

*Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art.* By Titus Burckhardt. Translated and edited by William Stoddart. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987. 270 pages.

One could not imagine a better introduction—or more suitable homage—to the life's work of T. Burckhardt (1908-1984) than the 25 essays collected and translated here, together with a short biographical note. Even readers already acquainted with Burckhardt's books on Islamic mysticism or medieval Christian (and Islamic) architecture and religious arts are likely to be surprised by the vast range of subjects and religious traditions covered in these articles, and those encountering his writings for the first time can pursue their particular interests through the complete bibliography of his publications (and subsequent translations in five languages) provided at the end.

The editor has divided these articles (drawn from a wide range of French and German-language publications) into four sections, roughly corresponding to the main subjects and religious traditions dealt with in all of Burckhardt's writings. The opening studies on "Traditional Cosmology and the Modern World" are representative of his lifelong efforts to point out the deeper symbolic and spiritual significance and lasting validity of common cosmological themes and assumptions shared by many of the world religions. (Fortunately for most readers, this is also the only section where the polemic tone and familiar dogmatic assumptions associated with the works of R. Guénon are particularly in evidence.) The following shorter studies on "Christian Themes"—ranging from Dante and Chartres to Russian icons and Swiss folk art—illustrate in a brief space that recurrent concern for bringing out the spiritual meaning and intentions of sacred iconography which is the unifying focus of Burckhardt's many books on the religious art and architecture of medieval Christianity and Islam.

The articles in the following section on "Symbolism and Mythology" turn the same eye for spiritual symbolism to themes that are either more universal (the symbolism of the mirror, water, alchemy or the sacred mask) or tied to less familiar religious traditions ("The Return of Ulysses" and the Crow sun dance). Precisely because these subjects are less bound up with familiar schemas of interpretation, these essays—such as Burckhardt's masterly unfolding of the "Symbolism of Chess"—are likely to give the clearest sense both of his actual spiritual method

and of the *autobiographical* dimension, the particular spiritual and aesthetic sensibility that brought together such outwardly disparate interests.

Finally, the essays on “Islamic Themes” (including translations and commentaries on works of Ghazali and Ibn Mashīsh) point to the area of Burckhardt’s work, including his pioneering translations from Ibn ‘Arabi and other Islamic mystics, which is probably destined to have the greatest lasting influence. Paradoxically, as can be seen in some of his latest writings here, his original attempts to transmit something of an earlier living Sufi tradition to a European audience have turned out to be of even greater interest to modern Muslims, from many backgrounds, for whom the loss of tradition and the secular disenchantment of the world (especially as promoted in religious “reformist” and “fundamentalist” guise) are far more than speculatively academic and historical questions.

Readers approaching these writings for the first time are likely to be struck not so much by any “school” or “doctrine” as by a sense of the individual, of having encountering someone with an extraordinary aesthetic and spiritual sensitivity—a quality that may not be unrelated to the author’s own family background (including the famous historian Jacob Burckhardt). If there is a single unifying principle in these works drawn from such different contexts, it is perhaps best suggested in the brief “letter on spiritual method”, summarizing the functions and qualifications of a genuine spiritual master, that the editor has placed at the very end. Just as the classical Sufi poets offered endless tales and images designed to awaken their listeners to the divine reality and presence within all the forms and events of their daily lives, so this writer seems to have been driven to penetrate and transmit the spiritual meanings of whatever “traditional” symbols and rituals he happened to encounter. And if, as Burckhardt often insists, such intentions, in pointing “beyond forms”, necessarily follow a different direction from the more familiar historical and analytical approaches of academia, still scholars and amateurs alike, from many fields, will no doubt continue to draw inspiration from the studies (and the often “iconoclastic” perspective) represented here.

Only those familiar with the diversity of Burckhardt’s writings and the difficulties of the original French and German texts (often full of transliterations from Arabic, Sanskrit, etc.) can fully appreciate the editor/translator’s efforts, both in organizing and translating this material,

and his constant attention to detail. A measure of his true success is that one is rarely aware of reading a translation.