

SPIRITUAL ART: EVOCATION AND EXPRESSION OF TRANSPERSONAL KNOWING

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Abstract

At their most powerful the arts provide a doorway, gateway or bridge inviting us from one state to another, enabling us to expand our everyday reality and respond to something that is both greater than ourselves and intimately part of us. Some art has the capacity to shift or deepen the way we know and live the world. It is particularly the shift in the activity of consciousness or knowing, through both creating and beholding spiritual art, that this paper explores. The lens of transpersonal psychology provides an integral approach in consideration of spiritual art. A general theoretical and phenomenological consideration of the activity of knowing in spiritual art is followed by examples of the noetic evocation of a variety of religious and non-religious art.

Spiritual Art: Evocation and Expression of Transpersonal Knowing

Touching paint to canvas. Coaxing image. Shaping form. A dollop of paint becomes a spoon, a tree, a pool of blood. Poets' words on paper. Dancers' bodies leap. Arc becomes line, stone becomes lovers, voice marries violin with cello and drum.

The arts explicate the implicate order. Creation manifests itself in wonderful variety--as sacred music, dance, theater, literature, architecture, the visual arts--and, of course, these forms are more than canvas and colors, instruments and costumes. They may become medicine (McNiff) for a wounded soul, or a window into another's world (Oaklander). At their most powerful the arts provide a doorway, gateway or bridge inviting us from one state to another, enabling us to expand our everyday reality and respond to something that is both greater than ourselves and intimately part of us. By entering that doorway and opening into that communion, through both creative expression and appreciative beholding, we are brought closer to the experience of the union between our inner and outer worlds, between the visible and the invisible. If only for a moment, some art has the capacity to shift or deepen the way we know and live the world. It is particularly the shift in consciousness toward the spiritual that this paper explores. Most fundamentally our questions are: What is spiritual art? What is the knowing that spiritual art emerges from? What is the knowing that spiritual art can evoke?

Aesthetic critique, religious interpretation, and usually psychoanalytic perspective provide conventional interpretive means when art, spirituality and psychology have met. However, these have generally been uninformed by more recent work in transpersonal psychology. Transpersonal psychology, which considers the further reaches of human experience,

is relevant to art and to questions of spiritual art, precisely because great art has the power to transport us beyond a limited sense of ego or self. And this is precisely the domain that transpersonal psychology explores.

But what is spiritual art? While one could say that subject (e.g., a religious icon) or conscious intent of the artist (e.g., to express love for God) defines spiritual art, we will instead approach the question from the consciousness or knowing “surrounding” the art. The value and meaning of art cannot be reduced to simply the intent (conscious or otherwise) of the artist, the form of the art, the cultural context, or the response of viewers. An integral approach, which recognizes both the value and also the limits of each independent approach, moves away “from the babble of interpretation” (Wilber *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad* 97) that characterizes art criticism and allows us to inquire into the transcendent and epistemic aspects of art. In this essay we will not focus on the foundational interpretations of art; rather, we will appreciate art in light of its noetic dimension.

Making a basic distinction between *religion* (and *religious*) and *spiritual* may help clarify. Religion refers to a systematized approach to spiritual growth formed around standards, doctrines, rules of behavior, and rituals. Spiritual refers to an intimate and direct awareness of the divine. Spiritual experiences, including those on which the world religions were founded, are direct, personal, and have the effect, if only for a moment, of waking us up, expanding our consciousness of ourselves and our place in the world. They are often characterized by themes of interconnection, interrelationship, unity, the divine immanent, infinity and the eternal, the Self, shifts in awareness, and they are described as revealing hidden wholeness and engendering communion. What appears most universal across spiritual events is a shift or opening in the way we know the world (see Hart/Nelson/Puhakka). While spiritual art may also be religious--

representing a religious icon or idea for example, religious art is not necessarily spiritual. That is, religious art does not always derive from or evoke expanded knowing. Spiritual art, both as we create it and as we behold it, coaxes an expansion in our awareness and serves as “mediation between the spectator and the divine that we cannot name” (Duthuit 121)¹. This descent of spirit into form has the capacity of opening our knowing beyond and beneath the surface of the artistic form and into the invisibility of being.

Lipsev, in *An Art of Our Own*, writes that “the spiritual is not an abstract knowledge of cosmos or human nature; it is a renewed discovery, a beginning again and again. It is a shift of experience, the cleared vision, the daimon to which we all have the capacity to listen” (9). While present with such art, the grasping, holding, and judging of normal consciousness shifts toward beholding; distant observation becomes intimate participation; the separation between the knower and what is known collapses; the chattering mind becomes awareness; imagination soars; emotions flow; and light, space, and time transmute. While we might achieve such moments and knowing through compassionate service, meditation, love, and so forth, we can also be brought into this clearing through art. With spiritual art, consciousness is freed from the tangle of self-interest, and this allows us to reach the “disinterested joy” (Tagore) which is the source and goal of creation.

Creation

To say that some art is spiritual and other art is not is merely a relative position, and speaks of degrees, not of ultimate value. The creative act, the moment of inspiration and then expiration into form, is a common wave that runs through all art and all creativity. In and of itself we can claim that the act of creation (in art, of the universe, of the thought and quality of our life in this moment) is the most available touchstone and practice of spirituality. Whitehead

suggests that creation is the ultimate category, the category necessary to understand all others. Arieti names "creativity . . . as the humble human counterpart of God's creation" (4). Even the most secular artist inhabits the common ground that religious practice and artistic work share. That is, the artist, like the religious devotee, often feels that wholeness comes near only in returning to the sustenance and struggle that his or her practice or work provides, with its religious-like devotion, ritual, and sometimes renunciation of aspects of "normal" life. As with other spiritual practice, the self can be laid bare, pushed to its limits, and, for a moment, suspended to give form to a vision.

Spiritual art emerges out of (and engenders) a particular awareness or knowing. It emerges from the vision of the artist. Evelyn Underhill says of this vision:

This intuition of the Real lying at the root of the visible world and sustaining its life. . . *must* be present if these arts are to justify themselves as heightening forms of experience. . . . That 'life enhancing' power which has been recognized as the supreme quality of good painting, has its origin in this contact of the artistic mind with the archetypal--or, . . . the transcendental--world: the underlying verity of things. (74)

Inspiration sits at the opening to the vision. It emerged as a "birdsong" for Milton, like a dream for van Gogh, "song" for Goethe, a flash of light for Tchaikovsky, a beneficent power for Dickens, as a golden chain linking earth and heaven for Homer, and as love for Dante. An altered way of knowing underlies the various faces of inspiration; and the bright flashes or subtle traces of such knowing may bring sweetness, sustenance and may push for expression.

Inspiration is understood not simply as particular content, but as a way of knowing (see Hart). The word itself, stemming from the Latin "inspirare," implies being breathed into, filled or inflamed. For Nietzsche:

The notion of revelation describes its [inspiration's] conditions quite simply.

By this I mean that something profoundly convulsive and disturbing suddenly becomes visible and audible with indescribable definiteness and exactness. One hears, one does not seek; one takes, one does not ask who gives: a thought flashes like lightening, inevitable without hesitation--I have never had any choice about it. There is an ecstasy whose terrific tension is sometimes released by a flood of tears, during which one's progress varies from involuntary impetuosity to involuntary slowness. There is the feeling that one is utterly out of hand, with the most distinct consciousness of an infinitude of shuddering thrills that pass through one from head to toes--there is a profound happiness in which the most painful and gloomy feelings are not discordant in effect, but are required as necessary colors in the overflow of light--This is my experience of inspiration. (cited in Vogt 15)

From where does the vision come? Many artists credit God or divinity as their source of inspiration. Johannes Brahms believed that his music was given to him as revelation--the divine contacting the soul: "When I feel the urge I begin by appealing directly to my Maker. . . I feel vibrations . . . which assume the form of distinct mental images. Straightaway the ideas flow in upon me, directly from God" (Abell 62). Emerson understood the divine part of humans--"Oversoul"--as receiving inspiration from God. Milton conceived of inspiration as knowledge of God, Keats called it an achievement of "spirit creation" (see Williams 41). Other artists experience inspiration as emerging from internal forces at work in the unconscious. "I do not believe that inspiration falls from heaven. . . the poet is at the disposal of his night" (Cocteau as cited in Ghiselin 81- 82). And for M. C. Richards "what looks like inspiration is really the

organic principle trying to find a soft spot to sprout in” (Richards 63). Ultimately, the source will remain mysterious.

How can an artist provide “soft spot” to welcome inspiration? Rollo May provides one answer. He suggests that creative inspiration is dependent on encounter: "The deeper aspects of awareness are activated to the extent that the person is committed to the encounter" (May 46). Along with encounter is receptivity--"holding [oneself] alive to hear what being may speak. . . . [This] requires a nimbleness, a fine-honed sensitivity in order to let one's self be the vehicle of whatever vision may emerge" (91).

The creative process may be thought of as one of vision and revision. The artist “by means of veils and symbols. . . must interpret his free vision, his glimpse of the burning bush, to other men. He is the mediator between his brethren and the divine, for art is the link between appearance and reality.” (Underhill 75)². The need for revision--crafting, shaping, flowing, and forming, and reforming--follows the vision. This is a dance between craft (from the German Kraft which means power) and inspiration (breath). This is both very delicate and very important as the quality and power of the art is dependent on the adeptness at communion with the vision and the ability to transmit the vision through one’s craft. And as with any spiritual practice the artist’s job is often to get the “small self” out of the way. Painter Paul Klee says an artist "does nothing more than gather and pass on what comes to him from the depths. He neither serves nor rules. . . he transmits." (cited in Shallcross & Sisk 52). Dante said, "I am one who, when love breathes in me, takes note, and I, in that manner in which He dictates within me, go setting it down" (Williams 11). The artist’s role is humble, “he must clean house and await its (inspirations) due visitation" (Cocteau cited in Ghiselin 81- 82).

Artists sometimes describe a work as being technically better than they can do. And yet it is done. At times the artist is pushed by the vision to experiment in forms and mediums that are new to him or her, as the dance between vision, intent, surrender, and form unfolds. A shift of mediums or a “technical” breakthrough may allow the vision into being. Andy Lakey’s descriptions of the making of his angel paintings illustrates breaking through to the right medium as he accidentally spills one type of paint on another (Lakey & Walker 60-61). And if the creation does not happen, if the vision is unmanifest, often more than opportunity is lost. Artists may flop into despondency or agitation and lose meaning if they are unable to manifest the vision (e.g., see Schildkraut, Hirschfeld, & Murphy). And as Black Elk says: “For a person who has a vision, you do not get the power of your vision until you perform it on earth for the people to see” (in Richards xxii).

Artists are not only able to perceive and convey concealed worlds, the artistic activity itself creates new worlds. The materials and techniques of art become the artist's mode of expression, and by embodying his or her meaning, they help create and give it objective existence. As the artist participates in a subtle dialogue with the world, the miraculous emerges in the discovery that the act of creating art can evoke a natural world that nature does not know. The artist becomes an active participant in the creation process itself. There are times, of course, when we move slowly towards that which beckons, and times when we miss the beacon altogether. However, since there is no true closeness to the divine that is not related to our actual human living, through art we are made more aware that we can be a refinement of the sense of truth. Creating (and perceiving) great art has the capacity to remind us of our potential to express our world, and ourselves, and to hint at the mystery out of which all is born. And most importantly, art is not confined to paint and poem but extends to how we dance through our daily

lives. We can, in other words, become embodiments of the divine expression, our world, and ourselves in each moment. Kahlil Gibran wrote:

Beauty is life when life unveils her holy face.

But you are life and you are the veil.

Beauty is eternity gazing at itself in a mirror.

But you are eternity and you are the mirror. (76)

Beholding

Once brought into form (as poetry, painting, etc.) inspired art becomes a contagion itself. Plato writes that inspiration is “a divine power, which moves you like . . . a magnetThe Muse inspires man herself, and then by means of these inspired persons the inspiration spreads to others, and holds them in a connected chain” (Plato lines 533 D-E). Art may resonate with the viewer, reminding, coaxing, opening to an expanded awareness. Georges Duthuit says,

I ask of it [i.e., art] to facilitate for us communion with the things of this world, to make us sense the profound bond which unites those things, one to another, and even perhaps to suggest to us the existence of a transcendent principle revealing itself through things, while placing itself beyond them. (119)

He goes on to say that “the art object has no value in itself, it only has a value as intermediary between the spectator and something divine” (121). And what Duthuit calls divine may not be distant but simply hidden. As Lucy Grealy writes: “It [takes] hidden and little-understood parts of my own mind and soul and connect[s] them to the light of day in such a way that the world, so alien and disparate only moments before, suddenly shimmer[s] with a new meaning and beauty.”³

The process on both sides (creating and beholding) of spiritual art is described as timeless, riveting of attention, non-linear, a “fusion of horizons” (Wilber “To See a World: Art

and the I of the Beholder” 133). Such experience does not lend itself to conventional interpretation, especially from the art critic. The experience is post-reflective and post-rational as the linear mind collapses into the now. We are brought bare, surprised, perhaps with some resistance, but with any luck, opening and surrendering to the wave as it passes into and through us, and in so doing it enlivens and awakens. This shift in knowing is described by Wilber (“To See a World: Art and the I of the Beholder”):

Great art grabs you, against your will, and then suspends your will. You are ushered into a quiet clearing, free of desire, free of grasping, free of ego. . . . And through that opening or clearing in your own awareness may come flashing higher truths, subtler revelations, profound connections. . . . When we look at a beautiful object we suspend all other activity, and we simply are aware, we only want to contemplate the object. . . . we cease the restless movement that otherwise characterizes our every waking moment. (135). . . .

Great art suspends the reverted eye, the lamented past, the anticipated future: we enter into the timeless present. . . . it suspends our desire to be elsewhere, releases us from the coil of ourselves. (134)

An echo or resonance is produced in the viewer when one is open to the art. Nature is on the inside, Cézanne tells us. Quality, light, color, depth, which are there before us, are there only because they awaken an echo in our body and because the body welcomes them (Merleau-Ponty 164). The resonance may engender sorrow or joy, or most anything else. And while it may invite a kind of universal awareness in the viewer from one person to the next and from one time to the next, it will also be unique. As we meet a work of art our individual consciousness may find fear one day and joyful release the next as our own awareness shifts and grows. Spiritual art

serves to remind and awaken, and its viewing can become a growth practice or an act of communion and prayer.

In works of art “there is much more than mere aesthetic value; they constitute living forces, almost living entities, embodying a power that has suggestive and creative effects” (Assagioli 283). In order to feel it “*within ourselves*” and achieve the full benefit, the art be must be contemplated

intently, in a state of sympathetic and quiet receptivity. . . until we become wholly absorbed by it, until we feel ourselves to be the thing or picture we are contemplating. For instance, if we contemplate the resurrected Christ of Fra Angelico, we should feel that it is *our own spirit* that has arisen from the tomb (283).

Emanuel Swedenborg’s concept of “correspondence” maintains that “all aspects of existence, whether they are things, words, objects, have an internal spiritual meaning” (Taylor 4) and are aspects of the divine. “But this reality is normally hidden from view and the extent to which a person sees is a measure of his or her internal spiritual development” (4). For a person moved by art there is an awakening of a spiritual knowing or interior sense that moves “through the power of emotions, leads them into the unconscious, and then transports them to the higher sphere by the purity of motive and by the path of inspiration” (17).

According to G. I. Gurdjieff, the level of consciousness is inextricably linked to frequency of vibration. Certain frequencies of vibrations--colors, shapes, geometric figures, and above all proportions--evoke corresponding frequencies in us, each of which has a specific quality (Brook 31). This enables every phenomenon to be situated in its relationship to others. In as much as it incorporates the human experience, this dimension is perceptible. We recognize it, we talk of it, yet it remains difficult to define--we might call it "quality". We live according to an

intuitive sense of its meaning, and it guides most of our attitudes and decisions. Each individual's perception is in accordance with the level on which he or she is alive and awake. When the German scientist and philosopher, Leibnitz, watched Rembrandt paint, he described him as believing that “if he laughs in soul while painting, the painting will exhale joy, and if he covers it with his sighs and moaning, the painting will exhale sorrow” (cited in Roerich 8). Rembrandt knew that in order to convey a living message, and the truth of an experience, the artist must identify with the inner soul of the subject that he is expressing. As artistic perception is embodied, it serves as a silent exposure of potential within ourselves. To the extent that we are open to it, the perception of quality will determine the extent and depth of our communion with art and with life in general. In this opening the mind has opportunity to become aware of some mysterious truth. And when one approaches the wonderful one knows not whether art is Tao or Tao is art.⁴

Uncovering Spiritual Art

Keeping in mind an integral approach that understands that meaning is not confined to a single perspective or aspect, we will now consider several examples of spiritual art (primarily visual). Specifically, we will look at its role as a component of an epistemic event (see Ferrer). These examples include both art with a religious theme (e.g., Christian architecture, Buddhist Calligraphy) and non-religious art.

In religious art, meaning and evocation may be partially dependent on the signifiers referring to particular religious ideas (e.g., love), people (e.g., Jesus), or events (e.g., crucifixion). Meaning is sometimes revealed or enhanced by one's knowledge of the signifiers. At other times the spiritual resonance opens us without prior conceptual understanding. A brief examination of religious art provides examples of its capacity to shift our knowing and engender a spiritual

event. Although this discussion is without the great benefit of pictures, we will attempt to convey some sense of these images and the knowing evoked.

Different religions have different views of the cosmos, and differing ways of connecting with it. In the Judeo-Christian religions, the universe is experienced under the transcendent God who is creator and source of all truth. Christian art is often iconic. Depictions of Christ, his life and teachings, and Mother Mary, are intended to evoke the spiritual experience of the embodiment of the Christian message of Divine love. The work of Russian icon painters comes to mind as well as the architecture of many churches, which is specifically designed to evoke a transcendent Christian experience. Gothic cathedrals, for example, are designed so that when one walks into them, one walks through square doors, past square columns, through the cathedral towards the three circular apses, the rose window and the crucifix. Symbolically, the squares represent the imminent world of form, the circular spaces and the rose window represent the transcendent realm of unity and wholeness, and the three apses symbolize the Trinity. The incredible height of the cathedrals serves to draw the eye upwards and may evoke a feeling of transcendence, but could also stimulate for some viewers a sense of distance. As one walks through the space, the eye is drawn along the horizontal plane until it espies the crucifix and is drawn upwards towards the vertical plane. The living experience can be the embodiment of the cross, with the human being becoming the axis mundi with his or her consciousness in Christ.

Evoking a somewhat different experience, the forms of a Romanesque church flow one into the other, on and on around you embracing, perhaps even swallowing you up. The form flows around a center within the church, making you as viewer central--enveloping, addressing you and turning the question back on you. In Early Christian churches, the Christos, the face of Christ, is in the central dome looking down. The image is so designed that it exists in the space

of the church, not as something beyond. It exists in your space; it is falling into you, into the center of your being. For some this may soothe, for others it may terrify.

Jewish and Islamic art are deliberately non-representational. God is seen as the Divine Unity, the seer and healer of all, infinite and indivisible, unique, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, and imageless. Jewish and Islamic religious books, artifacts, synagogues and mosques are full of intricate non-representational expressions of art. Spiritual reminders are embodied in the geometric abstract shapes that are without beginning or end, flowing contiguously in infinite patterns, producing rhythm, and creating beautiful forms without producing images. The constantly repeated patterns suggest infinity, diversity in unity and the knowledge of an ultimate order in an ordered universe. The art is expressly meant to inspire the love of God in the viewer. Islam adheres to the idea that beauty most closely approaches the symmetry of one's internal nature. The quest for beauty, therefore, resembles the quest for the soul. In the words of the mystic poet, Kahlil Gibran, "Beauty is not a need but an ecstasy. . . . a heart inflamed and a soul enchanted" (75).

In Islamic miniature painting, the eye is drawn to the various parts of the paintings in a spiral pattern. The esoteric significance of the spiral symbolized the "helical movement" which represents the descent from Allah to the soul of man, and then the return heavenward to its maker. The spiral represents the mystical, alchemical and religious movement of the circumambulation of the worshiper coming closer to the inner sanctum of divine realization with each turn until he or she finally enters into the state of union. The spiral, by its hidden presence in the core of the microcosm of the painting, is the secret mandala organizing simultaneously, the art and the universe, thereby having the power to inspire meaningfulness and a sense of completion.

In Eastern meditative traditions, spiritual power is considered both transcendent and immanent, evidenced in both the cosmos and in the life of the devotee. Hindu and Buddhist art has many sacred images whose purpose is to bring the observer to his spiritual center. True knowledge, or as the Buddhists call it, "Right knowledge," implies an identification of the observer with the observed and an experience of the oneness of reality.

For many centuries there has been a formalized relationship between art and spiritual practice in the East (and perhaps to a lesser degree in the West). It is considered a great blessing to make or keep sacred images. Implications of the spiritual process are imbued within every piece of Eastern sacred art. The physical image acts as a base that can support or encourage the presence of the divinity being portrayed.

Tibetan art can serve as one particular example of an Eastern approach to religious art. Tibetan Buddhism is a combination of Sutrayana, the exoteric understanding, and Mantrayana, the esoteric aspect of life. The concept of divinity is perceived differently from these two perspectives. The purpose of Sutrayana art is to serve as a reminder of the spiritual path and it inspires the viewer to maintain awareness of meditation and spiritual qualities. Most Sutrayana art depicts Buddhas who are usually shown as monks with their bodies adorned with the one hundred and twelve marks of major and minor signs of perfection. They look more or less identical and can be distinguished as individuals by their hand positions and the objects they hold. In the Mantrayana tradition, the teaching is of the Buddha nature, which is reflected in all beings, but needs to be uncovered. The art of this tradition consists of meditational deities, forms of the Buddhas each with their own mandalas and sacred texts. All the sacred images have three dimensions to their divinity, the inner, outer, and the secret dimensions. As an example, Avolokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of compassion, is depicted with the palms of his two hands

folded together in the mudra of compassion, and between them, he holds a wishfulfilling gem because the practice of compassion fulfills all the wishes for one's self and others. When depicted with four hands, they represent love, compassion, the ability to experience joy at the success of others, and the equanimity that holds compassion for all, regardless of their worthiness. Sometimes he is depicted with a thousand hands and eyes, and these stand for the idea that compassion works to benefit the world in a thousand ways, and watches with a thousand eyes of wisdom. The outer meaning of Avolokiteshvara is that of a being who was once an ordinary person who achieved enlightenment through a path of compassion in action. Externally, through meditation on this Buddha, one can receive the blessings of the Bodhisattva divinity. The inner meaning reveals Avolokiteshvara as a symbol of compassion, an attribute all people possess in latent form, and may achieve through the cultivation of their own inner quality of compassion and wisdom. The secret meaning of Avolokiteshvara shows the manner in which the spiritual quality of compassion is always present in every experience. Meditation on this deity teaches that we can learn compassion from even the most painful ordeal.

In some traditions, calligraphy is a highly respected art form. Copying sacred texts is considered to be a form of meditation and an act of great merit. In Chinese Buddhism for example, words are considered sacred, and calligraphy is valued as having a profound purpose. Chinese calligraphy is rooted in a net of well-defined pictographs and principles to which the written word, and every act of writing, must conform in order to fulfill its purpose. Two of these principles are “zhi” and “wen”. Zhi represents the medium, motif and method of the art. Wen refers to a transcendence of physical reality, or a delving into the deeper reality, the Tao. In Chinese art, the significance of any artistic creation is measured by the ideal of the equilibrium between these two qualities. A beautiful example of Chinese calligraphy can be found on their

"wordgates". Wordgates are found in shrines, family alters, schools, gardens, temples and even restaurants. The words of this particular form of verse, taken from Confucian, Taoist or Buddhist texts, are written vertically in columns framing doorways with sacred poetry. This is called "ying lian", literally, pillar couplets. Lian means to unite. It implies mutuality and interdependence. The pillar couplets follow intricate patterns of interrelationship in meaning both within and between the columns. "Individual words or phrases speak across the open space in pairs, rather like a poetic dance.... Mountain in one column speaks to cloud in the other, the sound of a flute to empty sky, Heaven to Earth, violence to peace, yin to yang" (Walker 66). There is significance in the balancing of complimentary pairs. The purpose of the couplets is to evoke the knowing of those who enter the doorway, preparing the way for the inner experience. The wordgate, therefore, is a symbol and an opportunity for transformation. The boundary represented by the written columns is about removing boundaries, and the silent center of the doorways demonstrates the nature of universal possibility.

Spiritual knowing may infuse some religious art, but it is not confined to formal religion. Themes of interconnection, interrelationship, unity, the divine in form, infinity and the eternal, hidden patterns of wholeness, the Self, shifts in awareness, and so forth, often define spiritual experience and, in turn, inspire and shape the artistic impulse.

Not all visions are the same, of course, nor do they emerge from the same place or evoke the same response in the viewer. Transpersonal psychology has identified different aspects of consciousness, especially those potentialities beyond the ego. Wilber's (*The Spectrum of Consciousness*) spectrum model has been foremost. While spiritual art may have infinite variation and expression, we may be able to recognize art as emerging from and evoking certain developmental dimensions--the existential, or the eco-noetic self, the archetypal, or the non-dual,

for example. These visions may approach my soul, or engage my transcendent spirit, or bring me in communion with the natural world or the existential now. William Blake's etchings particularly capture what we might call the human and the soul with its longing and struggle for unity. His subjects are often gloriously and painfully stretched between two worlds infused by both. M. C. Richards (1962) hints at identification with the entire material world or "world soul" as she writes, "imagine inventing yellow, or moving for the very first time in a cherry curve" (70). Alex Grey's paintings capture the multi-dimensionality of vision. His paintings show the superstructure of musculature or veins, the human form and the etheric aura. (Wilber and Grey). Although as Wilber (*A Brief History of Everything*) has suggested, our consciousness is more like a blob than a pinpoint and so we may be touched or moved on a wide variety of levels.

Artists may not necessarily think of their work as spiritual or transpersonal, but artistic expression can be seen as the personal search for ultimate meaning, for example, the revelation of the divine in human nature and in the world. Vincent Van Gogh expressed his experience of the divine unity in his painting "The Starry Night" in which everything appears to be alive and in motion. "For him the distinctions between organic and inorganic, animate and inanimate, or void and mass do not exist. All of creation exhibits the divine presence" (Feldman 40). Through this work the viewer has the opportunity to share that perception and touch that place within him or her self.

Some artists are consciously aware of the desire to express their experiences of a spiritual connection. For example, Taylor has described the influence of Emanuel Swedenborg on the American 19th century landscapes of Paul Inness. The stated intent of Inness was to awaken one to the "interior view of things" as Swedenborg had described. The Canadian painters, Emily Carr, Fred Varley, Bertram Booker, Jock Macdonald and Lawren Harris specifically explored

mystical form, attained through contemplative openness to a hidden spiritual dimension of reality, that they perceived to pervade both nature and the self (Davis). They subscribed to the Theosophical doctrine that maintains that the terrestrial and celestial realms are corresponding and continuous, and also to the transcendental belief that nature is the outward expression of the ultimate reality. Davis described their achievements as outward manifestations of intuitions and intimations of the ineffable and the divine. They wished to surrender through contemplation, expanding their sense of interiorization and through their art, make visible the hidden universe. Emily Carr describes her mystical awakening as “something that spoke to the very mighty wonderful soul of her, surging through her whole being like a great river rushing on” (qtd. in Davis 7), and this experience profoundly affected the way she painted. She wrote in her diary that although not every artist thought of himself or herself as religious, “if something other than the material did not speak to him, and if he did not have faith in that something and also in himself, he would not try to express it” (Davis 10). She was seeking both higher inspiration and attempting to capture this in paint.

Carr understood the importance of what she called soul, a deeper and more unifying aspect of reality. She wrote:

I think we miss our goal when we only regard parts, overlooking the ensemble, painting the trees and forgetting the forest. Not one part can be forgotten. . . . On, on, deeper and deeper, with the soul of the thing burrowing into it's depths and intensity till that thing is a reality to us and speaks one grand inaudible word--God. The movement and direction of lines and planes shall express some attribute of God--power, peace, strength, sincerity and joy. The movement shall be so great the picture will rock and sway together, carrying the

artist and after him the looker with it, catching up with the soul of the thing and marching on together. (Davis 12)

The Abstract Expressionists of the mid-twentieth century tried to express spiritual qualities in abstract landscapes, particularly the spiritual idea here is that each component is of equal importance, themes of interconnection, unity, and the inseparability of parts to the whole is foremost. They experimented with portraying particular aspects or elements of those qualities. Barnett Newman, a colorfield artist, painting flat colored canvasses with strong lines, experimented with the themes of subject and object in his art. He felt that if a painting had no object, it did not necessarily mean that it did not have a subject. The lines on his paintings attempt to unite the painting, and to create a totality where the beginning and the end, and the interior and the exterior happen at once. Helen Frankenthaler spoke of her paintings as having a ground that is part of the medium colorwise, every inch of the surface of equal importance in shape, everything as important as everything else.

The fundamental nature of relationships as an expression of wholeness is captured by Georges Braque, the French Cubist artist, "I do not believe in things, I believe in relationships" (Crone and Koernner 4), and the interrelatedness of his cubist images reflect this idea. The spiritual insight is that all is contingent on the existence of all else. This concept, often explicit in Buddhism, is explored by someone unfamiliar with any Buddhist doctrine. Taken to its extreme this interrelationship is often expressed as the spiritual insight of unity or oneness as described here by Emily Carr:

The subject means little. The arrangement, the design, colour, shape, depth, light, space, mood, movement, balance, not one of these fills the bill. There is something additional, a

breath that draws your breath into its breathing, a heartbeat that pounds on yours, a recognition of the oneness of all things. (cited in Davis 16)

Spiritual experience is often described as a shift in vantage point. Aquinas, for example, referred to *gnome* as the ability to see things from a greater height, or to see through or into things. As we change vantage point the invisible becomes visible. Microscopes, telescopes, views of the earth from satellite's and so forth reveal a hidden world. Comparing notes with members of an Aboriginal tribe, or with revelers around a table at a Paris cafe has the effect of offering new points of view as well. As these views are exposed, some artists find universal themes or images across time, scale, and culture. These may be interpreted as evidence of the hidden wholeness, archetypal pattern, unitive forms, or even a neurological predisposition to recognize certain shapes and patterns. For example, Vimercati and Bezruczko find stunning comparisons between images from particular artists and organic images revealed through the microscope.

We may also intuit or resonate with certain patterns that reveal unexpected forms. Sante Fe artist Christine Chalmers brings to her work an appreciation of the innate geometry of life. Chalmers employs "sacred geometry, as expressed in spirals, the proportions of the Fibonacci numbers which make up the mathematical proportions of many things in the universe: the nautilus shell, the spiraling trunks of eucalyptus trees, the seed arrangement in the sunflower, the cochlea of the human ear, DNA, the proportion from joint to joint, and so on" (Chalmers 1). Ancient concepts of harmonious proportion (e.g., the Golden Mean) take on new meaning with the discovery of innate patterns that seem to under gird nature, such as the Mandelbrot set, a radical but simple mathematical formula that is visually represented in fractals. These fractals, which include spiral forms, have turned out to be a key to such scientific breakthrough as data

compression and image regeneration through computers, and appear to be the hidden pattern that shapes such things as coastlines and cloud formations. Again, we may find resonance with these hidden patterns and they may evoke a sense of unity with nature and creation.

In a similar vein, symmetry as well as the experience of infinity and the eternal nature of existence is sometimes experienced in spiritual knowing. The Dutch painter, Mauritz Cornelius Escher was intrigued by geometric structure. His painting was very strictly structured, and all his work involved repetition and symmetry. He became fascinated with tessellation used in Islamic mosaics and created art using the principles of the geometry of symmetry, and the geometric properties of space. Escher was fascinated by the idea of infinity, and of bringing infinity to finite terms, and this he accomplished in his art through the use of the principle of inversion. His paintings fascinate us as the more we look at them, the more they reveal, thereby reflecting the hiddenness and multiplicity of life within a single unified whole (Escher).

Another spiritual theme is that of wholeness of the Self. Cross culturally Jung finds the mandala to be a symbolic archetype of the psyche arising spontaneously out of the unconscious and serving as a profound psychological and spiritual path towards individuation. When the "Self" symbol emerges in our dreams, meditations or art works, it reflects a transformation of opposites into a higher synthesis. Jung maintains that the energy of the deity at the central point of the mandala is manifested psychologically as a compulsion to become one's ultimate true nature. He describes the overall purpose of both designing and contemplating the mandala as one of shifting the psychological center from the personal ego to the impersonal non-ego, which is then experienced as the real ground of the personality.

M. C. Richards takes the circle of the mandala and gives it three dimensions (at least) as she breathes life into the simple curve of a circle and forms a bowl that seems to be a repository for soul:

The imagery of centering is archetypal. To feel the whole in every part. . . . A form, which can reveal to my consciousness and to others deeper meanings. . . . The deeper we go into these realms, the more we come into contact with another's reality. . . . The center holds us all, and as we speak out of it, we speak in a common voice. (4) Any bowl is symbolic of an archetypal circular form, which I share with all, but which *I* make and which therefore contains those very qualities of myself which are active in the making. . . . Pots have the smell of the person who makes them: a smell of tenderness, vanity or ambition, of ease or naturalness. . . . The pot gives off. . . its innerness, that which it holds but which cannot be seen. (20)

Conclusion

Some art has an extraordinary capacity to shift or deepen the way we know and live the world. A transpersonal understanding of such art recognizes that spiritual art is not determined by the: intent of the artist, religious affiliation, object represented, form of the expression, or cultural backdrop. Instead, spiritual art derives from and evokes a state of knowing or consciousness in the artist and also in the beholder. Through the gateway of spiritual art, we are brought nearer the place where the edges of the artist, the art, and the viewer mingle and merge.

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¹ All material from Georges Duthuit has been translated and provided by the kindness of Pat deSorcery, to whom we are indebted.

² Underhill also clarifies the distinction between mystic and artist: "The true mystic is the person in whom such powers transcend the merely artistic and visionary stage, and are exalted to the point of genius: in whom the transcendental consciousness can dominate the normal consciousness." (75)

³ This quote appears on the back jacket of Lauren Slater's Welcome to My Country: A Therapist's Memoir of Madness. New York: Random House, 1966.

⁴ From Lauren Slater Welcome Madness. New York: Random House, 1966.