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# The Symbol of the Bull as an Art Form

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THE SYMBOL OF THE BULL

AS AN ART FORM  
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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, the subject of the bull in painting has been primarily an expression of man's emotions. It is quite evident that many paintings represent feelings that man has towards his environment rather than towards the animal itself. A natural depiction of the bull would express strength, fierceness, fearlessness, and virility, or possibly some variations of these characteristics. However, in some cases, the bull has been used as a motif or a means to express something other than the bull itself. Man has added his own emotions to those of the bull symbol. A bull might represent any human emotion, all human emotions, or any combination of human emotions. The feelings contained in one single work might possibly be as complex as the life of the painter.

The earliest known paintings of bulls or bison were done by cavemen as rituals with the intention that the painting would insure their success in the hunt and would also protect them from the brute strength of the animals. It was, in fact, an expression of their desires and was not done merely for the purpose of re-creating the image of the bull.

For many centuries, in the ancient Near East, the bull was worshipped as an authoritative god who controlled some aspect of nature. The bull was god of fertility, god of the sun, god of thunder, god of strength, the overpowering god who controlled the universe - the answer to all mysteries. By the artist's sacred depiction of the bull, the gods were pleased and thus bestowed good fortune upon the people. This type of painting contained far more emotions than were present in the actual bull. In so doing, these cultures humanized the character of the bull.

In the modern Western civilization, the bull is neither sacred nor is it as important as a direct source of life - but the bull image is still present in many art forms. Even though man's relationship with the animal has changed, he still uses the form to express his feelings towards his environment.



## CHAPTER I

In the earliest history of the cave man, man depended upon the wild animal for nearly all his necessities of life. The only occupation of the male was that of learning the habits of wild animals and how to hunt them. Man was thus enabled to devote endless hours in preparation for the hunt. His life was entirely centered around the activities of these animals.

One beast which was hunted extensively was the "aurochs", which is described as being a "huge savage creature with shaggy hair and long, curving horns."<sup>1</sup> This particular animal is known as a herding animal. A herd would consist of a bull and his possession of cows and calves. In the hunt, man first had to contend with this wild bull. Thus, the struggle with the bull was, at first, literally a struggle with life itself and it was quite often that the brawn of the bull triumphed over man's intellect.

It was through necessity that art entered into the life of the cave man. It became a weapon of great strength to be used against the bull. The earliest cave paintings were magical rituals which protected the hunter from the strength

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<sup>1</sup>Jack R. Conrad, The Horn And The Sword, (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1957), p. 14.

of the bull and which also insured the success of the hunter in conquering the bull. The paintings were an expression of man's desire for self-preservation. It protected him from both danger and starvation. The subject matter very often showed the conquered animal, pierced with spears and darts. By recreating the image of the bull, the cave man believed that he had gained control of the animal. This art was found most commonly on the walls and ceilings of caves in southern Europe. The location of these caves was separated from the place of habitation of the cave man. Many of the paintings were found deep within the caverns, in places far removed from the normal activities of the cave man. It is the opinion of some authorities that the reason for the remoteness of some of these ritual locations is that the primitive man was so superstitious that he believed if his magical paintings were seen by the animals he hunted that the spell would be broken or even possibly reversed.

Another important aspect of the cave man's art is the role the sorcerer played. The sorcerer was a type of witch doctor who wore the head and skin of the bull, which he thought possessed the animal's power. In so doing, the sorcerer possessed the strength of the bull which, when combined with man's cunning, became an insurmountable force.

The sorcerer, who was half man and half animal, was quite often portrayed in the art of primitive man. The sorcerer, with the appearance of a bull, standing upright like a man, imitated a wounded and dying animal. He . . . "portrayed animals as he wished for them to be. The cave art and drama show a need for food, a wish for its easier attainment, and a magical attempt to coerce reality towards this end."<sup>2</sup>

One characteristic of the art of the paleolithic man was that the forms he used were abstract. Very often he would use the natural shapes on the rocky walls and construct an animal with only a few linear definitions. It was quite often that the cave painter sacrificed the natural form of the animal for a more explicit expressive thought.

The outstanding expression of artistic strength appears in the curled-up figures of recumbent bison - neither falling nor dead, but perhaps giving birth - whose forms are determined entirely by protuberant rock shapes. These are evidence of the Magdalenian artist to recognize life slumbering in chance outcrops of rock and to give it form. To our eyes the unpainted protuberances are simply formless knobs of rock. Magdalenian men perceived them differently. At this time, when their artistic powers were at their height, they achieved an individual unity in their imaginative approach to forms existing in nature, sculpture, engraving, line drawing, and color.<sup>3</sup>

Some forms, which were a complete withdrawal from nature, and were only understood by a particular cult, were the most

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<sup>2</sup>Jack R. Conrad, The Horn And The Sword (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1957), P. 23.

<sup>3</sup>S. Giedion, The Eternal Present, Vol. I: The Beginnings of Art (New York: Bollingen Foundations, 1962), P. 427.

powerful in their magical symbolism. Some of the forms reached pure abstraction. Contrasting this, many of the cave paintings of bison were extremely naturalistic. The same contrasting styles also exist today, so it would seem that it is a matter involving differences in personal feelings that account for these contrasting characteristics rather than differences on a larger scale such as cultures and centuries.

The hunting culture of the cave man endured for thousands of years. The relationship between man and beast was not too unlike the relationship which developed between other animals of different species and yet art still existed in its purest form. The esthetic qualities in these primitive works and the expressions rendered by the artists are considered to be exquisite in our sophisticated Twentieth Century.

The end of this hunting culture was the result of a great climatic change. With the passing of the last great glacier, the pastures of southern Europe developed into huge forests. The herds of wild animals gradually disappeared. With the passing of the huge animal herds and the hunting culture, man learned to domesticate his own herds of cattle. This new age is known as the Neolithic Age or New Stone Age.

As the cattle culture grew, man began to see the importance of the bull in regard to the size and number of his cattle. Thus, the bull became a symbol of fertility.

A strong healthy bull represented wealth and a promising future to the Neolithic cattle raiser.

The significance of this period is that the bull had a new and different meaning to man. Although the mighty bull, in later years, was a symbol of many different ideas, the fertility aspect which developed in the Neolithic age remained dominant over all others.

The culture of the American Plains Indian was quite similar to the culture of the ancient cave man. The American bison, or buffalo, provided the Indian with the same necessities that the aurochs provided for the cave man.

Bison is derived from the French word "bouefs" meaning bulls. English speaking settlers corrupted it to buffle, buffer, and buffalo. It served as meat and succor for the pioneers - provided fuel (buffalo chips) where there were no trees. They led the way to obscure water holes, blazed the trails through the mountains, and clothed the pioneers with warm robes. One of the earliest drawings of the American bison appeared in *Historia General de las Indias* by the Spaniard, Lopez de Gomara, who depicted it as a strange shaggy beast.

The American Indian and the cave man were separated by thousands of years and miles, and yet the ritualistic practices of each culture concerning the bison were nearly the same. Each culture considered the bull a symbol of great



strength and fertility. The Plains Indian and the cave man hunted and respected this great wild animal. Through similar ritualistic dances and paintings these cultures believed they could control the outcome of the hunt. With their primitive weapons and their magic, these hunters faced the wild bull - sometimes killing the bull and sometimes being killed. For hundreds of years, the vast buffalo herds and the Indian tribes thrived on the American plains.

The Mandan Indians of the upper Missouri were noted for their rituals concerning the buffalo. The women participated in a society known as the White Buffalo Cow Society, as depicted by Charles Bodmer, in which they wear their huggar cape of white buffalo cow skin. Their ceremony, which was held in a manner similar to that of the men of the tribe, was to lure the buffalo to their vicinity by rocking back and forth to the accompaniment of a chanting chorus.

Much of the wild ritualistic fury of the Plains Indian is found in Bodmer's dramatic painting of the Mandan. The Bull Society Dance, practiced by the man in a frenzied ceremony, is held periodically to draw the elusive buffalo herds closer to the village. George Catlin also painted another version of the Bull Society Dance in 1832, depicting the scene with grandstand crowds watching the show from the rooftops of the Mandan village. There is also a legend of the Buffalo Spirit in which Wisaka was a manitou, or wizard,

of awesome power in the mythology of the Fox Indian. While very young, he was lost upon the prairie where a party of Sioux, enemy of the Fox, had approached and threatened him. Suddenly a herd of buffalo appeared and drove the Sioux away. He was thus blessed by the sacred white buffalo and, as Wisaka grew up, he gained the power to change from a brave to a white buffalo whenever he wished. One day the Sioux attacked his tribe, so Wisaka changed into a white buffalo and quickly destroyed the Sioux. A splendid painting of this scene was done by the contemporary artist, James Lewicki.

With the development of the American West, the vast buffalo herds quickly disappeared. The old Indian symbol of strength, courage, and fertility was replaced with the American idea of easy wampum. The romantic slaughter of the bison and his Western surroundings were popular subjects for many other American painters.

George Catlin was a renowned painter of Indians and bison, who spent much of his life in the West studying Indian cultures and their relationships with the buffalo. Catlin quite often depicted the great buffalo chase in which he illustrated the great speed and strength of the animal.

Charles Russell, the cowboy artist, painted the great buffalo chases. In 1890, he painted "Wild Meat for Wild Men", a canvas which illustrates the hunting techniques of the American Plains Indian. In another canvas, he painted a herd of buffaloes being driven over a cliff. In this canvas

the Indians are portrayed as being strong and courageous and the buffalo are depicted as being stupid and weak.

Albert Bierstadt painted the buffalo in all its glory. In his work, he shows the majestic buffalo in serene settings. Subtle colors and a slow moving rhythm illustrate the greatness and grandeur of this animal unmolested by man.

Alfred J. Miller, a native of Baltimore, was engaged as an artist to travel west with an expedition in 1837. He made close observations of the great American Bison and brought to us in his art their great strength and beauty of form as a symbol of the West.

John M. Stanley, another prominent painter of Indian life and the bison, was the staff artist for the United States Pacific Railroad Survey expedition. With this expedition, he traveled to Oregon and studied the bison and its importance as a factor in the settling of the West.

## CHAPTER II

The deification of the bull began in ancient Sumaria. The bull was first worshipped as a god of fertility. The oxen, a symbol of peace and good will in the later Christian religion, in early Sumaria, pulled the plow with ropes attached to its horns. By walking through the fields, the bull bestowed fertility into the ground. "Plowing helped the earth to receive this force."<sup>4</sup> The Sumarians called this bull-god "Enlil", whose spouse, Ninlil, was worshipped as the cow-goddess.

Gilgamesh was the early King of Aruk, the builder of many beautiful temples and palaces. He incurred the wrath of Istar (the goddess who lived in her earthly temple with her retinue of sacred harlots) when he refused her love. Istar ascended into the heavens to demand the death of Gilgamesh from her father, the God Anu, who in turn created a heavenly bull, powerful enough to overcome hundreds of men, and sent it to earth to punish Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh and his friend destroyed the bull and Gilgamesh had a vessel for the sacred anointing oils made from its horns, much to Ishtar's anger and disappointment.

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<sup>4</sup>Jack R. Conrad, The Horn and The Sword (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company., 1957), p. 28.

The Babylonians, as well as the Sumarians, considered the bull to be the most powerful source of life. The sun was worshipped as the "Bull of Light" in this culture. Marduk was the sun-god of Babylon. He was a bull-god, like Enlil, and was worshipped as supreme god over all land and water. There were many other bull-gods, as well as Marduk, in ancient Mesopotamia. From these very early deifications of the bull, the bull became a symbol of authority. The bull was looked upon by man as having power over all things. The bull, symbol of kingship and authority, was depicted in much of the art work of this era.

In the earliest of these ancient cultures, the bull was connected with royalty. The people of ancient Sumaria were among the first to be controlled by kings. These kings believed that the bull-gods were the source of their power. In battle, to protect them from all evil forces, the kings wore headdresses with horns. From this king-god relationship, the bulls were depicted with beards. With this newly acquired characteristic, paintings of the bull began to express human masculinity as well as strength and fertility. Many ancient man-bull statues were found in the region of Sumaria. This representation of man and bull combined differs from the earlier sorcerers in that it is a depiction of a powerful god whose forces are directed towards helping humans. From this close association of gods and kings, in ancient Sumaria, came the

name "Wild Bull", which referred to both the bull-gods and the kings. An excellent example of the human qualities that the Sumarians expressed in the bull form is a decoration on the front of a harp, found in the "Kings Grave" at Ur. This tortoise-shell inlay depicts the bull of heaven as a form with the body of a bull and horned face of a man. The divinity of the bull is expressed by the human-like hair and beard on the bull, which, in other cultures as well as Sumaria, was a symbol of royalty and was a quality possessed by all gods.

Another all-powerful bull-god was worshipped by the people of Anotolia and northern Syria. In this region the land is poor and when crops do grow, very often they are destroyed by either violent storms or droughts. So their god had to be violently strong in order to rule over the weather. The god was also quite unpredictable, in that he often allowed the crops to be destroyed and from the earliest of times was considered to be a wild bull.<sup>5</sup>

In the later Hittite religion, about 2000 B. C., the bull was worshipped as a weather-god. Statues of this god were placed high on a pedestal and were worshipped with the sacrificing of rams. The bull was worshipped by the Hittites at Carchemish as a supreme god of fertility. The Hittite

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<sup>5</sup> Jack R. Conrad, The Horn And The Sword (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company., 1957), p. 96.

rendering of the bull, in stone, at the Royal Palace in Carchemish is among the strongest of works in the ancient Near East. In this statue, the two stone bulls seem to represent all the force in the universe.

The Canonites worshipped Baal, the son of El. Baal possessed many powers. "He was lord of fertility, the impregnating force of the universe, the king, the father, the war leader, the guardian, the judge, the benevolent or wrathful patriarch. And, like El, his father, Baal was also a bull."<sup>6</sup>

The bull also played an important role in the early religion of the Hebrews. Jacob was referred to on many occasions as a bull, because of his great ruling strength. He was considered to be under the protection of the great bull-god. In all probability, many of the Hebrew tribes that went into Egypt acquired some of the beliefs of the Egyptians concerning the worship of the bull. The golden calf, built by Aaron at Mount Sinai, was probably a representation of the god which the Israelites believed had delivered them from the land of Egypt.<sup>7</sup> Yahweh was another god that was worshipped quite extensively by the Hebrews. "He was a god of storm and battle whose voice was like thunder."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>7</sup> Jack R. Conrad, The Horn And The Sword (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company., 1957), p. 107.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 106.

On the Island of Crete the bull was connected with the worship of the sun. At the place of Gortyna, the Cretians kept special herds of cattle which were sacred to the sun. In early Crete, as in other parts of the East, there existed a king-god-bull relationship. In the "Cretan solar-bull cult, . . . the bull worship of these people contained three major groups of ritualistic activities: fertility dances, bullfights, and bull sacrifice."<sup>9</sup>

Another quite different representation of the bull was given birth in ancient Greece. The Greeks considered the bull to be an animal of great nobility. Many Greek inscriptions have been found referring to the "Noble Bull". Many different bull-cults existed during the times of Classical Greece. Dionysus was worshipped as a god of life and fertility. His many titles include: Horned Child, the Horned Deity, Bull-horned, Bull-browed, Son of a Cow, and the Noble Bull."<sup>10</sup>

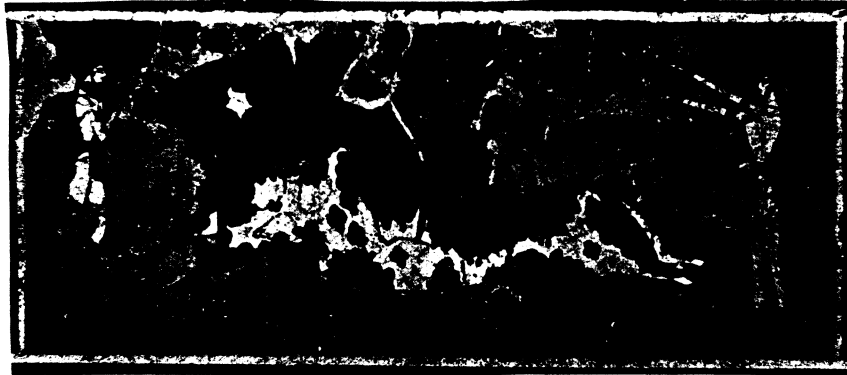
The Greeks introduced two new rituals in their worshipping of the Noble Bull. They believed that to drink large quantities of wine, was to receive the mystical powers of the gods. In so doing, the worshippers consumed, what they believed was, the actual substance of the bull-god. The phallic celebrations of the ancient Greeks comprised another aspect of their religion. Included in these celebrations were

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 116.

<sup>10</sup> Jack R. Conrad, The Horn And The Sword (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company., 1957), p. 131.





mountaintop orgies, which the Greeks believed were ordained by the sacred bull.

A great portion of Greek art is contained on ceramic ware in the form of vase painting. The bull was an important figure that appeared quite often in these beautiful paintings, which are considered to be among the finest works of this type ever created. A Greek sculpture of the horned Dionysus, god of wine and fertility, is a representation of a man of great strength and unlimited wisdom.

The bull figured quite prominently in Greek Mythology, either as an assumed guise of the Greek gods or as one of their humble servants. Examples of their presence were depicted on Greek vase paintings or by latter day artists inspired by the myths handed down through legend.

Zeus, the father of the gods, often assumed the guise of a bull in his frequent love affairs. One often depicted was the occasion when Zeus, attracted to the fair young Europa, descended to Earth disguised as a bull and carried her off to the Island of Crete where she gave birth to Minos in which we come in contact with the bull again. This is seen in the painting by Rubens, "Rape of Europa", or the contemporary Darrel Austin's "Europa and the Bull". He also fell in love with the Goddess, Io, and due to his jealous wife, changed her into a cow and placed her on earth where he could visit

her in the guise of a bull. His wife, in turn, sent Argus, the God on earth, to guard the cow Io from Zeus' advances. Zeus then sent Hermes to seduce Argus with sweet music into a deep sleep so he could free Io for Zeus' pleasure. A painting by Rubens also depicts this scene. Among others, Zeus also made love to the Goddess Demeter in the guise of a bull.

Hermes also appears in Greek mythology. He was known as protector of the herds, many of which he had stolen from Apollo as seen in the painting by Claude Lorrain.

Hercules had many adventures in which the bull played an important part. His struggling with the Cretan bull has been a favorite subject of Greek vase painting. He captured the wild Cretan bull after it had been set loose to terrorize the countryside by the jealous Poseidon.

A beautiful legend has been woven from the story of handsome Ampelus who was loved by Dionysus. He was killed in a struggle with a wild bull. In sorrow, she had his body converted into a vine to be with her always.

Perhaps the most noted legend of all was that of Theseus and the Minotaur. The Minotaur was the offspring of the wife of Minos and a wild bull. A terrible monster, part human, living in a labyrinth, devouring the prize youth of the land until Theseus, with the help of his beloved, killed the beast and set the people free. Many artists have used this legend for inspiration, including Picasso and G. F. Watts in our generation.

In the religion of the early Romans, the bull was god of many things. For some time before the Tenth Century, B.C., there were various bull cults in the area of Italy. These cults derived from the Greeks, the Etruscans, and the Itali. The Etruscans worshipped the bull as a fertility god. The Itali worshipped the bull as a god who would give the people strength in time of battle. "Fighting against the Romans, the Itali wore the horns of bulls upon their helmets, called upon their bull-god for success in battle, and actually thought of themselves as being bulls."<sup>11</sup>

One of the most popular religions was Mythraism, which was Persian in descent and was primarily a worship of the bull as ruler of the sun. In Mythraism all good things come from the death of a bull. Contrasting this belief, many other cults believed that great misfortune was the result of the death of a bull. The God Mythra sacrificed a bull in a sacred grotto to advance life on earth. The first man, Gaymost, and his primitive bull, Gosh, produced all life on earth. Both of these legends are depicted in the art of the Persians. Mythraism spread so rapidly that by the Second Century, A. D., it was declared the official religion of the Empire.

The bull was also used by the Romans for the purpose of persecuting Christians. One type of persecution, which was introduced by Nero, resulted in Christians being pulled around

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<sup>11</sup> Jack R. Conrad, The Horn And The Sword (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company., 1957), p. 147.

the arena by ropes attached to bulls' horns. It was the Christians who first opposed Mythraism and after the Emperor Constantine, who was converted to Christianity, the Roman's belief in Mythra began to diminish. However, it was many years before Mythraism completely disappeared from Europe.

The Celts were another ancient bull worshipping cult. They were warring people and, like the old Cumarian kings, wore horned headdresses to battle. There are accounts of these horned headdresses as early as 1000 A. D. The Celts believed that great strength could be attained from eating the raw flesh of a bull. "One account tells of the God Thor (the Thunderer) drinking three barrels of mead and eating an entire bull before setting out on an exploit to recover his magical hammer."<sup>12</sup> The Druids, which were Celts living in the huge oak forests, "related the sacred bull to the sky, the thunderstorm, and to the oak tree. To them these were symbols of regeneration. The fertility of the bull was tied in with the phallic oak with its thousands of fertile acorns, and with the rainstorm wherein the golden mistletoe was a symbol of lightning and the bull was the thunderer. Ritual ceremonies designed to fructify the land and animals were performed by white-robed Druid priests deep within the sacred oak forests. At these occasions, bulls were probably sacrificed, and mistletoe was cut from the oaks with a sacred golden sickle."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Jack R. Conrad, The Horn And The Sword (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company, 1957), p. 157.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

As late as the Seventh Century A. D., the struggle between Christianity and the descendants of the old Celtic bull cult was still raging in England.

Nearly all of the ancient cultures worshipped the bull as a supreme god. Although the worshipping rites varied in many ways and the bull represented many different ideas, the bull consistently represented the supreme force that controlled things which were beyond man's power. In short, the bull was a tool used to give man power over all. Whenever there was a need or a desire that man could not satisfy himself, it was the all powerful bull that came to his aid.

In comparison to other ancient bull-worshipping cultures, the beliefs and practices of Egypt and India, regarding the bull, were much the same. The bull still has a predominant role in the religion of the Egyptians and Indians, whereas, the other cultures abandoned their traditional worship of pagan gods and became converts of the more modern Christian religion. The reason for this difference is that throughout all the history of Egypt and India, the bull has been a direct necessity of life.

Since the earliest of times in Egypt, the bull has been associated with gods and kings. To the Egyptians, the bull was primarily a symbol of great strength. However, the bull was also worshipped for its fertility. The fertility

of the Nile Valley was the result of the power of the Apis, who was a bull-god. The Egyptians considered the great creator to be in the form of a bull. "The great creator-god Pta, for example, was believed to be incarnate in the Apis bull, Mnevis was thought to be an incarnation of Ra, the sun-god of Heliopolis. The birth of Apis was believed to have followed the impregnation of a special cow by a deity in the form of a ray of moonlight. This immaculate conception thus made Apis the son of a god."<sup>14</sup> Only a few bulls with certain select markings were considered sacred by the priests. These bulls were the living vehicle of the god Apis. "Thus the holy black bull of Apis had a white triangular blaze on his forehead, the diminutive form of an eagle on his back, the shape of a beetle on his tongue, double hairs in his tail, the figure of a crescent moon on his right side, and some twenty-four other distinct marks through which he is identified by the priests."<sup>15</sup> The Apis bull was traditionally sacrificed in the prime of his life by the king. Thus the Apis bull was always young and strong. By eating the flesh of the sacrificed Apis bull, the king received strength and verility in the eyes of all the people.

Worship of the Mnevis bull was quite similar to that of the Apis bull in the Egyptian religion. Both were

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<sup>14</sup> Jack R. Conrad, The Horn And The Sword (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company., 1957), p. 76.

<sup>15</sup> Jack R. Conrad, The Horn And The Sword (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company., 1957), p. 75.

celestial gods of strength and fertility and were each associated with the god Osiris. After the sacrificial ritual of these sacred bulls, they were embalmed like kings and decorated with funnary outfits which included many magical objects to protect the bulls in their afterlife.

Another bull that played an important role in the religion of ancient Egypt was the Buchis bull. This bull-god was also connected with Osiris. This bull, like Mnevis, was known as the "living soul" of Ra.

Hathor was the Goddess of the Sky, and was considered to be in the form of a cow. The Egyptians believed that Hather created all the world and with her milk, nourished all the living. From this Goddess of the Sky, the Pharaohs received their strength and ruling power.

The Egyptians quite often depicted their gods as having the body of a man and the head of a bull. Mentou, an Egyptian nome god, carved from limestone, is seated at a throne and appears to have command of the entire universe.

Throughout all of Egypt's history, the bull has had a deep symbolic meaning. It has played an important role in culture of Egypt and has been used primarily as a symbol of strength and fertility.

Life in many present day African tribes and their beliefs concerning the meaning of the bull may be compared in many aspects to that of ancient Egypt. In the Zulus tribe, a



bull is sacrificed every year for the benefit of the king. The strength and vitality of the young bull are transferred to the king, thus prolonging and revitalizing his life. Throughout the primitive tribes in Africa today, as in ancient Egypt, the bull is connected symbolically with "birth, life, marriage, fertility, strength, and the spirit world."<sup>16</sup>

The bull played an important role in the religion of early India as well. In the mythology of India, the most famous bull-god is Indra, God of the Heavens. Indra was the son of Dyaus, the red bull, who also had considerable power in the heavens. Indra killed his father in order to obtain soma, an intoxicating drink that bestowed immortality. As Indra grew to maturity, he was known as the "Bull of Bulls". Rudra was a god of lessor importance, who ruled the thunder-storm. He was a slayer of men and cattle and thus was also known as "The Great Destroyer". Another bull-god that played an important role in the mythology of India was Agni, God of Fire. Agni was known as having a thousand horns, a symbol of great power.

Many of the beliefs in the modern Hindu religion derived from these ancient myths. The concept of the ancient "phallic god", Shiva, is very little changed in India today.

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<sup>16</sup>Jack R. Conrad, The Horn And The Sword (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company., 1957), p. 93.

Shiva has the ultimate power to create and to destroy. Much of Hinduism, in fact, is concerned with the great god Shiva, two of whose earthly forms, the bull and the linga, are related to the quickening of crops, cattle and women.<sup>17</sup> Many Hindus use only bulls to plow with, excluding cows, as it is the function of the male to make the land fertile.

There is an element of serenity in the Indus' depiction of the sacred bull, that does not appear in any other culture. At Mysore in southern India there is a great stone statue of Nandi, a vehicle of Shiva, that expresses the feeling of serenity in the reclining form of a majestic bull.

At dusk, in India today, when the cows are driven home to be milked, the dust which they raise is considered to be sacred. An Eighteenth Century painting by Rajput of The Cowdust Hour illustrates a group of cows that are peacefully being driven home.

In ancient mythology, the bull was god of many things. However, nearly all of these gods had one thing in common. They all possessed powers on the universal scale. Whatever the god controlled, it was controlled with absolute power. Whatever the bull represented, he represented to its extreme existence. If the bull was the god of fertility, then he represented the epitome of fertility. It is this characteristic that had made the bull a popular form for the painter.

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<sup>17</sup> Jack R. Conrad, The Horn And The Sword (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company., 1957), p. 38

It is with this form that many artists have created works strong in meaning.

There are many scriptures in the Bible concerning the bull. Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy contain many examples of sacrifice. The blood of the bullock represented the atonement of the soul. Aron and his sons were instructed to kill the bullock and put it on the altar to burn in atonement. Moses instructed the Levites to sacrifice the bullock and put it on the altar for their atonement.

Many references in the Bible speak of pagan gods worshipped in the form of bulls. Jeroboam made two golden calves for worship. The pagan god, Baal, previously mentioned, was the powerful god of the Cananites and is referred to quite often in the Bible. The prophet Elijah made a sacrifice of the bullock to emphasize the Lord's powers over the prophets of the bull-god, Baal.

Ezekiel had a vision of the likeness of four living creatures representing the four Kingdoms. One of them was the ox, which represented Greece. Solomon's Temple was built on a molten sea which stood on twelve oxens - three looking toward the North and three toward the West, three toward the East and three toward the South. In dedication of the temple, two and twenty-thousand oxen were sacrificed as a peace offering. This is a likely dedication for the temple of the wealthiest kings of biblical times, as the cow was the main symbol of wealth.

In the New Testament the ox was present at the birth of Jesus. In nearly all paintings on the subject of the birth of Christ, the ox is depicted as a sacred animal.

### CHAPTER III

The oxen or bull has long been recognized as an animal of service. In the Neolithic age, man first recognized the value of the bull as an animal of service. Through the ages, the bull and the oxen, a close form of the bull, have been associated with the culture of mankind.

In ancient times Charybdis, daughter of the God Poesidon, stole an ox from Hercules and, as punishment, Zeus struck her down with a thunderbolt and changed her into a whirlpool. Thousands of ships were lost in its votex. Also, Hercules had other troubles with his oxen. When he brought Geryous' herd through the Straits of Sicily, Scylla seized and devoured one and Hercules was forced to kill her.

Jason, the Hebrew of biblical times, was the proud owner of a herd of oxen, which were often an important part of the feasts and sacrifices of the period. The presence of the ox at the birth of Christ has enhanced the symbol of this noble beast of burden. Later day Rennaissance painters, such as Botticelli, Fabriano and Tiepolo, showed the oxen as a spectator at the birth of Christ. Today the ox is known as a symbol of St. Luke, an idea which was established by the medieval artists because of his belief in sacrifice for atonement to Christ.

The oxen has long been thought of as a symbol of endurance. Due to the fact that it could exist for long periods of time without water, it has been called the camel of the American desert. Its fame as the beast of burden played an important role in the settlement of new frontiers. It pulled the wagon trains across the overland trail to California and helped establish the freight lines during the settling of the West. It was hitched to the plow by the pioneer sod buster as the homesteader staked his claim in the new land. Nick Eggenhafer and Albert Bierstadt were among the early artists of the West who gave the ox its full credit during this period.

Paul Bunyan and his famous blue ox, Babe, were making legends in the lumber camps of the North. This legendary ox was capable of great feats and a sculptured monument has been erected in Babe's memory at Bemidji, Minnesota. In addition to this, there have been many other artists' depictions of this fabulous beast of the American Northwest.

In the Orient, Lao-Tza, the Chinese God, is often depicted riding a green ox. The ten ox herding pictures of the Kaku-an were ascribed to Shuban, a Japanese Zen priest of the Fifteenth Century and may be seen at Shokakuji, Kyoto, Japan. The Zen faith is concerned with discipline over oneself. The Kaku-an pictures depict an escaped bull which is captured by its master and brought back to its place in society. In

this case, the bull represents one's unruly nature, which must be mastered by the person's true self.

The cow herd, even from the ancient days, has been a symbol of peace, tranquility and security. The cow itself, has been associated with peasant life in Europe and in the Orient. They represent the wealth of these people in many ways - milk, butter and cheese, as well as other lesser necessities. In time of need, the cows herd itself, has been the only source of food and shelter for an entire village.

Cow herds and cowherding scenes have often been depicted in painting. A very famous painting by Pieter Brugel illustrates a scene in the evening when the herdsmen are bringing in the cattle from the fields. Van Leiden was another Dutch painter who used the cow herd as his subject quite frequently. Valadon has painted the country life in France, in which he stressed the tranquil aspects of the cow herd. Chagal has used the cow many times in his magical scenes of Russian peasant life. Franz Marc, in Germany before World War I, depicted the cow or bull as a tranquil animal - a symbol of peace. In fact, the cow herd had the same symbolic value in China and Japan where they represented man's effort to make peace with oneself and numerous paintings pertain to this thought. In India, the cow is considered sacred and is thought of as being a serene animal, at peace with its surroundings. The American painter, N. C. Wyeth, depicts the cow as being a pleasant and peaceful animal. Thus,

in contrast to the long standing symbol of strength and ferociousness that the bull has possessed, some groups have accorded the cattle family, the cow and the bull, the symbol of peace and tranquility.



#### CHAPTER IV

In dealing with the history of the symbolism of the bull in the corrida, one must realize the differences between the various cultures in which the corrida was an important part.

The bull represented different things to these various cultures - yet there was one common predominant theme which existed in the bullfight ritual of these cultures. This common theme was, and is today, a symbolic struggle between man and his environment, the bull representing all those obstacles standing between man and supreme happiness.

The concepts of modern bullfighting derived from the ancient rituals in bull worship on the island of Crete. To the early Cretans, the bull was a means through which the people could obtain their desires rather than being a symbol of opposing forces. The opposing forces in these rituals were actually those of nature itself.

In the bullfight ritual, the object of the Cretans was to impregnate the earth. The Cretans believed that it was the horns of the bull that were the source of its fertile powers. From this belief, developed the art of horn grappling.

For this event, wild bulls were captured and taken to the arena. As the Spring is the most fertile time of the year, the Cretans conducted their most important ceremonies at this time. In the art of horn grappling, which was one of two features in the early corrida,

...specially trained male and female athletes went into the arena unarmed. Standing calmly before the onslaught of a bull, the sacred performers had neither cape nor sword, and in fact, did nothing until the beast was almost upon them. Then by grasping the horns of the charging bull a split second before the lowered head snapped upward in a mighty toss, the athlete was immediately catapulted into the air. Performing a forward somersault in midair, he landed with his feet on the back of the bull or on the ground.<sup>18</sup>

In the horn grappling ritual, the Cretans believed that through these activities with the bull, the athletes absorbed strength and verility. The other feature of this ritual was the killing of the sacred bull. The most common method of killing the bull was neck breaking, which was done by a single male athlete in a manner similar to modern bull-dogging. With the death of the sacred bull, all the people received his magical powers. A great portion of Cretan art depicts the sacrifice of the sacred bull.

One of the best examples of Cretan art is a gold cup with excellent metal working that illustrates the dangers and violence of the bull chase. In a fresco from the Palace of

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<sup>18</sup>Jack R. Conrad, The Horn And The Sword (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company., 1937), p. 122.

Knossos a Cretan painter has captured the fertility ritual of horn grappling. In this painting, the bull is depicted in a stylistic manner and seems to be quite happy with his role of fructifying the earth.

The Cretan artists were among the first to depict the spectators of the arena. The style in which this idea occurred was quite similar to the later style of Toulouse Lautrec.

This visual suggestion of the presence of spectators is in fact one of the most curious characteristics of Cretan painting. A whole crowd of people throng the steps of the amphitheatre to watch the dances or bull fights; they are so numerous that sometimes the mass of spectators is not defined in detail but merely suggested by a few light silhouettes devoid of any sharp definition, against a dark sharply characterized and one can distinguish their individuality. This is especially so in the case of the celebrated Parisienne. This comparatively small figure, part of a larger composition, owes its name to the resemblance noted immediately on its discovery in the early years of this century- to the midinettes so popular with Toulouse Lautrec. In the Parisienne the artist ... stressed only the essential features, those that give the most vivid, not the most photographic, likeness of the model; details that are not noticed at a first glance are deliberately sacrificed, and the ear, for instance, is not even suggested. This is Anticipates Impressionism.<sup>19</sup>

The fact that these works were unknown to Lautrec and that the similarity of the styles existed supports the theory that ancient man experienced things and responded in his art in much the same way as does modern man.

The Roman bullfight also gained in popularity. It grew from the long tradition of bull-sacrifice in Italy and

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<sup>19</sup> Pierre Devambez. Greek Painting. (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1962), p. 5.

rose to even greater heights as a result of the sacrifice aspect in Mithraism. The bullfight came to replace the bull sacrifice in the Roman culture. Each event resulted in the same flowing of blood. Julius Caesar introduced a new type of bullfight to the arenas, which he had witnessed in Thessaly. The bull was chased by horse and rider and was leaped upon by the rider, who with brute strength and precise timing, broke the neck of the beast.

The corrida has maintained its importance in the Spanish culture from ancient to modern times. Nearly all of the early bull cults found their way into the Spanish culture. The Romans, the Cretans, the Phoenicians, the Greeks, and the Celts, the Iberians, the Egyptians, the Visigoths, the Moors, and the Bourbons each contributed to the culture of Spain and to Spain's corrida. During almost the entire history of Christianity there has been a struggle between the Christians and the corrida and yet the corrida has survived. The corrida has become a part of the character of Spain itself. "To the Spaniard....killing a bull or watching the killing of a bull is a symbolic act wherein deeply repressed anti-authoritarian feelings find cultural expression."<sup>20</sup> The corrida also represents many other human emotions. The bull represents all of the barriers which stand between man and

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<sup>20</sup> Jack R. Conrad, The Horn And The Sword (New York: E. P. Dutton and Company., 1937), p. 191.

supreme happiness. On the other hand, the bull represents all the gaiety of the Spanish holidays. And yet, the corrida is mystical in all the meanings it renders. It is the essence of the bullfight which one cannot completely understand. It is through this difficulty in comprehension that the corrida has become such a great challenge to the painter. Everything that is obvious about the corrida has been expressed well by many artists, but very few have captured the essence of what the bullfight means to the Spanish people. A friend of Picasso's, also quite adept in the corrida, reveals his feelings about the Spanish bull:

Bullfighting is indeed an eternal symbol. I would scarcely dare to compare it to the eternally renewed conflict between Good and Evil, but it derives from a myth that dates back to the origins of humanity, a spectacle in which the spectator rids himself of his own fears and hostilities as he watches Theseus putting an end to the hateful human sacrifices that the Minotaur demanded. For centuries, men have thus been seeking as if in a ritualistic re-enactment the death of the divine monster who once was so hungry for human flesh. Before he actually confronts the beast, the bullfighter repeats the gesture of Theseus. His back to the sun, he uses his cape to trace a shifting labyrinth in the sand and in the air around the bull. Only then comes the hallucinating confrontation from which he can now escape only by plunging his blade into the least accessible part of the beast.<sup>21</sup>

The complexities of the meanings of the bull to the Spanish people have presented a great problem to the artists who have attempted to capture the innermost meaning

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<sup>21</sup>Luis M. Dominguin, Pablo Picasso, Toros & Toreros (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1961), p. 22.

of the corrida.

Not only does the bull represent many things to the Spanish people in general, but it has different meanings for each individual. Also, the nature of all bulls is not the same. There are ferocious bulls and there are fighting bulls. It is for these reasons that all bulls do not seem to possess the same qualities to all artists.

Two of the most successful painters of the corrida are Goya and Picasso. In Goya's paintings and drawings of the corrida, one may begin to understand the complexities of the meaning of the subject. "In the drawing, Juanito Apinani In The Bull Ring At Madrid, Goya illustrates an agile banderilleros vaulting over a charging bull. His themes were on the one hand, those of human folly, cruelty and stupidity and, on the other, the enigmatic and disquieting images of fantasy and paradox and dreams."<sup>22</sup>

Goya was concerned with much more than either the bull or the actual fight. He painted himself, his environment, and what he knew about both. It is this ability, with an excellent sense of aesthetics, that makes a good painting. The bull and the corrida are simply tools of the artist with which he can express something about himself. The bull and the corrida has been a popular subject for the painter because of its powerful mystical meanings. The strong, fighting

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<sup>22</sup>A. B. Saarinen, "Goya", New York Times, (August 10, 1965), p. 28.

Spanish bull can be a symbol of anything the artist feels. The corrida can be a colorful, happy affair in which the bull glorifies man. It can be a symbolic representation of man's struggle with society. Or the corrida may represent, as it did to Goya, the foolishness and stupidity of man.

As a Spaniard, Picasso has a very deep feeling for the bull and the bullfight. The corrida is among his most popular subjects. To him the bullfight is a symbolic struggle between man and his environment. In Picasso's art of the corrida, everything about life is expressed. The dazzling excitement is expressed along with man's fears and struggles. To Picasso the bull is excitement in itself, a symbol of man's strength and courage. In one of his most famous paintings of the corrida, Picasso illustrates the great human tragedy.

In....Minotauromaquia, 1935, there is only decision, tenacity, force in the monstrosity of the bull. The rest is flight, innocence, pain. The horse is subjugated before the beast; the bullfighter is a woman; a girl who appears to have no notion of what is involved carries a branch of flowers, a light - as if another homage were involved, one which would be the refutation of all public homages. Two women appear seated on a stone piazza; an older man flees in nakedness; the sword is drawn in such a way that it is not clear whether the torero is intent on suicide or the bull is holding it. The beast is completely dominant, threatening, decisive, a mixture of brutality and repulsiveness, a minotauromaquia emerging from the sea, eternal symbol of the inexhaustible, pouring into the plaza, into the

privacy of the home, into all public spectacles,  
and homages, into all gestures of tenderness...<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Vincent Marrero, Picasso and the Bull (Chicago:  
Henry Regnery Co., 1956), p. 60.



## CHAPTER V

To the modern man, the bull carries a different meaning than it did to the ancient cultures in which the bull was a direct necessity or a god. To modern man, the bull is almost insignificant. In this chaotic century of painting, artists have used the bull symbol in many different ways. Although the bull is relatively unimportant to modern man, its strength, as a mystical symbol of man's strongest emotions, has made it a popular form for the painter.

The German expressionist, Franz Marc, painted the serenity and beauty of the domestic cow. "Marc's animals were projections of human ideals."<sup>23</sup> He painted the serene animal and its calm life in the pasture as an idyllic form of human life. Through his painting, Marc expressed his desire for a more peaceful life - a life more like that of a common domesticated animal.

The French painter, Jean Dubuffet, feels that "art exists where no one is waiting for it." The primitivism of Dubuffet was "a wise blindness...resembling that period of the unconscious best characterized by a joyous confidence, namely the period of childhood."<sup>24</sup> His is a successful

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<sup>23</sup> Author unknown, Time, 67 (January 2, 1956), p. 46.

<sup>24</sup> Author Unknown, Art News, 61 (April, 1962), p. 50.

attempt to return to "spiritual innocence." Dubuffet works for a spontaneous representation of his subject. He has painted the cow in a whimsical manner, capturing his own innocence. His desire is to be himself - unaffected by social pressures like the bulls and the cows he paints.

The surrealist, Max Earnst, paints the bull as an evil force - the cause of man's despair. In his painting the Spanish Physician, Earnst depicts a bull evolving from the earth and a terrified woman attempting to escape. Again, as in the symbolic corrida, the bull is a symbol of evil; he is the cause of fear.

The American painter, Darrell Austin, has presented the mythological aspect in his work. Austin depicts the bull as a type of god that watches over man. His settings are serene woodlawns, with figures reclining in peace - a watchful bull merged in the background, unnoticed by man, protecting them from intruders. In Europa and the Bull Zeus, Austin depicts the bull as a protector of Europa. It is a scene in which Austin has removed man far from his natural environment to an ideal situation.

The paintings of N. C. Wyeth are quite similar in content to those of Marc and Austin. In his painting of A Still Summer Night, Wyeth depicts the serene nature of the cow. His reclining, resting cows present another ideal situation, which is far removed from man's environment.



The most noted painter of bulls is Pablo Picasso. The symbol of supreme authority is a favorite subject of this dynamic painter. It is with this form that Picasso has created some of his more forceful works. Although Picasso's paintings are full of vitality and meaning, it is only his means of expression that differentiates his art from that of the ancient man, who painted his environmental elements as they affected him.

In Picasso's work, the bull is almost always the supreme force. "His bulls, quintessentially the bull, are lords of the world which he paints."<sup>25</sup>

In the famous painting Guernica, the bull is a symbol of strength and authority, unyielding to any force. The bull stands alone in the room, unaffected by the chaos around him, while the horse and the people die in anguish. It is the bull that instigated the war - the bull of evil.

The element of myth enters into Picasso's painting of the Minotaur. This painting is quite similar to the ancient concept of the horned-man as a symbol of great strength. It is a more direct approach to the problem of combining the qualities of man and beast. To express the animosity and brutality of man "in Picasso's art the same facility serves him to humanize the beast as to brutalize

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<sup>25</sup>Vincent Marrero, Picasso and the Bull (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1956), p. 58.





the man."<sup>26</sup> Picasso's horned man carries a different meaning. It is a more personal expression of the artist. It is not mythological, but is quite real in Picasso's mind. The Minotaur wears the expression of a man with many problems. Although Picasso has borrowed the man-bull symbol from ancient Crete, he has used it only as a motif and has given the form thoughts of only the Twentieth Century.

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 58.





## CHAPTER VI

In my usage of the bull as a motif, in painting, I have found the bull to be an extremely versatile and intriguing form. It is a form which, by its numerous connotations can express any creative effort. Unlike a more delicate subject which might only be capable of expressing beauty, the bull is a mysterious and powerful creature whose temperament is not always knowledgeable. He has moments of beauty and moments of ugliness. The bull could represent stupidity and weakness just as easily as he might be a symbol of strength and authority.

It is this mysterious aspect of the bull that presents a challenge to the painter. The challenge is not to reproduce the image or the nature of the bull, but to project through the image, the nature of man. It is possible for the painter not only to simulate the nature of man through the form of the bull, but to use the strength and force of the form to exaggerate it.

The versatility of expression through the bull motif is a simple matter of creative design. Through design the artist is allowed freedom of expression. The fact that





the bull symbol has varied in its meaning to man, from the earliest of times to the present, illustrates its versatility.

I have used the bull motif to express two general themes: 1. controlling forces of society; 2. a utopian type of life. Although these two themes are opposite each other, the bull motif works equally well in either case.

In regard to the first aspect I touched upon, the bull becomes almost human in its connotation and spirit. The whimsical features of expression and structure seem to give emphasis on the follies of mankind and his attitudes in society, which is closely related to the bull-gods of mythology with all their human strengths and weaknesses. Similar in kind to these mythological creatures are works by latter day artists such as Picasso, Klee, Austin and Dubuffet.

The heroic aspect of the bull is expressed through the powerful form of the fighting bull, that carries all the courage and strength that may be found in our society.

Throughout history the bull symbol has been an important aspect of man's expression of all his emotions. The bull has been a symbol of fertility, ferocity, strength, and omnipotence. The bull has represented the human condition in every aspect. In every aspect the bull has represented the all-powerful good, which protects the well being of man, or has represented the supreme evil force which man must overcome.





It makes little difference whether the bull has represented the supreme good or the supreme evil, the significance is that man's representation of the bull has always been an expression of a supreme force that man has had to cope with. He must either live up to the standards of the bull-god, or overcome the bull of evil.

The Twentieth Century painter has added his innermost feelings to the ancient bull symbol. To the modern man the bull symbol might represent anything from the wildest fantasy to the most objective realism - anything from serenity to chaos. The bull symbol might represent a supreme force or it might represent a single feeling of the modern painter. The Twentieth Century painter might represent the bull differently as his thoughts turned from one subject to another. He might also change his representation of the bull as he changes his mood from exuberance to remorse. To him, the bull symbol might represent anything.

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