NEW ART: OLD ICONS[1]

Modern art seen in the light of sacred art

by Aidan Hart

Introduction

A quantum shift occured in western art around the sixties, according to key art historians such as Herbert Read, E.H. Gombrich, and even that champion of American modernism, Harold Rosenberg, and this revolution's cry was "novelty is freedom!" As early as 1963 Rosenberg wrote in the *New Yorker*: "Art historians stand ready with cameras and notebooks to make sure every novel detail is safe for the record. The tradition of the new has reduced all other traditions to triviality..." An ironic statement in itself, since by definition novelty cannot be a tradition (whose literal meaning is to hand on something which has been received), and the only thing it can reduce to triviality is itself. This so called Post Modernsim has been very good at saying what it thinks art is not. As in all iconoclasms its legacy is more what it has destroyed than what it has made.

But it is all too easy to gripe about this mad scramble for the shocking. To gain a more profound insight into the state of things we need to ask what is the most fundamental value which has been lost, and which therefore needs to be restored, albeit in a vital way. I think the answer is very simple. If we look at the art of cultures throughout time we see one recurring theme: they saw their art as a mediator between some higher realm and their own world. Their art was based on three premises: that there exists some higher realm; that this world is an image of or even an incarnation of that realm; and that the most sublime role of art is to mediate between these two realms.

The very word art means to fitly join together. Sacred art mediates between two realms: the Divine source of all that man aspires to - harmony, strength, beauty, rich variety - and the culture which creates it. Such traditional art is a sort of mining operation, a quest for the treasures hidden within the material world, a search for that quintessential essence and spark which illuminates all things from the inside.

The precise role and therefore style of sacred art varies tremendously from civilisation to civilisation, depending primarily on its religion. Nevertheless, and this is my main point, art is always considered a mediator, existing between a higher world and our lower world. The cave paintings of Lascaux in France, for example, had the purpose of magically aiding the hunters. Most Egyptian art was part of the funerary rites of passage. Greek art was a reflection of the Platonic realm of the ideas or ideal archetypes of things. As Plato said: "Beauty was once ours to see in all its brightness...beauty shone bright in the world above, and here too it still gleams clearest."[2] Chinese and Japanese painting was usually integral with poetry in deepening contemplation of nature. Traditional African art - masks, totems etc. - has

[1] A lecture given at the Shrewsbury Art Gallery and Museum, for the Shrewsbury Art Festival, 11 July, 2003.

[2] Plato, *Phaedrus* (Penguin, 1973), p. 57

usually been part of shamanic ritual. The iconography of the Orthodox Church, still a living tradition, functions as a door or window between heaven and earth.

Western art has been in crisis in the last few decades precisely because it has, by and large, rejected or forgotten this traditional mediatory role. It does not seek to manifest the strength and variety and beauty of a higher realm, simply because it does not believe that such a realm exists. We are no longer sure why we have art, what it is to do.

The initial impetus of modern art and its immediate precedents was in fact a desire to return to a form of those values of traditional sacred art. It was research into the essence of things, and an attempt to make the art object a participant in reality and not just an illustrator of it. As Vincent van Gogh wrote:

> *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.*[3]

For the founders of modernism, such as Cezanne, Brancusi, Mondrian and Kandinsky, art was a serious search for objective, though mysterious, reality. It left no room for idle speculation or arbitrariness. For these early moderns the artist was the organ of research, and not the subject of the art as it has come to be. In this sense their mind-set was close to that of the scientist. Cezanne refers to this when he writes:

> *The artist must scorn all judgement not based on an intelligent observation of character. He must beware of the literary spirit which so often causes painting to deviate from its true path - the concrete study of nature - to lose itself all too long in intangible speculations.*[4]

Realism for these founders had to go beyond mere representationalism. And so they reintroduced abstraction to the west as a language to express objective metaphysical truth, the essence of things. Abstraction was a language just as formulae are to the mathematician, with the difference that as artists these founders attempted to communicate directly through the senses of the viewer rather than through their brain with literary symbols. 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.*

However, the abstraction and stylistic freedom which these pioneers reintroduced came to be used from about the 1960's more as a plaything than as a language to express and explore objective metaphysical realities. The father of modern abstract painting, Wassily Kandinsky, was aware right from the beginning of possible abuses of abstraction. He wrote:

> *Thus, I circumnavigated and left behind me the three greatest dangers on the path I had foreseen. These were:*

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

[4] Letter to Emile Bernard, 1904 (quoted by Peter Selz and Joshua C. Taylor.)

1. The danger of stylised form, which either comes into the world stillborn, or else, too weak to live, quickly dies.

2. The danger of ornamental form, the form belonging mainly to external beauty, which can be, and as a rule is, outwardly expressive and inwardly expressionless.

3. The danger of experimental form, which comes into being by means of experimentation, i.e., completely without intuition, possessing, like every *form, a certain inner sound, but one that deceitfully simulates internal necessity.*[5]

Choosing to ignore a higher realm, later mainline modern art (including post-modernism) has left itself nothing else to do than to become increasingly self referential, dominated by the artist's ego and the desire to impress with novelty. Its aim is increasingly to reflect the angst or else the materialism and spiritual vacuity of the artist and his or her society. Many have been the voices among artists who have ignored or opposed this trend - Mark Rothko, Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth and Alberto Giocometti are a few names which come to mind. 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.[6]

Admittedly the spirituality of these moderns is much more generalised than that of the great civilisations, but they have retained that essential sense of art as reflection of and research into something noumenal. 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]

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.[8]

The critic Herbert Read, who was initially a major apologist for modern art, in his later life came to lament the direction modernism was taking. At the end of his book "Modern Sculpture", written in 1964, he wrote:

"But all categories of art, idealistic or realistic, surrealistic or constructivist (a new form of idealism) must satisfy a simple test (or they are in no sense works of

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[5] "The Cologne Lecture" 1914. Quoted in "Art in Theory 1900-1990" ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, (Oxford, 1992) p. 95.

[6] "The Romantics Were Prompted" in *Possibilities* I, (New York) Winter 1947/48, p.84.

[7] Quoted by Richard Harries in "Art and the Beauty of God" (London, 1993)

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

art): they must persist as objects of contemplation. For contemplation we might with some aesthetic justification substitute fascination, which would correspond to Henry Moore's distinction between beauty and vitality. But while contemplation leads to serenity and love, the fascination of the 'new realism' can only arouse horror and hatred. Ruskin, as usual, stated this truth in his incomparable way, and his prophetic words shall complete this brief history of a complex subject:

> *'The worst characters of modern work result from its constant appeal to our desire of change, and pathetic excitement; while the best features of elder art appealed to love of contemplation...where real deformity enters, in any other degree than as a momentary shadow or opposing force, the art is illegitimate. Such art exists only by accident, when a nation has forgotten or betrayed the eternal purposes of its genius, and gives birth to painters whom it cannot teach, and to teachers whom it will not hear....'"*[9]

Some elements of sacred art

Most of our art criticism and art history is written from a secular point of view - the more mathematically accurate perspective systems of the Renaissance, for example, are read as an improvement on the more primitive systems of the Byzantine and Medieval artists. But this rather patronising attitude fails to account for the profound metaphysical aims of these great artistic traditions. From the view of those spiritual traditions, the more naturalistic art of post medieval western Europe actually appears as more crude than their own, because more opaque and spiritually truncated. Secular art criticism and history in turn effects what art is produced and valued in our own times. The eyes which interpret the past become the hands which fashion the present.

To address this problem, what follows is my attempt to identify some of the most fundamental and general elements of traditional sacred art. I make particular reference to the iconography of the Orthodox Church since this is my particular tradition. I then conclude with a selection of aphorisms from Constantin Brancusi, the father of modern abstract sculpture and a proponent of these traditional values in art.

1. Ritual

A sacred art object - a painting, carving or whatever - is invariably part of a larger ritual. As such it is inextricably intertwined with music, dance (as liturgical movement) and place (be it a building like a temple, or the landscape, like Stonehenge). The icon, for example, is chiefly found in a church. As the faithful enter they kiss the various icons, by way of greeting or venerating the saints which they depict. On feast days icons may be processed around the church and outside, in this way becoming part of a sacred dance.

Icons form part of a total sensual experience during a church service: as well as seeing the icons one touches them, and hears chanting, smells the incense and tastes Communion. Performance art is nothing new! Church architects have in mind the total liturgical use of the church: the murals or mosaics to be applied to the surfaces, the

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[9] Herbert Read, *"Modern Sculpture"* (Penguin, 1964), p. 271, quoting Ruskin from his *Giotto and his Works in Padua* (1854), p. 23.

acoustics for the chanting, the space for the liturgical movement, the sacred proportions which will relate it to the laws governing the cosmos.

But icons are also used in abundance outside churches - in cars, buses, above town gates, in homes, in roadside shrines. They form an integral part of daily life in traditional Orthodox countries, showing that nothing in life is inherently profane.

A central element to this integration of the arts is the realisation that all creation operates according to the same inner laws. Different cultures have described this unifying body of laws differently. Pythagoras described it in terms of numbers. The medievalist William of Auvergne described it as a song:

When you consider the order and magnificence of the universe...you will find it to be like a most beautiful canticle... (De Anima, V, 18)

2. Originality

Originality in its most profound sense means to go to the origin of things. The word icon is Greek for image. The Orthodox icon exists only because its archetypes exist: Christ the incarnate God, the Virgin Mary and all the saints who are the subject of the images. Only God Himself is; all else has. He alone is I AM; all else has being by participation in Him.

So originality in sacred traditions is more a matter of moving the viewer as close as possible to the subject matter than of doing something novel. This in part explains the conservative nature of sacred art. Another reason is that its spiritual truths often need a symbolic language to communicate, and language needs continuity from one generation to another in order to remain understood.

Variation certainly exists within a given sacred tradition - for example we can tell purely by an icon's style in which place and epoch it is painted. But this variation is rooted in the subject matter's mystery and is a natural result of the artist's uniqueness rather than a deliberate attempt at novelty. Originality in its modern sense as newness is not the object of the sacred artist's endeavours, but where it does exist it is an unconscious element which enters the work as he tries to reflect truth and beauty. The artist's uniqueness flourishes the more he ignores it in the ecstatic quest for objectivity, to depict the other. The more he dies to any desire to express himself or make something novel, the more truly expressive and fresh his work is. Dying to himself, he finds himself in the other.

The teaching of the Orthodox Church refers to this essence of each thing as its logos. By this logos or divine word each thing has been brought into being and is also kept and directed towards its fulfilment. So an iconographer will depict not just a tree, but a tree "burning" with this divine grace and dancing along with the cosmic symphony in praise of its Maker.

3. Imagination

If we can speak of imagination at all in the production of sacred art, it is not so much a faculty of invention as a faculty of reception. It is a sort of screen onto which images can be projected from the spiritual world. It is not an originating faculty, but a mediatory one.

The icon's milieu is the ascetic teaching of the Orthodox Church. According to this tradition the highest faculty of the human person is what is best described as the eye of the heart - the *nous* in Greek or *intellectus* in Latin. By the nous we can know things in an unmediated way. If the nous is purified, then it can communicate to the imagination images from the archetypal world, that is, from God. By contrast, an unpurified nous and imagination will throw up hellish, irrational images, and art based on such images will oppress the culture into which it is born.

From the maker's point of view sacred art is born of a nostalgia for a state somehow remembered, somehow experienced, but now lost - a paradise or call it what you will. At the same time this sacred art is itself a ray of light descending to us from this very place or state which we seek. Some artistic civilisations have related this aspiration to religion and spiritual values more than others. Nonetheless, virtually all civilisations have in their own way seen art as a means of transformation, enrichment, a movement towards a higher and deeper plane.

4. Abstraction

Sacred art is always abstract, in that word's literal sense, in that it "draws out" the essence of its subject. It uses stylistic abstraction to suggest these invisible realities. Such art is therefore not naturalistic, but it is realistic in that it affirms the spiritual as well as the corporeal nature of reality. Sacred art typically reveals the union of the inner with the outer, the invisible with the visible. It reveals eternity active within the present, and is therefore closer to reality than naturalistic art which reflects only the outer phenomena.

Sacred art invariably has an element of imperfection or incompleteness about it. A monastic friend once said to me that there exists an imperfect perfection and a perfect imperfection. The former is something so mathematically or formally complete that there is no room for the viewer. It is mechanically complete but inorganic. Perfect imperfection, on the other hand, beckons the viewer to complete the work. It begins a process which is completed in the heart of the viewer. Its incompleteness keeps it organic, growing, alive. Sacred arts' "perfect imperfection" is also a way of acknowledging that it is only a dim reflection of its perfect archetype.

The abstraction of the icon is most marked in the different forms of perspective which its uses - at least five types, which are discussed below. In general the icon retains a certain flatness, since it wants to lead the viewer through itself to the holy person it depicts. This is a deliberate technical "imperfection". The icon's purpose is not that we admire it as a work of art - as beautiful as it might be - but that through it we may come to know and love its archetype. Icon means image, and the icon's flatness keeps it true to its nature as image and helps the viewer pass through it to the saint it represents.

5. Craft and love of the medium

While making the "logos" of its subject more evident to us, the sacred artwork does not disdain the material expression or body of that logos. The work therefore always remains incarnate. It shows a transfigured world and not a dematerialised one.

And so sacred art delights in the very medium it consists of. It does not merely use its medium - be it wood, paint, notes, words or whatever - as though it were a neutral and discardable means to an end. It does not merely depict a transfigured world, but is itself part of that transfigured world, it participates in it. The beauty of sacred art testifies to the possibility of paradise. It is itself a fruit of paradise, a union of spirit and matter. It has a sacramental property and is not simply a signifier. It is the child not only of love between the artist and the subject matter, but also of artist and the stuff of the artwork.

The icon is made of wood, rabbit skin glue, egg yolk and earth and stone pigments. To make a good icon the iconographer needs to understand and know the qualities of these different materials - how much to grind azurite, cinnabar, ochre and so on.

The actual act of making an icon is considered to be both an act of prayer with paint, and a priestly act in which the raw materials, wonderful as they are in themselves, are made even more articulate in the praise of God.

6. Tradition

The individual sacred artist operates within a tradition. Therefore on looking at a sacred work one is not so much aware of an isolated genius, but of an inspired tradition which acts through the individual maker or workshop. That is, the artwork will always be communal, relational. The wisdom needed for sacred art cannot be gained by a single person in his or her lifetime. Each person living the sacred tradition might add his unique expression to the whole, but his uniqueness flourishes within the community of that tradition, and not outside it. In this way sacred art keeps the human person from collapsing into individualism.

Different forms of sacred art are united by universal laws or principles. Because these principles are rooted in God, they are not restrictive but to the contrary open doors of almost unlimited potential. The depth of richness of these principles inspire a great variety of expression, depending on the individual maker, his culture and his epoch. Paradoxically, any art which seeks for novelty at the expense of sacred laws will eventually collapse into a boring chaos of uniformity, a pile of rubble.

The painter Cecil 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 tome, 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]

7. Humility

Sacred art is humble. That is, its style leads us beyond itself - albeit through itself - to the divine source of goodness and beauty. "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17) writes the apostle James.

The artist of the sacred must himself live within the spiritual tradition that gave birth to his form of sacred art. He must experience something of the holy, so that his art is not merely the intellectual expression of ideas but is a description and embodiment of personal experience. This of course is not to say that it is the illusory self which he aims to express, but rather, inasmuch as it is possible, something of divine realities. "God is light," writes St Simeon the New Theologian (949-1022)[11], "and He communicates His radiance to those who are united to Him, to the extent that they are purified."

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

[11] *Ta Apanta* (Thessaloniki, 1969), I Homily 25.

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.*

Struck by the deep mystery of his or her subject, the artist of the sacred feels a great sense of responsibility and awe. The painter Stanley Spenser refers to just this wonderment when he writes:

> *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.*[12]

8. Compassion

Sacred art encompasses the human suffering, the disorder, the angst which is an element of our present existence. It does not ignore these as an embarrassment to some pristine ideal world. To the contrary, sacred art understands human suffering and ugliness all the more profoundly precisely because it sees this suffering in the light of the beauty whose loss is the very cause of suffering.

This is where modern art faces a profound dilemma: it senses the unnaturalness of the angst-filled state and vacuity that it seeks to depict, and yet it refuses to believe in the harmonious and replete archetypal world which is natural to us and whose loss is the very cause of our unnatural state. Ugliness can only exist if there is such a thing as beauty; sickness can only exist if there is such a thing as health.

We notice that the faces in icons have a sort of bright sadness, a joy mingled with sorrow. This presence of sorrow in the saint comforts us in our own struggles. Likewise, iconographic depictions of great suffering, such as the crucifixion, keep in union the fact of physical and mental suffering and the fact of its sublimation in love.

The power of Mark Rothko's painting is in large part due to this successful union. He writes: "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."[13]

The Style of an icon

As mentioned above, what is characteristic of holy icons is not only what they depict and how they are used, but how they depict their subject. Below are described just a few of the stylistic techniques used to suggest spiritual realities. We can see from these how many elements have been readopted, albeit in isolation, by modern art movements.

- *Flatness*. The icon leads us through itself to the person depicted. Flatness helps this. The icon does not replace the reality it depicts, but rather leads us through itself so we can meet the reality itself. This probably explains why there is not a tradition of statues in Orthodoxy, only relief carving.

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[12] Stanley Spenser, *Sermons by Artists* (Golden Cockerel Press, 1934)

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

- *Inverse perspective*. Instead of lines converging in some fictitious space behind the image, they usually pass through the real space in front of the icon and converge in the viewer. Thus, the icon is not interested in imaginary space, but in the real space in front. Icons sanctify the actual space in which they are found. Their function is not primarily to establish a relationship between the viewer and itself - to stimulate a purely aesthetic experience - but a relationship between person and person through itself.
- *Multi-point perspective*. A building is often depicted as though viewed from both sides and above and below all at once. In this way the viewer is encouraged to view the world as God sees it, from all viewpoints, and not from the limited, single viewpoint of an individual.
- *Isometry*. Lines that are parallel in nature are often depicted as parallel in the icon. In doing this the icon affirms the "isness" of the object, the object as it is in itself and not merely as it appears to our physical eyes.
- *Perspective of hierarchy.* What is most important is the relative spiritual importance of the persons depicted, and so icons often adjust the scale of the persons accordingly.
- *Radiance*. Icons depict a material world transfigured by and "soaked in" divine light. In Christ, everything is filled with light, and therefore all shadows flee. The halos surrounding the heads of the saints and the gold leaf background all testify to this. "In God we live and move and have our being" said Saint Paul. Whilst there is enough modelling in icons to affirm the materiality of the thing depicted, there is no chiaroscuro, a painterly technique used to emphasise the effects of natural light reflecting off the surface of things.
- *Divine and profane time*. In Greek there are two words for time: kronos, which is clock time, and kairos, which is divine time. Often the same person will be depicted a number of times in the same icon, since what is important is the eternal significance of an event rather than the strict time sequence within kronos.
- *Garments.* In icons, garments reflect the transfigured state of the bodies they clothe. Their lines are harmonious and abstract, whilst conforming to essential anatomical laws. Usually curved lines of drapery are broken into a series of straighter lines. Or sometimes these curves are accentuated, as in some Comnenian icons and in Romanesque works.
- *Facial features.* Very often the organs of reception are enlarged or elongated - the eyes, nose, ears - while the organs of expression are diminished or understated - the lips or hand gestures. This is because the saints are contemplators and listeners, and this fills them with divine power so that they need say or do little for a lot to happen.

Constantin Brancusi

Brancusi rightly has been called the father of modern abstract sculpture. I want to end with some of his aphorisms, since they so clearly and poetically show that he operated according to those principles of sacred art as have been discussed. He is a living link between them and our own times. Seeking the timeless and respecting the proven wisdom of the old he is always new.

Fashion

"I do not aspire to be in fashion. For what is in fashion, goes out of fashion. If, on the contrary, your work is contested today, it doesn't matter. For when it is finally understood, it will be for eternity."

Tradition

"I never burned my boats," he said: "nor pulled out my roots in order to roam giddily. My art profited from that."[14]

"In the nineteenth century sculpture was in a hopeless situation. Then Rodin came and transformed everything...Sculpture once again became human in its dimensions and significance."[15]

"[Michelangelo's] art neither comforts, nor heals...Ever since Michelangelo's time sculptors have wanted to create the grandiose. They have only succeeded in creating the grandiloquent."[16]

Respect for matter

"Matter must continue its natural life when modified by the hand of the sculptor...Matter should not be used merely to suit the purpose of the artist, it must not be subjected to preconceived ideas and to a preconceived form. Matter itself must suggest subject and form; both must come from within matter and not be forced upon it from without."[17]

The Divine source of beauty

"Look at my sculptures until you see them. Those nearest to God have seen them."

"...I know that the prayers of our old Oltenians [Brancusi came from the county of Olt] were a form of meditation, that is to say a philosophical interrogation."

Abstraction

"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"[18]

"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."

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[14] Petre Andrea *Constantin Brancusi: Reminiscences and Exegeses* (Meridiane Publ., 1967). Quoted by Calinic Argatu in '*Peace and Rejoicing' with Brancusi* (Bucharest, 2001) p. 15.

[15]Quoted in Jean-Louis Ferrier (ed.) *Art of the Twentieth Century* (Chene-Hachette,1999), p.539

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] Quoted in "Constantin Brancusi: A summary of Many Conversations" *The Arts, vol. 4, no. 1 (July 1923) pp. 16-17.*

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

"I'd rather make a mistake in achieving these sculptures than not make a mistake and re-create Venus of Milo."[19]

"Simplicity is not an objective in art, but one achieves simplicity despite oneself by entering into the real sense of things."[20]

Art and joy

"Don't look for obscure formulae or mysteries. It is pure joy that I am giving you."

"What really matters in art is joy. You don't need to understand. Does what you contemplate make you happy? That is the only thing that counts."[21]

In 1945 Frank McEwen (then Fine Arts Officer of the British Council in Paris) and Herbert Read organised an exhibition of children's paintings to which Picasso, Bonnard and Brancusi were invited. It was usually difficult to get Brancusi to exhibitions of contemporary art, but he happily came to this one of children's paintings. As McEwen observed: " [Brancusi] never went to exhibitions. He just came because he was so friendly and nice...It was very difficult to get Picasso to an exhibition but especially Brancusi because he had no contact with the outside world...He wouldn't go out, he wouldn't meet journalists; no photographers, no art critics, no art historians, nobody promoting themselves at his expense, he wouldn't have anybody."[22]

Later, when McEwen told Bonnard that Picasso had been at the show Bonnard said: "Is he still making monsters?" And when McEwen told Picasso that Bonnard had been there Picasso said: "I hope he learnt something." But when Brancusi came there was none of this thrusting competition. ".. the divine Brancusi!" exclaimed McEwen, "he was like a saint, a radiant, beautiful person and he came in and he just looked and he said 'La joie éclate!' and that's all he said and he just looked around marvelling."

Humility

"There is a purpose in everything. In order to achieve it, one must detach oneself from an awareness of self."

"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."[23]

"People do not get along with each other because they arrange their communal existence on the basis of a fatal pyramid. They all try to reach the top, relentlessly pushing each other aside when it would be more natural to live like flowers in a field, each one finding its own spot and being provided with rain, sunshine, the freshness of a cool breeze, the blessing of the sky, and the violence of storms."[24]

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[19] Argatu p. 11.

[20] *Aphorisms (undated).* From *This Quarter* (Paris), I, I (January 1925), p. 235. Translated by Herschel B. Chipp (*ibid.)* .

[21] Argatu p. 12

[22] An interview of Frank McEwen, ex British Council, Fine Arts Officer, Paris, and Director Gallery of Rhodesia/Zimbabwe, interviewed by Michael Shepherd about British Council/Moore/ Shona sculpture 15.8.89.

[23] Argatu p. 11

[24] Quoted in Ferrier, p.539