

Altars and Shrines

By Susa Morgan Black



Shrine in the Chalice Gardens, Glastonbury, England

Shrines

A shrine is a niche containing the image of a deity, a hallowed place of worship, a woodland sanctuary. In Eastern Europe, shrines are often made of wood, in a triangular shape, used as a niche for a small holy statue or icon, and placed at significant sites for protection, such as crossroads. In Ireland and Britain, shrines are often a niche in rock walls, placed near holy wells and other sanctified places. Catholic churches typically have lovely shrines for their Saints in church gardens. Shrines are there for comfort and meditation, and I encourage Pagans to construct these lovely meditational structures.

The natural transitory artwork of Scottish artist Andy Goldsworthy is inspirational for those who wish to build shrines in natural areas, or their own back yards.

I keep a permanent shrine to the Ancestors, with a dark clay figure representing Morrigan, one of the Celtic Goddesses of Death, with raven feathers and ceramic apples representing death and re-birth, and pictures and mementos of those who have crossed over into the Avalon, the Celtic Summerland. .

In *Umbanda*, practitioners dedicated to certain *Orisha* (African deities) create an altar, or shrine, specifically to that *Orisha*, leaving favorite objects, colors, foods, jewelry and items for the *Orisha*'s enjoyment.

I have borrowed this tradition and keep shrines for Morgan le Fay, with objects derived from Her folklore - apples, ravens, pentacles, sea shells, a miniature castle and tiny crystal sword and scabbard, a vial of water from Her well in Glastonbury, etc; and for Brigid with a swan figurine, well water from one of her sacred wells in Ireland to represent Her aspect as Healer, a tiny model of a harp for Her aspect as Bard, and a small iron forge for Her aspect as Blacksmith. For those dedicated to a specific deity, keeping a shrine in their honor is an excellent way to show your devotion and grow closer to that spiritual source.

Altars



Earth Altar

An Altar is a Witch's and Druid's work table where we focus our magic in ritual. It can be as simple or ornate as we desire.

For those of us lucky enough to have space, we can construct a permanent altar in a temple room. For the rest of us, a corner of a room, a shelf, small table, cupboard, or chest of drawers will have to do. My husband, Michael, made me a low pine table that fits snugly against a wall in my small office, with a curtain rod behind it so that I can drape an altar cloth against the wall behind the altar.

Altars can be made of any natural material. I have seen some altars with a slab of marble on top, to add the strength and stability of the mineral kingdom. For those who practice the art of smithcrafting, the anvil itself can be used as an altar dedicated to one of the sacred blacksmith deities (*Govannon* of the Celts, *Ogun* of the Yoruba, *Wayland Smith* of the Teutons, *Vulcan* of the Romans, and *Hephaestus* of the Greeks.) In a sense, the altar is where we "forge" our magic.

The altar is a place of worship, meditation, healing, trance work, channeling, and spell working. I have often put on soft music, candlelight, and arranged to sleep in front of the altar, in order to channel magical dreams! For ongoing spells, such as candle spells, we would keep our votives on the altar, putting the votive candle in a larger container filled with sand to prevent fires. (Otherwise, take the candle into the bathroom and let it burn down in the porcelain tub.)

Altar Cloth

The first thing we put on an altar is an altar cloth. I keep a set of altar cloths in different colors, using the magic of color to enhance the ritual purpose. Imbolc, (around February 2nd) is a pagan ceremony celebrated by Witches and Druids, honoring the Celtic Goddess Brigid. It is a sacred time of cleansing the temple space, I use a white altar cloth, to symbolize purity. Any time I feel a need to purify my temple, I will use this white altar cloth.

At Samhain I will use a black altar cloth, strewn with my collection of skulls and bones, to represent and welcome the Mighty Dead. If anyone dies during the year, I will offer a rite of passage, using this black cloth.

If asked to do a love ritual for a friend, I would start with a pink altar cloth. I would use green for a healing or prosperity ritual; yellow for a solar ritual at Litha (Midsummer); a red cloth decorated with greenery at Yule (Winter Solstice); deep blue, purple or indigo for full moons ceremonies, black during dark moon when I do scrying or trance work; magenta or violet when drawing down a higher power or deity. The colored altar cloths add richness and depth to our rituals and spells.

Elemental Altars



Water Altar

Altars are a wonderful way to work with the four Elements. They can be used in ceremony, and as a focus for elemental meditation. When I was in Nightwing Coven, there was a large living room with plenty of space at the covenstead in Marin County. We constructed five altars, one for each Element, and a large main altar in the Northwest, which held our Witch's working tools. On the Air altar, we placed figures of birds, feathers and a yellow candle. At the South altar, we placed many red candles and a figure of a dragon. On the West altar, we had a figure of a mermaid, a bowl of water, and a blue candle. At the north altar, we had a pentacle, a large stone, antlers, a figure of a satyr, and a green candle.

Main Altar

The main altar contained the coven sword, bowl of water, chalice and wine, plate with cakes, wand, aspergillum, pentacle, salt, oil, incense, herbs, a black and a white candle, the Book of Shadows, the coven crystals (both clear and smoky quartz), a skull to represent the ancestors, God and Goddess statues, and any tools we needed for specific rituals.

Druid Altar

The Druid tradition is based on the same ancient *Western Mystery Tradition* as Wicca, and many of the elements of ritual are the same. Druids might add the $\text{I}\backslash$ (Awen symbol) to their altar for inspiration, and include symbols that are especially significant to their tradition, such as figurines of deities or totem animals from the Celtic tradition, Dragons that guard the ancient sacred sites, and parts gathered from their sacred trees (flowers, berries, leaves, wands, staffs, staves) from either local trees or trees from the Celtic Ogham.

Summary

Altars and shrines are an intrinsic part of the world of religious traditions whether practiced by European Druids and Witches, by African based religions such as Santeria and Umbanda, by Asian religions including Hinduism, Buddhism and Shintoism, etc., or even by monotheistic religions – Christianity, Judaism, and Moslem.

Altars and shrines are the focal point of spiritual practices that help create sacred space for ritual and ceremony, a place of safety on a lonely road, or a place of sanctuary in a church or temple garden. Constructing a shrine or an altar, whether temporary or permanent, is a spiritual and creative act, which can lead us to the deeper mystical levels in whichever religion we choose to practice.

Resources

OBOD, Order of Bards, Ovates, and Druids: <http://druidry.org>

Doire Bhrighid (OBOD Seed Group): <http://doirebhrighid.net>

NROOGD (New Reformed Order of the Golden Dawn): <http://www.nroogd.org>

Chalice Gardens, Glastonbury: <http://www.chalicewell.org.uk>

Andy Goldsworthy: http://cgee.hamline.edu/see/goldsworthy/see_an_andy.html
Tools of Magic, by Susa Morgan Black (unpublished)

Altar Cloths - All of my altar cloths were made by Loren Washburn, who sells her cloths at the Renaissance and Dickens Fairs in Northern California.

The Author

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