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architecture

beans

drawing

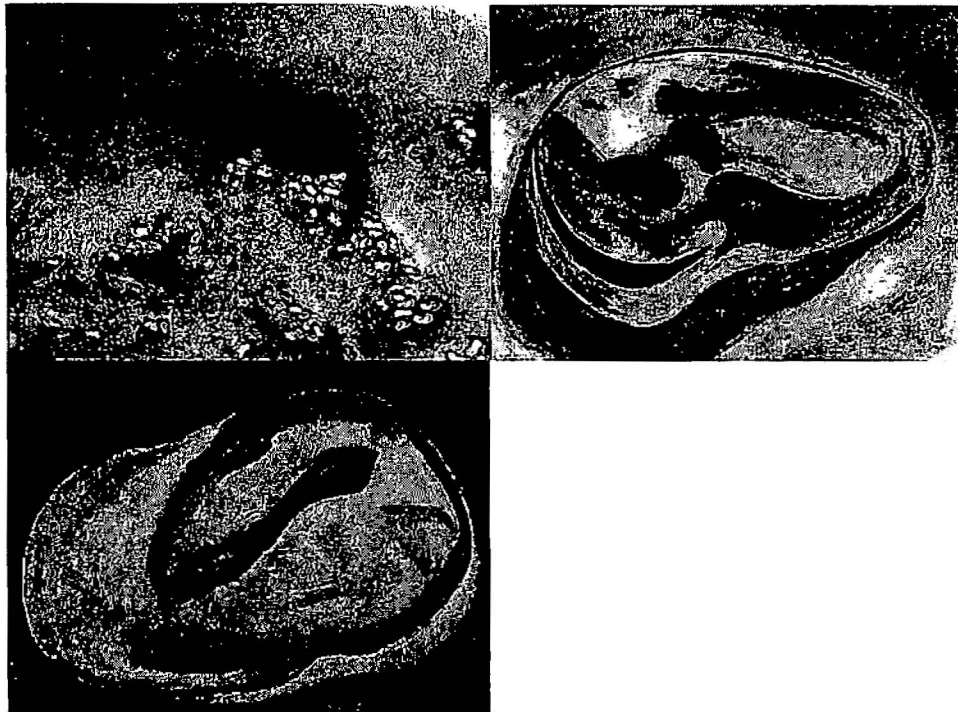
interior design

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"Abstain from beans. There be sundry interpretations of this symbol. But Plutarch and Cicero think beans to be forbidden of Pythagoras, because they be windy and do engender impure humors and for that cause provoke bodily lust." Richard Taverner



drawings by Charlotte Elizabeth Dam, 2003

Beans by Charlotte Elizabeth Dam

With its sensuous, round, undulating form, its fleshy curves, and sloping crevices, the bean evokes images of the voluptuous female body – the body that brings forth life into the world: so too, the bean is symbolic of creation. An essential form of sustenance for peoples around the world and hence likened by some to a god, the bean provokes a surprising discourse of its form and subsequent symbolism. Yet, this silent recipient of symbolic meaning must first be understood in terms of its more plebian attributes and history before one may begin to fully grasp the subtleties of its more philosophical and nebulous meanings.

Vicia faba, faba bean, horse bean, tic bean, or broad bean, as it is most commonly known, was domesticated in the eastern Mediterranean region in the late Neolithic period, but it remains unknown from which plant species the faba bean developed. Excavations of archeological sites in the Mediterranean basin and central Europe have found broad beans dating to the third millennium BC. The only known bean in Europe until the discovery of the New World, the broad bean's strongest proponent is that it is frost-tolerant and hence it is possible to sow seed in autumn so as to yield plants to be harvested in early summer.

In terms of consumption, broad bean seeds and young pods are eaten as a vegetable and are extremely nutritious for their high protein content of 20-25%. The beans may be cooked before being consumed, while very young pods may be eaten whole and raw. In some Asian and Mediterranean countries, especially in Egypt, the broad bean is a staple food due to its high protein content. In terms of cooking specifications, broad beans are usually dried and then soaked in water overnight before cooking them for an hour and a half. Fresh broad beans may be boiled for 10-15 minutes, if cooked longer, the beans tend to become softer and more of their vitamin content is lost. However, broad beans are not nutritious, so to speak, for all, for there exists a hereditary condition known as Favism, an allergic reaction against faba beans shown to have developed in Greece. So, too, this aversion to beans may be traced to the teachings of the ancients.

Considerable credit for an aversion to beans may be given to Pythagoras, the Greek philosopher who lived towards the end of the 6th century BC. It was Pythagoras, before both Socrates and Plato (who documented Socrates' pedagogy,) who taught that knowledge should never be written down as it may only truly evolve through the oral tradition. It is within this context of the attainment of knowledge that beans, as fuel for the carnal being, stagnate the mind's journey towards enlightenment. Pythagoras taught that a body cleansed of the burden of food, one cannot maintain a healthy bodily balance, and, in turn, cannot enter the path of knowledge. Quite simply, one cannot think clearly for the distraction of one's own physical processes of the digestion of food within the body. In fact, Pythagoras considered beans to be sacrosanct. Having spent nearly 45 years studying in Egypt where he learned of reincarnation and the transmigration of the soul, Pythagoras came to link the bean with one's own creation. This connection may be found in a study of ancient Egyptian words and their meaning. According to Colin Spencer in his book, *The Heretic's Feast: A History of Vegetarianism*, the ancient Egyptian word for bean is *iwryt*, similar to *iwr*, which, in turn, means to conceive or to generate.

Hence, the 'bean fields' of the ancient Egyptians, deriving their name from *iwr*, are the place where the dead are buried and await their reincarnation. This etymological context may help us to further understand Pythagoras' ban on the eating of beans. Pythagoras likened this action to the eating of the heads of one's own parents, in turn terminating the cycle through which we are reincarnated. So, too, according to Pliny, beans held the souls of the deceased. Thus, beans represent the same earthly material matter that generates human continuation.

The bean is, in fact, a true hermaphrodite for it contains both the female and male reproductive organs; hence, carnal symbolism perks further curiosity in the ancients. For Orpheus, the eating of beans produced sterility in women - an appropriate consideration when, more tangibly, as viewed sideways, the broad bean appears to have the form of female genitalia - a most direct link of the bean with the creation and fertility. It is the female sex that is first noticed with the bean. So, too do the curves and roundness of the bean's shape resemble not only a nude female form, but also a female womb. As Pythagoras points out, if one were to take a bean and its flower, moisten it and then bury it, after a few days to dig it up again, one would find it had the form of a womb, and upon further examination, there would be the head of a child growing beside it. Likewise in Ancient India, bean seedlings have been used as love charms for their resemblance to testicles. Further connection to the male sex may be found within the teachings of Pythagoras from passages in the *Doxographists*. In this text it is written that Zaratas forbade the eating of beans, as it was the bean that first emerged on this earth, and, in turn, is the source of life. Proof, it is argued, may be found in that when a bean is chewed to a pulp and exposed to the sun for a certain period of time, it takes on the odor of semen. The bean may, in these terms, be considered symbolic of both mother and father in the cycle of creation set forth by Pythagoras. Indeed, in "Passages Referring to the Doxographers," it is

written that Pythagoras said, "...the Monad is God, and...nothing has been brought into being apart from this." The bean is a symbol of all earthly creation and represents, quite literally, both mother and father of creation. So, too, if we were to eat beans, we would be devouring the "heads" of our parents, becoming cannibals who sustain ourselves by the very flesh that brought us into the world.