetary archetypes. Mercury in Gemini might wear a fluorescent yellow mask with pipe-cleaner antennae. Scattered across the mask's surface are words and phrases: Study, Learn, Write, Teach, Speak, Move, Travel, Do, "Give me more data," "I love to learn," "When do we go?" And pictures — of books, libraries, universities, bicycles, planes, trains, telephones. Masks like this create a more open channel between astrological archetypes and the psyche. Using them as a kind of shield of invisibility, we can suddenly be free to express ourselves without fear of judgment by others.

To make your planetary mask, you'll need these supplies: a handkerchief or barrette to tie back your hair, Vaseline (petroleum jelly), scissors, a

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bowl of warm water, tissues, towels to protect your clothing, paints, fabric, ribbons, glitter, etc., to decorate your mask, and a roll of plaster gauze (one standard roll will make two masks). This kind of gauze is available at any medical supply store. You'll also need a partner to mold the gauze strips to your face.

First, cut about 20 strips of gauze, two inches wide and about four inches long. You'll also want to cut some smaller strips to work into smaller areas and fill in the gaps. Next, tie back your hair with the handkerchief and apply the petroleum jelly to your entire face, except the eyes and nostrils. Be sure to cover your eyebrows well. (You men with beards will want to coat them generously, or else your beard will end up in the mask instead of on your face.)

Decide what planet mask you're making, and turn on some appropriate music. Then, lie back with your head on a towel, get comfortable, and focus on your breathing. Have your partner cover your eyes, nose, and lips with small damp pieces of tissue. Now you are ready for the first layer of gauze. If you have not done this before, remember to keep your face relaxed and neutral. Focus on the nature of the planet you are creating. Breathe. Have your partner dip the plaster gauze strips into a bowl of water and apply them to your face, making sure to smooth them down with the fingers. Your partner should cover your entire face three times, using the smaller strips to mold around your eyes,

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mouth, and nose. Place the second layer of gauze perpendicular to the first. Then, allow the mask to dry for approximately 10 minutes. (If it's a humid, rainy day, you'll need to allow more time.) When the plaster has set, pull the mask away from your face gently. As soon as it's fully dry, you can bring your mask to life with paint and other materials. Variation: If you want your facial expression to be mirrored in your mask (for example, an angry Mars), make the most exaggerated expression you can. You'll need to sustain it until the mask has set, up to 10 minutes, so be prepared. These masks are usually more interesting but take more effort.

### Creating a Healing Image for Inner Balance

Another visual approach that you might try is to create a healing image of your chart. A Pisces physician who had just completed her first Saturn return also had transiting Pluto in Scorpio trine her Venus-Mercury in Pisces. She drew the symbols of Pisces and Pluto at the top of her paper, with golden rays pouring down into four fetuses. She said that one fetus represented her new 30-year

Saturn cycle, and the other embryos were her patients whom she wanted to touch with her healing Pluto energy.

Another woman in the midst of Pluto in Scorpio opposite her Moon in Taurus drew an elaborate, green, penetrating spiral that represented her moving into her depths, her contact with her feminine, whose center became an eye, the "eye of her soul."

To make a healing image, use the same art supplies that you used for your birth mandala. Begin with some soft, meditative music. Then place a piece of poster board, about two feet square, in front of you. Close your eyes and spend a few minutes focusing on your breathing. When you feel relaxed, open your eyes and imagine your chart transposed upon the blank poster board. Look for a healing image to emerge that represents your chart/life at this moment. When you begin to see it, let it flow through your paintbrush or markers onto the poster board. Keep in touch with its healing, integrating quality as you draw.

### Active Techniques

Experiential astrology uses not only the visual arts (Venus-Sun) to experience the horoscope, but also the more active form, astrodrama. A central principle underlying the holistic therapies is that all our thoughts and emotions are inextricably interwoven with physical movement. Eastern philosophies have included active practices like yoga, karate, and sacred dance for thousands of years. When Western thought finally began to break with Descartes' dualism, it also affirmed the unity of mind and body. Psychological theorist Wilhelm Reich hypothesized that memories and



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emotions are stored in the muscles as well as the brain.<sup>2</sup> Biochemist and body therapist Ida Rolf found that pressure on particular muscles evoked memories, sensations, and emotions.<sup>3</sup> More recent research supporting the idea of a mind-body wholeness has evolved into the field of biofeedback.<sup>4</sup>

If we are to fully realize astrology's potential, we need to use our bodies to learn about our psyches, so let's get right to it. Try this: Turn on some lively, pleasant music that is easy to move to. Stand up and slowly begin to move to the music. Dance. Turn. Bend. How does Venus move? Be Venus.

Now, play more aggressive Martian music. Feel Mars in your body. Respond to it by dancing energetically. Be Mars. Shake yourself up. Get your heart pounding. Get moving! Then, turn on some ethereal Neptunian music. Settle into its rhythms, returning to slow, flowing movements. Do you feel how Venus and Neptune are similar? Both are flowing, easy, soft energy. Can you see why astrologers call Neptune the "higher octave" of Venus?

Now that you've got your body up and moving, take out your natal chart and put it in front of you. Choose one of your planets to express. Is it your Mars in Gemini? Moon in Pisces? Venus in Leo? Go through your music collection and find something that captures the feeling of the planet. Play a selection for your Mars in Gemini. How does it aspect the other planets? How would contact with them affect Mars' movement? If there's a trine from Jupiter, your movements may become grander, more expansive, more sweeping. Is Mars square your Saturn? That might limit your movement or cause it to be more staccato and jerky.

With a little research, you can gather your own collection of planetary music. Then, when you are feeling the frustration of a transiting Saturn conjunct your Mars, you can put on Mars-Saturn music, dance it out, and release the blocked energy. Whenever I feel the effect of the scattered, nervous energy of my Sun-Uranus conjunction in Gemini, I turn on "Dynamic Meditation" music from the Shree Rajneesh ashram. Its insistent, driving rhythms get me moving and shaking my body, discharging

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the excess mental buildup. I always feel relieved and more centered afterward. If I am feeling a little blue and "Saturnized," I'll turn on "Fanfare for the Common Man," by Aaron Copland, and dance with big sweeping movements to counter Saturn with Jupiter.

Try these dance forms for your planets in their signs:

**Aries:** direct, definite, hard-pounding, forward movement.

**Taurus:** rooted to one place on the Earth and crouched low. Move slowly, methodically, lazily.

**Gemini:** quick, butterfly movements, lightly touching here, there, everywhere. Use your arms, hands, facial expressions.

**Cancer:** rhythmic swaying, rocking, curling over into a fetal position or on the floor feeling like a small child.

**Leo:** grand, dramatic gestures, regal bearing and movement.

**Virgo:** meticulous attention to your small movements.

**Libra:** movements of balance and grace.

**Scorpio:** hips and pelvis gliding in slow, sensual circles, moving your hands over your body sensuously.

**Sagittarius:** movements that direct the body upward, stretching up, climbing higher.

**Capricorn:** concise, authoritative, sure, efficient, grounded movement.

**Aquarius:** jerky, unpredictable movements. Try making your body mirror the numbers 1 through 10.

**Pisces:** flowing, willowy, tumbleweed movement.

If you love to dance and be physical, turn on some rhythmic, flowing Venusian music and move from planet to planet, dancing out your horoscope. Try this at least once. It will make you more conscious of the different types of energy within you.

Each of these techniques will give you a direct experience of your horoscope and introduce you to experiential astrology. As more of us get tired of the "you sit and listen to me stand and teach" models, we will all begin to recreate an astrology that is immediate, direct, and alive. This style of learning seems especially helpful to students in the Pluto in Libra and Pluto in Scorpio generations. I invite you to join the fun!

## References

1. Jose and Miriam Arguelles, *Mandala*, Shambhala, 1972, p. 12.
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3. Ida P. Rolf, *Rolfing*, Harper & Row, 1977.
4. Barbara Brown, *New Mind, New Body*, Harper & Row, 1975.

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