

The Universality of Sacred Art

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When historians of art apply the term “sacred” to any and every work that has a religious subject, they overlook the fact that art is essentially form. An art cannot be called sacred solely because its subjects derive from spiritual truths; its formal language must also derive from the same source. This is by no means the case with a religious art like that of the Renaissance or Baroque periods, which, as far as style is concerned, in no way differs from the fundamentally profane art of those periods; neither its subjects, which, in a wholly outward and so to speak literary manner, it takes from religion, nor the devotional feelings with which it is often permeated, nor even the nobility of soul which sometimes finds expression in it, suffice to confer on it a truly sacred character. No art merits the epithet sacred unless its very forms reflect the spiritual vision characteristic of a particular religion.

Every form “vehicles” a particular quality of being. The religious subject of a work of art can be merely superimposed on a form, in which case it lacks any relation to the formal “language” of the work, as is demonstrated by Christian art since the Renaissance. Such productions are merely profane works of art with a religious theme. On the other hand, there is no sacred art which is profane in form, for there is a rigorous analogy between form and spirit. A spiritual vision necessarily finds its expression in a particular formal language. If this language has been forgotten—with the result that a so-called sacred art draws its forms from absolutely any kind of profane art—it means that a spiritual vision of things no longer exists.

It would be meaningless to seek to excuse the protean style of a religious art, or its indefinite and ill-defined character, on the grounds of the universality of dogma or the freedom of the spirit. Granted that spirituality in itself is independent of forms, this in no way implies that it can be expressed and transmitted by any and every kind of form. Through its qualitative essence, form has a place in the sensible order analogous to that of truth in the intellectual order; this is the significance of the Greek notion of *eidos*. Just as a mental form, such as a dogma or a doctrine, can be an adequate, albeit limited, reflection of a Divine Truth, so a sensible form can retrace a truth or a reality which transcends both the plane of sensible forms and the plane of thought.

Every sacred art is therefore founded on a science of forms, or in other words, on the

symbolism inherent in forms. It must be borne in mind that a sacred symbol is not merely a conventional sign; it manifests its archetype by virtue of a certain ontological law. As Ananda Coomaraswamy has observed, a sacred symbol *is*, in a sense, that which it expresses. For this very reason, traditional symbolism is never devoid of beauty. In the terms of a spiritual vision of the world, the beauty of an object is nothing other than the transparency of its existential envelopes. An art worthy of the name is beautiful because it is true.

It is neither possible nor necessary that every artist or craftsman engaged in sacred art be conscious of the Divine Law inherent in forms; he will only know certain aspects of it, or certain applications that arise within the limits of the rules of his craft. These rules will enable him to paint an icon, to fashion a sacred vessel, or to practice calligraphy in a liturgically valid manner, without it being necessary for him to know the ultimate significance of the symbols he is working with. It is tradition that transmits the sacred models and the working rules, and thereby guarantees the spiritual validity of the forms. Tradition possesses a secret power which is communicated to an entire civilization and determines even those arts and crafts whose immediate objects include nothing particularly sacred. This power creates the style of a traditional civilization. A style—something that cannot be imitated from the outside—is perpetuated without difficulty, in a quasi-organic manner, by the sole power of the spirit by which it is animated.

One of the most tenacious of modern prejudices is the one that opposes the impersonal and objective rules of an art for fear that they might stifle creative genius. In reality, there is no traditional work—one governed by immutable principles—which does not give sensible expression to creative joy in the soul; modern individualism, on the other hand, has produced, apart from a few works of genius which are nevertheless spiritually barren, all the ugliness—the endless and hopeless ugliness—of the forms that fill the “ordinary life” of our time.

One of the fundamental conditions of happiness is to know that everything one does has an eternal meaning; but who at the present time can still conceive of a civilization in which all its vital aspects are developed “in the likeness of Heaven”? In a theocentric society, the humblest activity participates in this heavenly benediction.

The ultimate objective of sacred art is not to evoke feelings or communicate impressions; it is a symbol, and as such it employs simple and primordial means. It cannot in any case be anything more than allusive, its real object being ineffable. It is of angelic origin, because its models reflect supra-formal realities. By recapitulating the creation—the “Divine art”—in parables, it demonstrates the symbolical nature of the world, and so liberates the human spirit from its attachment to crude and ephemeral “facts”.

The angelic origin of art is explicitly formulated by the Hindu tradition. According to the

Aitareya Brâhmana, every work of art in the world is achieved by imitation of the art of the *devas*, “whether it be an elephant in terracotta, a bronze object, an article of clothing, a gold ornament, or a mule-cart”. The Christian legends that attribute an angelic origin to certain miraculous images, exemplify the same idea¹.

The *devas* are nothing more nor less than particular functions of the Universal Spirit, permanent expressions of the Will of God. According to a doctrine common to all traditional civilizations, sacred art must imitate Divine Art, but it must be clearly understood that this in no way implies that the finished Divine creation, the world such as we see it, should be copied, for such would be pure pretension. A literal “naturalism” is foreign to sacred art. What must be copied is the manner in which the Divine Spirit works². Its laws must be transposed into the restricted domain in which man works as man, that is to say, into craftsmanship.

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In no traditional doctrine does the idea of the Divine Art play so fundamental a part as in Hindu doctrine. For *Mâyâ* is not only the mysterious Divine Power that causes the world to appear to exist outside of Divine Reality, and as such is the source of all duality and all illusion; but *Mâyâ*, in her positive aspect, is also the Divine Art that produces every form. In principle, *Mâyâ* is nothing other than the possibility of the Infinite to limit Itself, and so to become the object of Its own “vision”, without Its infinity being thereby limited. In this way, God both manifests, and does not manifest, Himself in the world. He both expresses Himself and remains silent.

Just as, by virtue of its *Mâyâ*, the Absolute objectivizes certain aspects of Itself, or certain possibilities contained in Itself and determines them by a distinctive vision, so the artist realizes in his work certain aspects of himself. He projects them, as it were, outside his undifferentiated being. And to the extent that his objectivization reflects the secret depths of his being, it will take on a purely symbolical character, while at the same time the artist will become more and more conscious of the abyss dividing the form, reflector of his essence, from what that essence really is in its timeless plenitude. The traditional artist knows: this form is myself, nevertheless I am

¹ In the terminology of the monotheistic religions the *devas* correspond to angels, in so far as the latter represent divine aspects.

² According to St Thomas Aquinas, “Art is the imitation of Nature in her manner of operation”, *Summa Theologica*, 1.117. 1.

infinitely more than it, for its Essence remains the pure Knower, the Witness which no form can grasp; but he also knows that it is God who expresses Himself through his work, so that the work, in its turn transcends the weak and fallible ego of the man.

Herein lies the analogy between Divine Art and human art: namely in the realization of oneself by objectivization. If this objectivization is to have spiritual significance, and not be merely a vague introversion, its means of expression must spring from an essential vision. In other words, it must not be the “ego”, root of illusion and ignorance of oneself, which arbitrarily chooses those means; they must be derived from tradition, from the formal and “objective” revelation of the supreme Being, who is the “Self” of all beings.

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Likewise from the Christian point of view, God is “artist” in the most exalted sense of the word, because He created man “in His own image” (Genesis: 1,27). Moreover, since the image comprises not only a likeness to its model, but also a quasi-absolute unlikeness, it cannot but become corrupted. The divine reflection in man was troubled by the fall of Adam; the mirror was tarnished; and yet man could not be completely cast aside; for while the creature is subject to its own limitations, Divine Plenitude is not subject to limitation of any kind. This amounts to saying that the said limitations cannot in any real sense be opposed to Divine Plenitude, which manifests Itself as limitless Love, the very limitlessness of which demands that God, “pronouncing” Himself as Eternal Word, should descend into this world, and, as it were, assume the perishable outlines of the image—human nature—and so to restore to it its original beauty. In Christianity, the divine image *par excellence* is the human form of the Christ. Christian art has thus but one purpose: the transfiguration of man, and of the world that depends on man, by their participation in the Christ.

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What the Christian view of things grasps by means of a sort of loving concentration on the Word incarnate in Jesus Christ, is transposed, in the Islamic perspective, into the universal

and the impersonal. In Islam, the Divine Art—and according to the Koran God is “artist” (*musawwir*)—is in the first place the manifestation of the Divine Unity in the beauty and regularity of the cosmos. Unity is reflected in the harmony of the multiple, in order, and in equilibrium; beauty has all these aspects within itself.

To arrive at Unity from the starting-point of the beauty of the world—this is wisdom. For this reason, Islamic thought necessarily links art to wisdom; in the eyes of a Muslim, art is essentially founded on wisdom, or “science”, this science being simply the formulation of wisdom in temporal terms. The purpose of art is to enable the human ambience—the world in so far as it is fashioned by man—to participate in the order that most directly manifests Divine Unity. Art clarifies the world; it helps the spirit to detach itself from the disturbing multitude of things, so that it may rise up towards Infinite Unity.

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Transposing the notion of “Divine Art” to Buddhism—which avoids the personification of the Absolute—it applies to the miraculous, and mentally inexhaustible, beauty of the Buddha. Whereas no doctrine concerned with God can escape, in its formulation, from the illusory character of mental processes, which attribute their own limits to the limitless and their own conjectural forms to the formless, the beauty of the Buddha radiates a state of being which is not limited by any mental process. This beauty is reflected in the beauty of the lotus; it is perpetuated ritually in the painted or sculpted image of the Buddha.

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According to the Taoist view of things, the Divine Art is essentially the art of transformation: the whole of nature is ceaselessly being transformed, always in accordance with the laws of the cycle; its contrasts revolve around a single center which eludes apprehension. Nevertheless any one who understands this circular movement is thereby enabled to recognize the center which is its essence. The purpose of art is to conform to this cosmic rhythm. The most simple formula states that mastery in art consists in the capacity to trace a perfect circle in a

single stroke, and thereby to identify oneself implicitly with its center, without the center itself being explicitly expressed.

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All these fundamental aspects of sacred art are present, in one way or another, and in varying proportions, in each of the five great religions just mentioned, for each one essentially possesses the fullness of Divine Truth and Grace, so that each one would be capable, in principle, of manifesting every possible form of spirituality. Nevertheless, since each religion is necessarily dominated by a particular point of view which determines its spiritual "economy", its works of art-which are necessarily collective, and not individual-will reflect, in their very style, this point of view and this spiritual "economy". Moreover, form, by its very nature, is unable to express one thing without excluding another, because form limits what it express, and thus thereby excludes other possible expressions of its own universal archetype. This Law naturally applies at every level of formal manifestation, and not to art alone; thus the various Divine Revelations, on which the different religions are founded, are also mutually exclusive when considered in terms of their formal contours, but not in their Divine Essence, which is one. Here again the analogy between "Divine Art" and human art becomes apparent.

There is no sacred art that does not depend on an aspect of metaphysics. The science of metaphysics is itself limitless, given that if object is infinite. As it is not possible to describe here all the relationships that link the different metaphysical doctrines in this domain, the reader is referred to other books which lay forth the premises on which the present essays are based. They do so by expounding, in a language accessible to the modern Western reader, the essence of the traditional doctrines of the East and of the Medieval West. We refer in particular to the writings of René Guénon³ and Frithjof Schuon⁴.

³ See *Crisis of the Modern World* (Ghent, NY: Sophia Perennis et Universalis, 1995), *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of Times*, and *Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines*.

⁴ See *The Transcendent Unity of Religions, Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts, Castes and Races* (Bedfont, Middlesex: perennial Books, 1982) and *Light on the Ancient Worlds*.