

ICONS AND MODERN ART

Re-assessing art history from the view of the sacred¹

- In our last talk we looked at the sacred icon - its role, the theology behind them, and the reasons why they are painted in the style they are. We can summarize what we discussed by saying that icons exist to reflect and to bring us into relationship with saints and Christ himself, that is, that they exist as mediators between a higher and deeper realm of archetypal beauty and our world, our experience.
- Today we are going to look at 20th century art in the light of the icon. In fact, to understand something of our modern period we shall first have to have an albeit brief look at the main epochs of European art of the last millennium, since modernism is in so many ways the child of those changes.
- As we have seen, Orthodox icons are sacred in their aim, designed to reflect the holy. But in fact the art of virtually all cultures until our European one from around the 18th century had and has a similar role – Egyptian, Greek, Chinese, African, American and so on. This art's aim is beauty and harmony, rooted in the objective realm of divine beauty and order. It is devoid of sentimentality, and it aims at the timeless, and is therefore always modern, contemporary.
- Art history is as much a reflection of the writers of history as it is of the art itself. Contemporary writing of art history and consequently its value judgements are conditioned by its secular outlook. This world view is characterised by two main things
 1. disbelief in God, and therefore that reality is to equated with the material realm
 2. the inevitability of progress, that innovation is always good, that tradition is stultifying, that imagination and creativity are to be equated with novelty.
- It is a complex thing, since although a given epoch might be anthropocentric, there are always eruptions, seekings for, intuitions of another higher world, since we are, whether or not we like it, made in the image of God and so seek our archetype.
- So, what are the general characteristics of sacred art ?
 1. It considers art to mediate or at least reflect a higher archetypal world
 2. It believes that any visible beauty is created by and is a reflection of divine beauty
 3. It believes a certain purity is needed in the viewer and the artist to perceive the inner depths of this spiritual beauty
 4. Although it has particularly holy objects and places, set aside (the meaning of sacred), these holy things only exist to make us see the holiness of everything. In other words, there is no opposition of sacred and profane, it is only our thinking which creates these false divisions. Consequently, sacred art always creates folk art which participates in the same spirit, though on a more parochial level.

¹ A talk given 27 July, 2004 during the icon exhibition “Icons Old and new” at Bear Steps gallery, Shrewsbury, Shropshire, 18-31 July, 2004

- As we said, to understand 20th century art in the light of a sacred world view we need to go back over its European roots in the last millennium. Each art movement in this period had a particular slant on the sacred, either moving away from it or trying to find itself back. Let us look at each of these epochs and identify the dominant spiritual values behind them. These of course will be generalisations, but generalisations have their value in as much as they, if accurate, explain the spirit of the age.
 1. The Romanesque is the last western artistic period whose aim is more or less identical with the eastern icon. It understands that reality involves invisible as well as visible realities, and that in art a degree of abstraction is required to suggest these invisible truths .
 2. The Gothic is the beginning of a shift, brought about primarily by the scholastic period. (The movement started in the areas around Paris where the universities were.) The Gothic and scholasticism is typified by a shift from the highest human faculty called spiritual intellect (or *nous* as the Greeks call it) and greater emphasis on the rational faculty. The result is an architecture whose language is aspiration, not incarnation, and where the structure of churches dominates over the images and therefore the content. The paintings of the time , though certainly still participating in something of a sacred aim, nonetheless give increasing emphasis to physical space, background scenes, the play of external light on the body, naturalistic drapery and anatomy.
 3. The Renaissance involves a yet greater eclipse of the spiritual intellect by the rational faculty, and so reality is associated increasingly with what can be observed and measured by the scientific, rationalistic means – that is, by naturalism, physical space, mathematics etc. However, it had the seeds of promise in that it was a reaction to the Aristotelean emphasis which guided the scholastics, towards the rediscovery of neo-Platonic thinking, which emphasized knowledge through direct experience. Nevertheless, the Renaissance ideal is primarily one of order – something on the plane of the created - and not of deification – that is, union with the divine. Consequently there is increasing interest in the reaction of light hitting the surface of things, rather than radiating from within, in mathematical perspective, anatomy and so on.
 4. There was an inevitable reaction against this cerebral approach to things - the Baroque and Rococo. But instead of returning to the contemplative and noetic faculty, they turned to the emotional faculty. This movement is typified by florid figures floating in space, in ecstasies of delight. And so we see over these four centuries a shift from Spirit to brain to emotion.
 5. At the same time you have the northern Europe movements, with the emphasis on the individual – Rembrandt, Durer, the whole portrait tradition. This at its best is highly developed psychologically, though rarely spiritually. It avoids the excesses of the baroque, by entering into the realm of psychological interpretation of individuals. And yet it still remains by and large on the human level. It is on Vermeer and Rembrandt that we get a sense of some otherworldly light infusing things.
 6. Fully fledged rationalism is introduced in the Age of Reason, (so called, but in fact it is typified by irrationalism and tyranny), and in the French revolution of 1789 for the first time in history we have a culture proclaiming atheism as an official belief. This is really the beginning of modern times.

The art and architecture following this line is controlled and harks back to classical times. The Salons emerge, exercising a sort of tyranny over the spirit. Interestingly, the period is typified by a series of neo movements: neo-Classicism, New Renaissance, New Baroque, the second Rococco, the Gothic revival.

This raises an interesting point: secularism tends either to revivals of past styles, and to reaction against existing ones, and so but doesn't seem to have the energy to be truly original. Because there is no eternity, no supra-human realities, then one is only left with an aping of the past or reacting against the present.

7. The Impressionists and the Romanic movement react against the controlling, empty, rationalistic ethos of the age of reason, but by and large they try to replace it with sensation, emotion, aesthetic and corporeal experience. Its strength is that it seeks for direct experience, rather than cerebral manipulation of others experience or a dry depiction of ideas..
8. Modern art. I think that there are three main current making up modernism, and they are not necessarily compatible:
 - a. There are the early abstract artists of essence. We have for example Brancusi, Kandinsky and Mondrian. They really are making a break from the materialistic view dominant in European art and are trying to return to a spiritually oriented art. They believed in the existence of the immaterial, spiritual essence of things, and that this can be discovered and made manifest through art. Pure abstraction, which was reintroduced to Europe by them, was a means of depicting objective realities.
 - b. Other artists turned to the raw primitivism of Africa and other primal cultures untouched by European rationalism. Picasso is the figurehead of this movement. Tied up with their philosophy was the Freudian idea of releasing the subconscious. Its spirituality has more the aspect of a storm unleashed than of a paradise.
 - c. Marcel Duchamp (and later Joseph Beuys) headed the modernist camp which responded to the pomposity of Salon art by saying that everything is art. By putting his name to a urinal, Duchamp makes it art. Ironically, these reactions to official art just as quickly become an official movement. This is the sad place post modern art has got itself stuck. Because its raison d'être is to oppose and tear down, it remains under the power of the very things it rails against. Satire is (Duchamp put a moustache on the Mona Lisa) daring and gives a thrison for a short time, but becomes soon tarnishes. For Duchamp and most official modernists, the emphasis is not so much on the object but the idea. This is more or less where art that is considered cutting edge by the establishment has got stuck.
9. Post modernism. For all its rebellion, modernism still stood for some ideal, it believed in some essence to search for and reveal. Post modernism is characteristic by the abandonment of ideals. And so we are left to play, to randomly paste together bits from any epoch without any guiding principle. Rejecting the existence eternal truths or essences, postmodernism concentrates on the narrative, how each person tells the story of reality how they see it. It constantly seeks to challenge people's narratives or concepts, precisely because it doesn't believe that there is any ultimate truth, or that if there is a

truth then it is not accessible. Probably this role as a challenger of notions has become the motto of postmodernism.

So what are we to do about modernism? Reject it all as complete trash? Try to learn from it? Turn back the clock? If so, how far, to what epoch? In reality modern art is so complex there is really no single school into which all well known artists can be compartmentalised. You have highly spiritual people like Brancusi running parallel to gifted clowns like Picasso, or with parasites of suffering like Francis Bacon, or with painters of humans like carcasses like Lucian Freud.

- I would like to look at a few artists whom I consider to be among the best that modernism has produced and to show that what has made them enduring is their spirituality. They are all somehow incarnational, that is, they believed both in the dignity of matter and its need to be drenched in spirit. They tried to unite these “opposites”. They loved their material, their subject matter, and they seemed to treat the viewer with dignity. They certainly wanted to challenge, but in order to nourish and not mock. Though of course ones choice of artists is to some extent subjective, I have chosen some whose own words for certain, and I think whose actual art works also, testify to the spiritual values affirmed by the icon and all great spiritual traditions. For me the list includes Van Gogh, Brancusi, Rothko, Henry Moore, Giacometti, Cecil Collins, Stanley Spenser and Barbara Hepworth. I would like to conclude simply by reading words from these artists, while we look at slides of their work

- **VanGogh**

*I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolise, and which we seek to confer by the actual radiance and vibration of our colourising.*²

- **Brancusi** said:

They are imbeciles who call my work abstract; that which they call abstract is the most realist, because what is real is not the exterior form but the idea, the essence of things.

And elsewhere:

The artist should know how to dig out the being that is within matter and be the tool that brings out its cosmic essence into an actual visible essence

For Brancusi it was essential that the artist enter into the harmony of nature if he or she was to embody harmony in their work:

They who have preserved in their souls the harmony residing in all things, at the core of things, shall find it very easy to understand modern art, because their hearts shall vibrate in keeping with the laws of nature.

Brancusi

“They are imbeciles who call my work abstract; that which they call abstract is the most realist, because what is real is not the exterior form but the idea, the essence of things.”

“Simplicity is complexity resolved”³

“Reality lies in the essence of things and not their external forms. Hence, it is impossible for anyone to produce anything real by imitating the external form of an object.”

² *The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*, ed. Mark Roskill (Fontana, 1983), p. 286.

³ Quoted in *Constantin Brancusi* by F. Bach. M. Rowell, A Temkin (Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1995), p. 23.

“The vain ego of the person ought to be dissolved.. The hidden principle - that is, the truth - can only be revealed if the ego is entirely eliminated.”⁴

- **Rothko** alludes to the traditional role of art when he writes:

Pictures must be miraculous: the instant one is completed, the intimacy between the creation and the creator is ended. He is an outsider. The picture must be for him, as for anyone experiencing it later, a revelation, an unexpected and unprecedented resolution of an eternally familiar need.⁵

“We assert that the subject is crucial and only the subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.”⁶

- As **Henry Moore** wrote:

Artists, in a way, are religious anyway. They have to be; if by religion one means believing that life has some significance, and some meaning, which is what I think it has. An artist could not work without believing that.⁷

And on further familiarity with the British Museum’s whole collection it eventually became clear to me that the realistic ideal of physical beauty in art which sprang up from fifth-century Greece was only a digression from the main world tradition of sculpture, whilst, for instance, our own equally European Romanesque and Early Gothic are in the main line.”⁸

- The painter **Cecil Collins** was among the few who dared to write and speak quite explicitly about the spiritual in art. Writing probably in the 1970’s he said:

We are spiritual barbarians, and therefore open to this immense self-deception which is its inevitable result. Art is not talent, it is knowledge. Beauty is a form of cognition. And when beauty is debased from cognition to sensation the next step is perversion. The perversion of this experience of beauty in our civilisation is a clear fact.⁹

Elsewhere Collins affirms the importance of authentic tradition in his book “Meditations, Poems, Pages from a Sketchbook”:

Now [tradition] does not mean the Royal academy, the establishment, as is sometimes thought. It is rather that continuum of knowledge which deals with the meaning and purpose of man’s life, and with the possibility of his rebirth. It is a knowledge ever new, fresh, immortal, always present, not subject to time, which is the basis of all the great civilisations. It must also be the basis of ours. To understand what modern art is, we must understand that we are in disequilibrium...¹⁰

- The painter **Stanley Spenser** refers to just this wonderment when he writes:

⁴ Argatu p. 11

⁵ “The Romantics Were Prompted” in *Possibilities I*, (New York) Winter 1947/48, p.84.

⁶ Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko, Statement, in *New York Times*, 13 June 1943.

⁷ Quoted by Richard Harries in “Art and the Beauty of God” (London, 1993)

⁸ Henry Moore, in “Primitive Art” published in “The Listener” (XXV,641, April 24,1941).

⁹ *Cecil Collins: Meditations, Poems, Pages from a Sketchbook* Ipswich (1997), p. 79.

¹⁰ *Cecil Collins: Meditations, Poems, Pages from a Sketchbook* Ipswich (1997), p. 79.

When I have reached a certain degree of awareness of the 'Touch-me-not' quality of things I am filled with a desire to establish this thing revealing quite clearly this quality. Love is the essential power in the creation of art, and love is not a talent...It establishes, once and for all time, the final and perfect identity of very created thing.¹¹

- **Kandinsky**

I believe that the philosophy of the future besides studying the nature of things will also study their spirit with especial attention. Then will the atmosphere be created that will enable men as a whole to feel the spirit of things, to experience this spirit even if unconsciously, just as today the outward form of things is experienced unconsciously by mankind in general, which explains the public's enjoyment of representational art. Thus will mankind be enabled to experience first the spiritual in material objects and later the spiritual in abstract forms.¹²

- **Barbara Hepworth**

In Brancusi's studio I encountered the miraculous feeling of eternity mixed with beloved stone and stone dust...To me, bred in a more northern climate, where the approach to sculpture has appeared fettered by the gravity of monuments to the dead – it was a special revelation to see this work which belonged to the living joy of spontaneous, active, and elemental forms of sculpture.¹³

¹¹ Stanley Spenser, *Sermons by Artists* (Golden Cockerel Press, 1934)

¹² Wassily Kandinsky, "Reminiscences" (published first in 1913). Translation in "Modern Artists on Art" ed. R.I. Herbert, New Jersey 1964. p 42.

¹³ "Barbara Hepworth: Carvings and Drawings" (London, 1952). Quoted in "'Modern Sculpture'" by Herbert Read (Penguin, 1998)