



## Circle of calm

*Discover how to weave the beauty, quiet and inner peace of collective mandala-making into the fabric of the modern world*



Mandalas are everywhere. They're in the circular patterns of tree trunks, formations of flower petals and delicate strands of spiders' webs. Seedheads, shells, crystals – wherever you look, there are patterns. But these patterns aren't just sacred to nature – their creation has also been adopted by humans for thousands of years.

In Sanskrit, mandala means 'circle', and while these works of art have long been enmeshed in Buddhist and Hindu culture, they're also found in many others throughout history. There are the medicine wheels of Native Americans, the spiral symbols and knotwork of Celts and the ornate rose windows found in churches and cathedrals. The beauty and calming presence of mandalas has long been appreciated, but how can we weave their relevance into everyday, modern life and what can be gained from their creation?

Thérèse Muskus, custodian of Laikenbuie, a croft in the Highlands of Scotland, has been using land as her canvas to create nature mandalas since 2009, ever since she observed Tibetan monks making a peace mandala. She says the process of creation brings her a deeper sense of connection: 'I find I enter a place of quiet silence within, where I'm aware of my surroundings but at the same time detached. I'm completely absorbed in what's being created by my hands.' But the benefits don't just stop at inner connection.

One of the first people to introduce mandalas to the west was Carl Jung, a pioneer of modern depth psychology and psychoanalysis. In *Mandalas & Meditations for Everyday Living*, Cassandra Lorus writes how Jung saw mandalas as 'symbolising the perfect wholeness of the self' and used the

method of painting them with his clients, noticing that despite having no contact with traditional designs, they naturally appeared from the unconscious mind. This led to his conclusion that an individual's artwork is a 'personal manifestation of a collective unconscious common to all humanity'.

This idea of collective creation, unconscious or otherwise, is strongly felt by Thérèse, who often draws the local community into her land art. 'Creating with sand takes me back to childhood holidays, so now, when I'm going to make a large mandala on the beach, I send a call out inviting my friends to come and play. In this playing, the concept of time is lost as we're all completely absorbed.' Thérèse believes it can be immensely comforting as adults, particularly during times of stress and when feeling overwhelmed, to acknowledge the impermanence of life through these creations that are then washed away with the tide. 'It's about letting go and recognising that everything passes,' she says.

This sense of release is frequently felt by those who join her workshops. Following an afternoon of mandala-making, participants share joyful, harmonious, meditative reflections, acknowledging the sweet release of mind chatter and even pure emotion. When Thérèse was creating a mandala in Inverness Botanic Gardens, north-east Scotland, a couple of women in their 20s came to offer help. 'One of them started to cry,' recalls Thérèse. 'She said the experience had touched her in some way she couldn't explain and she was so grateful to have had the experience of being there in that exact moment.'

This connection with self unites with humanity's connection to nature as a whole, and it's important to Thérèse that respect





is shown at all times, particularly when sourcing materials. Along with her beach mandalas, she also creates indoor designs – using dried and blended flower petals from her croft – as well as harvest designs incorporating homegrown food: ‘Whenever I’m gathering natural materials to make the mandalas, I’m very aware of what I collect and cut and mainly make my Earth mandalas in autumn, when vegetation is starting to die back. I’ve always been sensitive to cutting flowers in their full bloom, but deadheading can encourage plants to produce more flowers.’

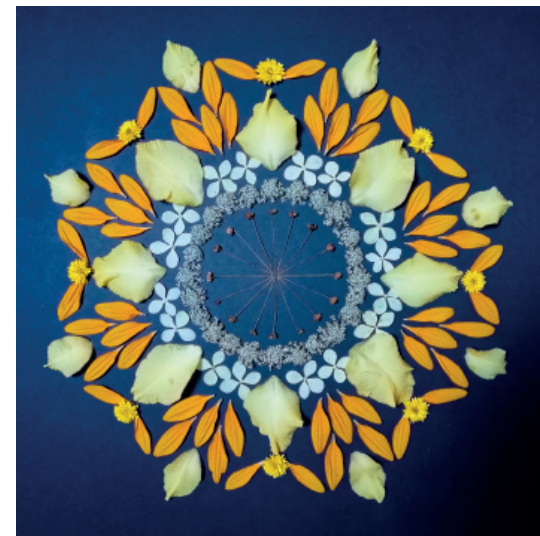
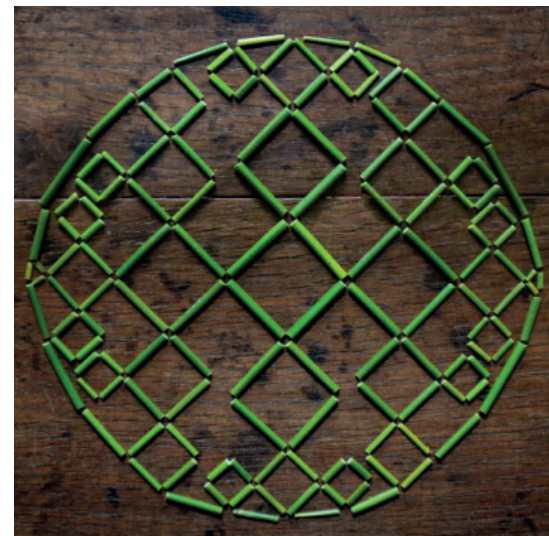
Fellow mandala artist, Mayumi Nakabayashi, follows a code learned from her ancestors in Japan: ‘I learned from Ainu people, an Indigenous ethnic group in Hokkaido, Japan, where I grew up. When they forage, they take into account other animals, humans [and] the growth of plants in the following year. They also take a moment to ask permission before they go into woodlands or mountains.’ For her workshops, Mayumi is equally conscientious, sourcing flowers from a local farm that

practises low chemical use and invests a lot of time and effort nurturing the soil.

Mayumi came to mandala-making in the autumn of 2018, when, after seeing the image of a flower mandala on a Japanese website, she decided to bring her community together in creation: ‘Yes! I knew I was going to host a flower mandala-making workshop before even making one myself,’ she says. Mayumi has long been fascinated by the structure of plants up close, often feeling as if she’s observing a faraway nebular or a planet she didn’t know existed: ‘It inspires me to feel that I’m a part of the ecosystem on Earth and the planetary system in the universe. I feel the connection from the micro to macro in a tangible sense as I observe the fractal geometry in nature – the idea that the smallest part of an organism represents the shape of the whole. For example, fern leaves, broccoli, cow parsley.’

What Mayumi saw in that website image inspired in her the joy of multiplying, just like fractal geometry. She says:

PHOTOGRAPHS: MAYUMI NAKABAYASHI







‘Individuality is important, but we all know how much we suffered from not being able to connect with others from the pandemic experience. Humans are meant to be together and mandalas represent exactly that – each individual part is unique, but connected to create one circle.’ Mayumi’s workshops, which she leads in her adopted country of the Republic of Ireland, have an underlying theme of highlighting unity in diversity, but her dreams involve an even bigger project: ‘I would love to create flower mandalas on borders around the world. These might be geographical borders dividing two countries or perhaps separation within a community, or a division between two conflicted feelings in our heart. I would like to create with people from both sides of these borders.’

The creation of ephemeral mandalas encourages you to look at life through the lens of gentleness, particularly when you observe their return to nature. In her closing ceremonies, Thérèse likes to emulate the Tibetan monks she originally

observed: ‘The dried mandalas I make are brushed away within hours and taken to a nearby river or stream to symbolically return to nature, complete with all the prayers and positive thoughts that have been imbued into them.’

Perhaps this is the relevance of mandalas in modern life: that in the creation of these time-honoured patterns, you uncover an opportunity to release what weighs you down and, on your meditative journey back to a central point, develop a sense of calm connection to the truest, purest essence of yourself, which can then flow out into the greater world.

**Words:** Alice Elgie

Alice is a writer and yogi who loves to explore connections between nature and self.

*Learn more about Thérèse and her workshops via [hiddenglen.co.uk](http://hiddenglen.co.uk). Follow Mayumi on Instagram @mayuminakabayashi*

PHOTOGRAPHS: MAYUMI NAKABAYASHI, SHUTTERSTOCK.COM

# TUNE INTO THE POWER OF MANDALAS

**Walk**

Go slowly, soaking up each offering from the earth, meditating on your part within all creation.

**Discover**

Look with fresh eyes: scales of a fallen cone, intricate seedpods, pebbles, broken flowers. Collect these jewels with awareness, respect and care.

**Create**

Make a cup of something warm and bring your discoveries together at a table or in your garden. Arrange, rearrange, play.

**Observe**

Tune into how you felt during this whole process and spend five minutes in silent appreciation and awareness of your creation.

