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# **Achieving Visual Literacy: Prior Knowledge of Spiritual Symbolism in Modern Art**

視覺素養之達成：  
現代藝術中精神象徵之先備知識

Martin Forker 馬丁·福客

Associate Professor / Department of Applied English

Shih-Chien University, Kaohsiung Campus

實踐大學（高雄校區）應用英語學系 副教授

有關本文的意見請聯繫代表作者馬丁·福客

For correspondence concerning this paper, please contact Martin Forker

Email: martin@mail3.kh.usc.edu.tw

## Abstract

It is argued that art studies should offer students prior knowledge in order to develop their visual literacy. This study focuses on the formation of a stronger knowledge-base of historical understandings and interpretive skills of spiritual symbolism in modern art. Accordingly, the study explores various notions of symbolism, Man's old relationship with the Divine, Man's new relationship with the Divine, the development of abstraction in modern art, modern prophets for a modern art, and spiritual influences on modern artists. The research results reveal that many modern artists were highly influenced by Theosophy and alchemical symbols and they also employed a proliferation of multivocality symbols in their symbolic interpretations of the Divine. The research results also reveal that modern artists were radical innovators and were driven by an unquenchable urge for spiritual transformation. Additionally, despite their different techniques and philosophies, such artists shared one objective: to break a path to a new, ultimate pictorial truth in their quest for the Divine.

**Keywords: art education, modern art, prima material, spirituality, visual literacy**

## 摘要

在藝術研究上，已有許多主張認為若欲培養藝術系學生之視覺素養，必須提供他們先備知識，本研究著重在加強學生對現代藝術中精神象徵史學理解力與詮釋能力基本知識之形成。本研究探討各類象徵概念、人類與神之舊式／新式關係、現代藝術抽象概念之發展、對現代藝術之現代預言，以及對現代藝術家之精神性影響。研究結果顯示許多現代藝術家深受神智學及煉金術象徵影響並且對神之象徵詮釋上大量使用多意喻之象徵。研究結果也顯示現代藝術家是激進之改革者，並且對精神性轉變有不可遏制之欲求。雖然具不同技法與哲理，但是他們卻共同擁有一個目標：闖出一條對探索神靈的新終極性繪畫真理之路。

**關鍵詞：藝術教育、現代藝術、原質、精神性、視覺素養**

## The Importance of Visual Literacy in Art Education

At the outset of this study, it is important to point out to the reader that the scope of this paper is vast and for reasons of limited space it is impossible to cover everything that relates to “Prior Knowledge of Spiritual Symbolism in Modern Art.” Nonetheless, this study is important to art education because in order to create a synthesis of religion and culture and to create a conduit to a new ultimate pictorial truth in their quest for the Divine, creative modern artists require deeper insights into symbolism in addition to insights into religion. The term “art education” came into being about sixty years ago when art classes were formerly called “drawing and crafts” lessons. Years later, a major shift took place when the “creative self-expression” approach to teaching art education was becoming prominent practice. The influence of Victor Lowenfeld (1947) was highly influential from the outset. It was the therapeutic benefits and fostering of personal growth associated with this philosophy that made it a convincing for decision makers to include study about art in general curriculum.

Although, the child-centered art movement was in full swing in 1930s and 1940s, questions were raised about its validity in the literature (Efland, 1987). At the time, the creative self-expression approach was seen as having no solid foundation for the teaching of the structure of a discipline. Furthermore, evaluation the outcomes of the students were difficult to accomplish (Barkan, 1962). The assumptions behind the essential components were called into question, such as such as goals, content, curriculum, nature of the learner and teacher, creativity, implementation, works of art and evaluation (Clark, Day, & Greer, 1987). In the 1980s and as a result of numerous art curriculum-developing projects in U.S, the term “Discipline Based Art Education” (DBAE) appeared in the literature (Greer, 1984). Since then, the discipline-based approach laid the foundation for developing a well-grounded art curriculum in any given situation. The advancement of art education was enhanced by Dewey (1934), Beardsley (1982), as well as other scholars. For example, Goodman’s *Languages of Art* (1976) ostensibly concerns only the philosophy of art, but in the book’s introduction, Goodman says that by the languages in the book’s title, he means symbol systems in general.

What do we mean by “visual literacy”? Visual literacy is the ability to understand and use visual images, including the ability to think, learn and express oneself by means of visual images. Humans have created images to express meaning for thousands of years, but the idea of educating people for visual literacy developed over the past century concurrently with new communications technologies. Debes (1969, p. 25) offers a cautious definition of the concept: “visual literacy refers to a group of vision-competencies a human being can develop by seeing and at the same time having and integrating other sensory experiences.” According to Yenawine (1997), visual literacy is the ability to find meaning in imagery. It involves a set of skills ranging from simple identification: naming what one sees to complex interpretation on contextual, metaphoric and philosophical levels. Many aspects of cognition are called upon, such as personal association, questioning, speculating, analyzing, fact-finding, and categorizing. Objective understanding is the premise of much of this literacy, but subjective and affective aspects of knowing are equally important. Visual literacy usually begins to develop as a viewer finds his/her own relative understanding of what s/he confronts, usually based on concrete and circumstantial evidence. It eventually involves considering the intentions of the maker, applying systems for thinking and rethinking one’s opinions, and acquiring a body of information to support conclusions and judgments. The expert will also express these understandings in a specialized vocabulary.

The importance of visual literacy as a means of expression and communication in human civilization makes it an essential field in the theoretical and applied research of education systems and instructional settings. According to Roblyer (1998), the visually literate student (a) is more resistant to the manipulative use of images in advertisements and other contexts, (b) can interpret, understand, and appreciate the meaning of visual messages, (c) can communicate more effectively by applying the basic principles and concepts of visual design, (d) can produce visual messages using computers and other technology, (e) can use visual thinking to conceptualize solutions to problems. Stankiewicz (2004, pp. 88-91) notes that the digitized production of high-quality multimodal images has made positions in music, cinema and the graphic arts accessible to young people who possess only vernacular levels of technical skill in these disciplines. Equally, young employees across many fields are required to capture images and design presentations in which the skill and the technology used is high but the ethical, aesthetic and communicative judgement is

correspondingly banal visual education needs to promote sophisticated levels of aesthetic and ethical judgement. Several studies in art education have stressed the importance of interpretative and historical understandings of art students in their comprehension of imagery (Cason, 1998; Forker, 2002, 2009; Forker & Chang, 2007; French 1992; Short, 1996; Stavropoulos, 1992, 1995, 1996). The significance of possessing interpretative and historical understandings of western modern art is crucial for non-western art students. Even though non-western art students may study western modern art, they may not necessarily fully comprehend the historical and cultural understandings or have the interpretive skills to realize how western modern artists used spiritual symbolism.

Hence, this study offers non-western art students prior knowledge (Koroscik, 1982) in order to help them form a stronger knowledge-base and to develop their historical understandings and interpretive skills of spiritual symbolism in modern art, and their visual literacy. Oring (2000, p. 8) points out that “for communication to take place there must be a common language between an artist and an audience. Some amount of effort on the part of both artist and audience is required . . . what is the sense in having a language-either visual or verbal - that we fail to understand?”

In what way can this study help non-western art students develop their visual literacy? One way is to provide them with adequate prior knowledge of symbolism and of how modernism’s complex philosophical origins influenced modern artists’ symbolism in their quest for the Divine. Vosnaidou and Brewer (1987) argue that the interaction between the knowledge-base, and knowledge-seeking strategies, explain why learning outcomes differ and provide a foundation for developing a more comprehensive approach for assessing student understandings of artworks. New experiences can be interpreted from prior knowledge. Significantly, Alvermann, Smith and Readence (1985) underline that students often fail to transfer their existing knowledge to new information.

Bransford and Johnson (1972) argue that learners activate and transfer prior knowledge; and this influences the degree to which new information and ideas are comprehended. For example, art students need to know something about Wassily Kandinsky before they understand his symbolism. Art-specific prior knowledge activates and determines understanding (Koroscik, 1982). Some prior knowledge may lead to misunderstandings. For example, many art students may believe in the popular fallacy that modernism is concerned

exclusively with line, form, and colour and they may also not comprehend how the image production of modern artists was affected by occult and transcendent spiritualities. Furthermore, many art students may not be aware of modernism's complex philosophical origins and that without such philosophical influences, abstract art as we know it, would not have emerged at all.

Hence, this study attempts to provide art students with sufficient prior knowledge of the meaning of symbolism, Man's old relationship with the Divine, Man's new relationship with the Divine, the development of abstraction in modern art<sup>1</sup>, modern prophets for a modern art, and spiritual influences on Western modern artists. Many of the Western modern artists discussed in this study were not "religious" in the conventional sense of the word. Most of them rejected traditional Christian iconography. In addition, it is worth noting that the quest for the Divine was not the most significant objective in their artworks. Let us begin by exploring various meanings of symbolism.

## Symbolism

What do we mean by symbolism? Scheffler (1997, p. 4) posits that we are symbolic creatures (*animal symbolicum*) rather than rational creatures whose work is exhibited in several forms of thought comprising human culture (Cassirer, 1944). We live in symbolic worlds created by ourselves which mediate between nature and our minds (Langer, 1956). Symbol is a term used by Charles Sanders Peirce to describe the sign proper, wherein the relation between signifier (an acoustic image) and signified (a concept or meaning), is entirely arbitrary and conventional (Liszka, 1996). The concept of symbolism as "quotes" is not always clear, especially what meaning the artist intends to convey; the possible meaning of any given work of art is limited but it also allows each person to discover his or her own meaning; it is akin to a mirror for the observer's own prejudices and fantasies. Important to the concept of symbolism is structuralism; a theory of literature which focuses on the codes and conventions that underlie all discourse and on the system of language as a functioning totality. This system, Saussure (1983) calls "langue," the whole set of linguistic habits

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of the present study, the term "modern art" refers to artistic works produced during the period extending roughly from the 1860s to the 1970s, and denotes the style and philosophy of the art produced during that era.

which allow an individual to understand and to be understood. Saussure claims that signs do not possess a fixed or essential meaning; what signifies is not red nor the essence of redness, but the difference between red and green (Hall, 1997, p. 31). Barthes (1957) claims that literature is a language; a system of signs-its being is not in its message, but in its system. Similarly, it is not for criticism to reconstitute the message of a work, but only its system. Language and structures, not the consciousness of an author, generates meaning. As a consequence, the subject is dissolved into a series of systems, deprived of its role as a source of meaning, and is thereby decentred. As Barthes suggests, the operative concept is intertextuality. Levi-Strauss (1963) maintains that the language of myth is the thought-structure behind all culture. Thought-symbolists concentrate on the study of collective representations. According to Sperber (1975, p. 99), a symbol is an object or a piece of knowledge which is in quotes. Symbolic objects have been bracketed off from ordinary objects. They have been highlighted, elevated, put in quotation marks and so we look at them and know they are symbolic.

Symbols, however, may not be taken lightly, since they bring both order and disorder. If they arise out of human creativity and spontaneity, they are also about power. One has to be respectful of symbols as we can take quite serious offence if the proper respect is not demonstrated. Symbols clarify some aspect of the world. A symbol draws attention either to the way the world is or to the way it should be, or perhaps to both. A symbol defines some segment of the world, so we can see that this strip of events (Buckley & Kenney, 1995) and has a recognizable structure. Importantly, symbols are also used to clarify, to define and give structure to our identity. In fact, we all devote much energy to dramatizing who we are.

The rites of passage (Van Gennep, 1960) are only the most obvious of these symbolic dramas. They allow us to step clearly from one status to another and permit us to move across some conceptualized social boundary. For example, ceremonies at birth, marriage and death, first communion, confirmation, baptism, and Masonic degree ceremonies all have this character. But on a more casual basis, we engage in symbolic social dramas (Burke, 1957; Turner, 1982) constantly. Symbols resonate with meanings. Turner (1967, pp. 28-29) identified three major empirical properties of dominant symbols: (1) condensation, polysemy, or multivocality, when one single dominant symbol represents many different things and actions; (2) unification of disparate significata, where the significata (the

underlying meanings of the symbol) are interconnected by virtue of their common analogous qualities, or by association in fact or thought; and (3) polarization of meaning or bipolarity, in which dominant symbols possess two distinct poles of meaning; at the ideological or normative pole, a cluster of significata refers to components of the moral and social order, to principles of social organization; at the sensory or orrectic pole, the significata are natural or physiological phenomena and processes that arouse desires and feelings. Multivocality symbols predominate in political and religious contexts because their wide spectrum of connotations, which permits multiple understandings among subdivisions within a population, allows them to appeal to a broad audience. According to Ortner (1973), key symbols are those that characterize whole peoples, nations, religions, and political movements, and tend to be among the most abstract and polysemous, yet still provide basic orientations for thought and action such as with the Virgin of Guadalupe, who is used to symbolize Mexico. Thus, it seems that through our dreams, illusions, spontaneous activities, moments of reflection, and in the general flow of our consciousness, we continually proliferate symbols and manipulate them.

## Man's Old Relationship with the Divine

Why were Western modern artists so discontented with the old relationship of the Divine? Man's relationship with the Divine has been expressed symbolically through orthodox religions, metaphysics, mysticism, and other esoteric traditions. The Western tradition can be traced from antiquity dating back to theorists such as Hermes Trismegistus, Plato, and Plotinus to the Middle Ages with important figures including Meister Eckhart, Durante degli Alighieri (Dante), Robert Fludd, Jakob Boehme, through to the 18th and 19th centuries: Emanuel Swedenborg, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, William Blake, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and to the 20th century: William James, Titus Burckhardt, Henri Corbin, and Martin Heidegger. In the East, the lineage of such quests might embrace Lao-tzu, Chuang-tzu, Ikhawan al Safa, Ibn Arabi, Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi, Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi, Liu Zhi, and Rabindranath Tagore.

According to Jung (1955), Archaic Man and Modern Man were magical entities endowed with supernatural powers animated with the spirits of powerful ancestors and forces of nature. Modern Man was like his earlier primitive counterpart, attempting to



control nature under disparate conditions of life with ceremonial figures: idols, masks, totems, charms and rituals hoping to exercise control over life and death. Two Jungian principles which were also widely known in the late 1930s and 1940s which seemed to underscore the spiritual were myths as archetypal forms that codify basic human experiences and conscious and unconscious as being interfused (Jung, 1939, pp. 53, 91). In the *Enuma Elish*, the chronicle begins with the creation of the gods themselves: in the beginning the gods emerged two by two from a formless, watery waste called prima materia, the material from which the universe was primarily created.<sup>2</sup> Rene Descartes argued that the intellect alone could help us to discover God and he claimed that reason alone could persuade humanity to accept the truths of religion and morality, which he saw as the foundation of humanity. Using the empirical method of his universal mathematics, he attempted to establish an analytic demonstration of God's existence. Descartes found evidence of God in human consciousness and he argued that even doubt proved the existence of the doubter.

In contrast, Sir Isaac Newton reduced God to his own mechanical system: a sovereign God was central to his whole system for without his Divine Mechanick, it would not exist. Jean-Paul Sartre described a God-shaped hole in human consciousness, where God had always been (1940). Nevertheless, Sartre insisted that even if God exists, it is still necessary to reject him, since the idea of God negates our freedom. Ostensibly, the idea of a personal God has become increasingly unacceptable in our modern world for all sorts of reasons: moral, intellectual, scientific, and spiritual. For example, Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued that instead of increasing our sense of wonder, God actually negates it because God represents absolute perfection; consequently, there is nothing left for us to achieve.

Albert Camus preached a type of heroic atheism and that people should discard God in order to pour out all their loving care upon mankind. The notion of atheism is stated best by Fyodor Dostoevsky in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) through the character of Ivan Karamazov who takes issue with God over the suffering of innocent children. Ivan declares that since he cannot understand or forgive injustice, he will reject God, preferring to stand with the wicked rather than accept misery as part of God's perfect plan. In short, the

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<sup>2</sup> The *Enuma Elish* is a Babylonian or Mesopotamian creation epic composed around the 18<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. It is important for understanding the Babylonian worldview as it is centered on the supremacy of the god Marduk and the creation of humankind as the servants of the gods.

remote God of Aristotle, the Unmoved Mover, and the pure world of Plato's forms had little impact on the lives of mere mortals.

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche suggested the death of God in the words of his imaginary *Zarathustra* (1891, p. 41). "Could it be possible? This old saint has not yet heard in his forest that God is dead!" The tension between the spiritual and artistic was underpinned by Constantin Brancusi who wanted us to free ourselves from the religious baggage of previous centuries. "In the art of other times there is a joy, but with it the nightmare that the religions drag with them - it is time we had an art of our own" (Lipsey, 1988, p. 244). In the early 1930s, a high proportion of visual artists and some architects became involved and worked with these ideas and belief systems, particularly after the devastations of the First World War.

Traditionally, Western art had focused on religious themes; however, artists and philosophers began to wonder how God could allow the atrocities of war to occur. As Armstrong (1993, p. 164) posits that the quest for a personal God simply embeds us in our own prejudice and makes our human ideas absolute. The concept of a personal god interfering with natural events makes God a natural object besides others, a being among beings, maybe the highest, but nevertheless a *Being*. This indeed is not only the destruction of the physical system but even more the destruction of any meaningful idea of God (Tillich, 1964, p. 129). The traditional idea of a personal God would become unfeasible for many Jews after the horrors of the Holocaust in the Second World War. For instance, Armstrong (1993, p. 375) recounts a story as told by Elie Wiesel, the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1986. Wiesel's narrative describes a Jewish child being hanged by the Nazi Gestapo. Wiesel states that one of the prisoners asked: "Where is God?" It took the child half an hour to die while the prisoners were forced to look him in the face. The same man asked again, "Where is God now?" Wiesel heard a voice within him reply: "God is hanging here on the gallows".

## A New Relationship with the Divine

It seemed inevitable that some artists would turn their attention to spirituality at the dawn of the materialistic age of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For many modern artists, the God of the Mystics seemed to present a possible alternative to symbolically express their new concept

of the Divine. The mystic's quest for the Divine is for the unchanging *Eternal*. The mystics insisted that God was not "another being" and that God did not really exist so it is better to call him "Nothing." Armstrong (1993, p. 396) asserts that this idea of God is more in tune with "the aesthetic mood of our secular society with its distrust of images of the *Absolute* and such a god is to be approached through the imagination—this god can be seen as a type of art form akin to the other great artistic symbols that have expressed the ineffable mystery, beauty, and value of life." "Man's ultimate concern must be expressed symbolically, because symbolic language alone is able to express the ultimate" (Tillich, 1957, p. 47). The religious impulse tends to become rationalized and we experience the Divine directly as a half-horrific, half-attractive sense of awe; a "mysterium tremendum et fascinans," a "burning bush" kind of experience (Armstrong, 1993, p. 41). To confront such an overwhelming experience and to avoid being burned by it, we use reason, theory, and symbolism. However in the process, we can let the rational and the symbolic get in the way of the "raw numen" (Otto, 1959).

In the late 20th century, art is rarely associated with religion (Schaeffer, 1987, p. 819). However as we shall see, modern artists employed new symbols in expressing the Divine, a new response to symbolizing a higher awareness of cosmic truth. Theosophy gave these artists a vista that became the fundamental groundwork of their spirituality. From this viewpoint, they believed they were able to see beyond and into the natural world, as well as gaining an understanding of the ancient wisdom and cosmic principles of our existence. This superior perspective elevated them beyond worldly concerns and gave them a sense of divine sight into otherworldly realms; they stood in the doorway between two worlds, they were the messengers, and communicating this knowledge became the objective of their art.

## The Development of Abstraction in Modern Art

Modern art's quest for the Divine began with the fin de siècle's experimentation with abstraction. It has been argued that abstract art, far from representing a neat break with representational art, is actually part of a Romantic tradition reflected in northern European artists like Caspar David Friedrich and Joseph Mallord William Turner who infused landscape paintings with a sense of divinity (Rosenblum, 1975). Most notably from about 1890 in Northern Europe, and later in the United States, a group of artists moved away from

representational art toward abstraction, preferring instead symbolic colour and form as their means of expression in an attempt to reach a higher and deeper dimension of meaning, the most pervasive of which was that of the spiritual. Spiritual influences are evident in many 20th century art movements (Regier, 1987, p. ix). Wassily Kandinsky explained the rise of modern art, with its rejection of materialism and realism as a result of the overthrow of old values in a time of change. Kandinsky (1912, p. 33) notes that “literature, music and art were the first and most sensitive spheres in which the spiritual revolution made itself felt.” They reflected the dark picture of that time and showed the importance of what at first was only a little point of light noticed by a few.

The pioneers of abstract art saw themselves as reacting to a spiritual crisis and that entailed an unqualified rejection of the materialism of modern life and abstraction was meant to play a role in redefining our relationship to the universe. Indeed, abstract art’s emergence throughout the 20th century was continually nourished by mystical ideas. What artists found alluring about the various arcane religious and philosophical systems was their fundamental argument that the spiritual world is ruled by laws that echo natural laws and that it could be expressed in symbols. This idea is parallel to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s (1836) notion that every appearance in nature corresponds to some state of mind. At its core, the theology codified by Emerson was experiential, one where individuals were driven by “throbs of desire and hope” to understand God (Whicher, 1960, p. 108).

Kandinsky believed in the latent spiritual powers of geometric designs: “We recognize the spirit of our time in the realm of construction, not as clear “geometric” construction, which is immediately noticeable, rich in possibilities and expressive, but as an inscrutable one, which inadvertently lifts itself beyond painting; and which, therefore, is meant less for the eye than for the soul” (Fingesten, 1961, p. 4). Thus, in abstract art, pure understanding and sensibility seem to offer insights into an ultimate reality: The abstract art work is simultaneously spiritual and obscure. In this sense then, it is absolute for there is no way of knowing concretely. At the most, it seems akin to a “pure being.” Like the Biblical god of the Israelites, Yahweh, the abstract work of art says no more and no less than *I am who I am* (Exodus, 3, p. 14). Pure line, pure colour, pure composition meet the criteria an *otherworld*. In a very real sense then, we can say that abstract art began with artists being discontent with their world (Kuspit, 1971, pp. 26-27) and it was a time for the emergence of modern

prophets to discover a more universal language to express their sense of the Divine.

## Modern Prophets for a Modern Art

For Katherine Dreier (1877-1952), modern art's emergence indicated a global outburst of previously submerged spiritual emotion. According to Bohan (1987, p. 56), Dreier's philosophy was highly predisposed to the spiritual teachings of Theosophy, the metaphysical theories of Kandinsky, the socially oriented aesthetic ideals of John Ruskin and especially William Morris. Theosophy was one of many occult sects that flourished in late Victorian and Edwardian England, as part of an international reaction to the limitations of positivist thought and a protest against the hegemony of modern science in western culture. For all these groups, including the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and the revived Rosicrucians, the East became the repository of true wisdom and soul-renewal insights into the meaning of life if one could find the key to unlocking the secrets. Hermetic thought reflected the notion of a universe in which every being possessed a spirit and the macrocosm corresponded to the microcosm and attempted to discover the hidden laws that ruled the universe and thereby to accomplish what is called "The Great Work"—the realization of spirit in matter. The alchemist's Great Work focused on matter, specifically based metals.

The prophets of Theosophy, Madame Helena Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott founded the Theosophical Society in 1875. Blavatsky equated "Divine Truth" to a ray of white light, which overtime, had been refracted into different colours of the spectrum, just as the truth of the ancients had been subdivided into various world religions and philosophies. Consequently, it was the mission of the Theosophists to reunite the separate colours, each claiming to be the one true light, into the original white light of truth (Blavatsky, 1889, p. 58). This synthesis was to be accomplished during the 20th century, after which mankind would regain its former clairvoyance and with the return of Man's former state; peace and harmony would reign in the world and there would also be greater brotherhood among men (Blavatsky, 1889, pp. 306-307).

Another key influential movement was *anthroposophy* founded by Rudolf Steiner who gained initial recognition as a literary critic and cultural philosopher. Steiner believed that human beings consisted of a physical body similar to the inorganic world; an etheric body, which all living creatures (including plants) possess; the astral body, held also by all animals;

and the ego, which anchors the faculty of self-awareness unique to human beings. Steiner (1923) describes art as being “the daughter of the Divine” highlighting the fact that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the once “dutiful” daughter struck out on her own quest for the Divine, disregarding her religious heritage and turned her attention to form. Steiner underscores that the starting point for a new life of art can come only through direct stimulation from the spiritual realm: “we must become artists, not by developing symbolism or allegory, but by rising through spiritual knowledge into the spiritual world.” It is possible for one not yet capable of “seeing” directly into the spiritual world himself to derive valuable spiritual knowledge from what was perceived by another (Steiner, 1970, pp. 26-27). This knowledge is communicated through a thought-picture of the higher worlds. Steiner emphasized that art, religion and science are inseparable, and the artist brings down the Divine to earth, not by letting the divine flow into the world, but by raising the world into the sphere of divinity and this was the “cosmic mission of the artist” (Ringbom, 1966, pp. 390-391).

Theosophy (Divine Wisdom) contends to be a synthesis of all religions, to have arrived at their inner, esoteric meaning, and, implicitly, to be the highest of all religions. Its principal doctrines are a pantheistic evolution and reincarnation, while the only morality that it demands is an adhesion to the brotherhood of man (Buser, 1968, p. 375). Although Carl Jung (1875-1961) certainly considered Theosophy an invention of the most unsavoury sort, he nevertheless regarded its emergence as deeply symptomatic. As Jung (1955, pp. 216-217) states: “The Theosophists have an amusing idea that certain Mahatmas, seated somewhere in the Himalayas of Tibet, inspire or direct every mind in the world..... Only this East is not a Tibetan monastery full of Mahatmas, but in a sense lies within us.”

## Spiritual Influences on Western Modern Artists

By the time of Madame Blavatsky’s death in 1891, the teachings of the Theosophical Society and related movements had become so prevalent and influential that artistic circles such as the Nabis (Hebrew Prophets), were beginning to re-establish spiritual enlightenment as a genuine function of art. For instance, around 1890, Paul Ranson, a member of the French Nabis group, created an image which mirrored Paul Gauguin’s Grunewaldian *Yellow Christ* for his central image, and created his own *Yellow Christ* in a painting entitled *Christ and Buddha* (1890-1892) venerated by ascending rows of golden angels in the background

with two blue green images of a contemplative Buddha and a blossoming lotus alongside and an Arabic inscription identifying the figures as the “knighthood of prophets.” In this image, Eastern and Western deities and symbols are therefore merged in one syncretistic supernal space (Davenport, 2007, p. 189). In 1910, Paul Serusier, who was the leader of the Nabis, painted *The Submerged Buddha* (1910) in which a pyramidal Buddha soars serenely in a sea swarming with marine and reptilian life which signifies the Theosophical themes of elemental truth, spirit, and nature. This image depicts “simple forms and immeasurable formlessness in a mystical, limitless space unknowable to modern man” (Davenport, 2007, p. 179). Odilon Redon’s *Le Bouddha* (1905) is an ideal reflection of the symbolic transition from Redon’s earlier works, which vastly included plant life with human heads, to his later years, which mainly represented translucent oneness and light. The image depicts the Buddha standing beside an illuminated tree. Symbolically, the image seems to underpin the Buddhist concept of the “Path of Oneness.”

The concepts of hope, liberty, democracy, science, and progress were greatly promoted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and yet a striking paradox became clearer with time (Fowlie, 1950, p. 317). The work of some of the greatest artists of the 19th century: Balzac, Delacroix, Baudelaire, Flaubert, Rimbaud, and Van Gogh reveals little faith left in those very ideals which the century had most fervently advocated. Vincent Van Gogh believed that for a painter to give an impression of spiritual agony it was not necessary to actually depict the Garden of Gethsemane and suggested that universal anguish may be expressed just as effectively in the depiction of a great tree struck down by lightning or in the faded colours of a dying autumn flower. All great art is one man’s secret vision, and hence triumph, of the world (Fowlie, 1950, p. 319).

Shortly after his death in July 1890, his brother Theo wrote a letter to Albert Aurier, a leading art critic. Theo felt Aurier could do most justice to Vincent’s artistic genius. Aurier’s writings were deeply influenced by the Hermetic tradition of alchemy<sup>3</sup> which offered modern painters a metaphor to illuminate their own work. Its symbols provided them with a new subject matter: allegorical signs referring to self-transformation (Langhorne, 1998, pp. 51-52). Aurier’s poetic evocation of Van Gogh’s imagery employs several literary

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<sup>3</sup> The defining objectives of alchemy include the creation of the fabled philosopher’s stone possessing powers including the capability of turning base metals into the noble metals gold or silver, as well as an elixir of life conferring youth and immortality.

techniques with which the Symbolists were experimenting at the time. Through incantatory rhythmic repetition, Aurier hoped to achieve a hypnotic effect common to much Symbolist poetry and his description of Van Gogh's imagery suggests a world composed of prima material.<sup>4</sup> Aurier (1890, p. 258) describes Van Gogh's landscapes as being "under skies at times cut into dazzling fragments of sapphire and turquoise" and "under skies resembling molten outpourings of metal and crystal" and "under an incessant and awesome shimmering" and "forms seen as in nightmare, colour turning into flame, light setting fire to itself, and trees being twisted like battling giants" and of "red-hot liquid metal, crystals, and jewels."

Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1913) generated a new century of subjective art and further undermined the idea of "artist as visionary." According to Freud, the synapse connects the unconscious and conscious mind thus dreams and art are intimately connected. Freud argued that the idea of a contact barrier affecting passage as well as communication and transformation would have a parallel in the relationship between dream thoughts the latent dream in its unconscious aspect and dream work which is the manifest experience of a dream. Symbolization, condensation and displacement render repressed aspects of the dream accessible to the conscious mind. In dreams and art, material is evolved and translated then transformed through the process of repressive mechanism.

Gauguin's idea of "the mysterious centres of thought" was identified by Freud as the unconscious or "a limitless cornucopia of dreams." Gamwell (1999, p. 78) points out that "the reality of the external world is used for illustration and proof, and so comes to serve the reality of the mind." Even though Paul Gauguin's moral conduct and his theological opinions might have upset contemporary Christians, it has been argued that he was fundamentally a "spiritual" man, searching for faith (Buser, 1968, p. 375). Gauguin's spiritual quest for the Divine is exemplified in a painting entitled *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897-1898). Gauguin's spiritual conviction goes beyond the ordinary anticlericalism and apologetics of his time. Occasionally, Gauguin's spiritual imagery is closely parallel to the Theosophical doctrine of Edouard Schure's popular book, *Les Grands Initiés* (1889). It would seem then, that the creation of synthetism

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<sup>4</sup> Prima Materia, according to alchemists, is the alleged primitive formless base of all matter given particular manifestation through the influence of forms.



and Gauguin's discovery of Theosophy were in close association. Although Hina, the goddess of the moon, belongs to Maori legends about creation, nevertheless the stories depict a primitive search for the origin and meaning of the universe. Hina is depicted standing in shadowy woods, her orange body shaded in green and blue. There is a bluish tonality to the entire painting. As we shall see later, the colour blue has special import in Theosophical colour symbolism: it is the heavenly colour.

As noted previously, it has been argued that it is feasible for one not yet capable of "seeing" directly into the spiritual world himself to derive significant spiritual knowledge from what was perceived by another (Steiner, 1970, pp. 26-27). This knowledge is communicated through a thought-picture of the higher worlds. Annie Besant's and Charles Webster Leadbeater's thought-forms were generated from thoughts and emotions, or to use Theosophical terms, the mental body and the desire-body (Besant and Leadbeater, 1901, pp. 13-24). Each colour signified a different meaning. Kandinsky went further than the Theosophists in creating the specifics of a spiritual art. As noted earlier, hermetic teachings highlighted the notion of "The Great Work" and it is clear that Kandinsky saw himself as a spiritual and aesthetic pioneer in this *magnum opus*. He viewed the artist as a prophet, like a Moses leading his people to the Promised Land (Kandinsky, 1913, pp. 262-369). With near-messianic fervor, he declared in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1912) that the type of painting he envisioned would advance a new spiritual epoch. This messianic approach convinced Kandinsky that the discovery of basic truths or natural laws that lay hidden beneath the artificial structures of established governments, religions, and art would change the direction of human life. During periods of materialistic predominance and spiritual backwardness, art is regarded as a purposeless activity whereas art essentially is a power with a definite purpose. It is a force which by developing and refining the human soul in its own way contributes to the motion of the spiritual triangle (Ringbom, 1966, p. 395).

The key concept of the Theosophical mysticism of colour and form is the notion of *vibration*. The pattern of the human aura, as well as that of the musical configurations observed by the clairvoyants, is shaped and coloured by supernal vibrations generated by thoughts and emotions. The psychic vibrations pattern the mental and astral matter of the aura in the same way as physical vibrations organize physical matter in certain circumstances. In his Theosophical colour symbolism, Wassily Kandinsky is clearly

appropriating an occult practice. For example, Kandinsky once claimed that the color “black is like the silence of the body after death, the close of life.” Moreover, Kandinsky (1912, p. 38) states, “the colour blue is the typically heavenly colour, the ultimate feeling it creates is one of rest: supernatural rest, not the earthy contentment of green. The way to the supernatural lies through the naturals and we mortals, passing from the earthy yellow to the heavenly blue, must pass through the green.” Kandinsky (1912, pp. 40-41) points out: “Red, as seen by the mind, and not by the eye, exercises at once a definite and an indefinite impression upon the soul, and produces spiritual harmony.”

For Kandinsky, blue is the male principle, astringent and spiritual; yellow is the female principle, gentle, joyful, and spiritual, and red is matter, brutal and heavy and always the colour to be opposed and overcome by the other two. The deeper the blue becomes, the more strongly it calls man toward the infinite awakening in him a desire for the pure, and ultimately, the supernatural; a palpable echo of the declaration in thought-forms that the different shades of blue all indicate a spiritual feeling. Here, Kandinsky follows the practice of conferring upon each colour a significance that is ultimately metaphysical. The mystical aura which envelops the female in Kandinsky’s *Lady in Moscow* (1912) seems akin to an etheric double derived from Besant’s and Leadbeater’s thought-forms while the ominous black shape may be linked to negative forces and distressing childhood experiences.

The narrative of the *Lady in Moscow* is recounted both on real and abstract levels. The image depicts a well-dressed woman with reddish hair standing in front of a relatively empty street scene. Her pose is reminiscent of Minoan snake goddesses. The female’s right hand surrounds a small white dog on a table and she holds a red rose in her left hand and she is framed by a loose triangle while a peasant appears to be almost standing on the table, a running dog, a horse-drawn carriage, and three street lamps frame her head. There is a distinct abstract shape on each side of her: a rose and a red circular form at the right and a blue triangular shape at the left. The sun is covered by a large black shape and churches, walls, and a watch tower are depicted in the background. The struggle between blackness and light, hate and love, remains the central theme of this image: It is a philosophical reflection on the relationship which relates to the visible and invisible worlds, a sermon on the occult nature of Man (Gettings, 1979).

Solar forces are absorbed by the changing etheric body and distributed throughout the

body along a series of wheeling centers (chakras) which are depicted in the image as intertwined pattern on the dress. The contrast between the two abstract splotches is frequently interpreted as signifying the conflict between good and evil thought-forms. The painting is a perfect square measuring 108.8 x 108.8 cm. A perfect square is symbolic of “Divine equity geometrically expressed . . . all the powers and great symphonies of physical and spiritual nature lie inscribed within the perfect square” (Blavatsky, 1877, p. 9). In terms of geometrical and mystical symbolism, the lady being encapsulated in this loose triangle also has Theosophical connotations. In Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine* (1888, p. 626), a triangle and a square represent the symbol of Septenary Man (Clemen, 1924, p. 284).<sup>5</sup> In *Lady in Moscow*, the center of the square has mystical connotations as the center-point of the square is located on the left arm. When a line is drawn across the lady from this point, it intersects the upper pattern of her dress, specifically; the area of the *heart chakra* which is one of the centers of the body which receives solar forces and is involved with spirituality and love. The heart chakra is also symbolic of the Mystic Rose, the flower she is holding in her hand.

Piet Mondrian, an avid reader of Theosophy, once said he learned everything he knew from Madame Blavatsky. Mondrian joined the Dutch Theosophical Society in 1909, about the same time that his work began its gradual evolution toward the abstract. The shift was heralded in his landscapes: wide expanses of beach and sea and forest scenes that highlighted the vertical thrust of trees from a horizontal expanse of earth. Mondrian’s preoccupation with the tension between vertical and horizontal was later depicted in the haunting abstract cruciform patterns that would become his trademark. According to Mondrian’s own notebooks, published by the Chinati Foundation (1989) his work represents the struggle of cosmic dualities towards unity and the religious symmetry underpinning the material universe. In an article entitled *Art, Spirituality and the Evolution of Human Consciousness through the Creative Process*,<sup>6</sup> Mondrian is described as being a passionate believer in the Theosophical doctrine of evolution and that Mondrian claimed that the hallmark of the new age would be the new man who could live only in the atmosphere of the universal, and that initiates, saints, deities brought the people, as from without, to feel and

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<sup>5</sup> The number 7 in Theosophy and Anthroposophy is considered to be a divine number.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.squidoo.com/artifactstoinpire>. Last retrieved 5<sup>th</sup> January, 2013.

recognize the universal. Thus, the concept of a purer more universal style of life as well as art developed.

Mondrian's triptych *Evolution* (1910-1911) is in essence a cosmic, mystical sequence progressing from matter through soul to spirit influenced by Steiner's Theosophy. Three nude female figures, or perhaps one figure, are seen from three different points of evolution: the terrestrial or earthly body on the left with the red shapes behind her (red signifying earthly passion) and the triangles indicating nipples and navel pointing downward to earth; the soul at center with the white light behind her and her eyes wide open. The navels and breast nipples reflect the Theosophical notion of "anima mundi."<sup>7</sup> The Divine Spirit on the right with yellow stars is depicted behind her and her nipples and navel triangles point both up and down in a perfect harmony of the spheres through a dynamic balancing of opposing forces. Thus, the spiritual and physical are in unison. The blues and yellows can be interpreted as suggesting astral shells or radiations of the figures. The six petals of the amaryllis flower, if viewed frontally, are akin to a six-pointed star which is the insignia of the Theosophical movement. Evidently, Mondrian's three upright nudes depict the notion of a clairvoyant visionary experience. The obscure background of the triptych seems numinous and transcends the limits of a specific time and space. Additionally, the androgynous physical appearance of the three figures suggests that they may be viewed as one person or as a temple of God.

In 1914 and 1915, Frantisek Kupka exhibited a series of squares on plain backgrounds. He was an avid reader of theosophy and other metaphysical works. Kupka approached the realm of the spiritual in art from a similar direction. He began as a Symbolist painter and presented concepts found in the Theosophical teachings on esoteric Eastern religions and philosophies. As a Symbolist, these ideas seemed to be a representation rather than a manifestation of his spiritual knowledge. When he began to make the connection between the forces acting in this world as a microcosm of the macrocosmic forces in the universe, his work began to communicate a divine message. This is also when his paintings became more abstracted, evolving into works of sacred geometry. Kupka created his first abstract works in 1911, combining his interests in Cubism, Czech folk art, philosophy, and optics. These radical

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<sup>7</sup> Anima Mundi is the divine essence which pervades, permeates, animates, and informs all things, from the smallest atom of matter to man and God.

new paintings, in which meaning was meant to be conveyed solely through elements of colour and form, were among the first purely non-representational works to be produced by any artist in Europe at the time. As its title indicates, *Vertical and Diagonal Planes* (1913-1914), this painting has an overall vertical composition, enlivened by diagonal elements and a strong sense of pattern and contrast. Kupka seems to allude to perspective through the angled placement of certain shapes, while still insisting on the flatness of the painting's surface through the absence of shading. The multitude of rectilinear geometric forms, mainly parallelograms in saturated colors, interlock in a way that suggests stained glass, textile design, or a folding screen; this effect may be the result of Kupka's association with the Viennese Art Nouveau movement in the first decade of the century.

Ostensibly, Pamela Coleman Smith possessed synaesthesia<sup>8</sup> to an exceptionally high degree, and seemingly, she was able to create sound paintings just by unconsciously drawing while listening to passages of music. At the time, synaesthesia was believed to have either occultist origins or to result from an extremely refined sensitivity to aesthetic "vibrations." In Smith's case, both ideas applied. The basic elements of Smith's art: mysticism and magic, folkloric content, visionary experience, and the visualization of music were part of the Symbolist milieu out of which her work evolved.<sup>9</sup> Smith joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1903. John Butler Yeats, the Irish artist, and father of the poet William Butler Yeats and the Irish painter, Jack Butler Yeats, described Smith as one of "the funniest-looking people, the most primitive Americans possible . . . she has the simplicity and naiveté of an old dry as dust savant but with a child's heart" (Yeats, 1944, p. 444).

Yeats was fascinated by the alchemical quest of self-transmutation and that alchemy was among the subjects studied by the students of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. As noted earlier, hermetic thought claimed that as in the physical realm common metals could be transmuted into silver and gold, so too on the metaphysical level the human soul could be changed into an imperishable and perfect spirit. Such a view held an abiding interest for Yeats and was to sustain itself in the poet's creative imagination long after his

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<sup>8</sup> Synaesthesia is a neurologically based condition in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to automatic, involuntary experiences in a second sensory or cognitive pathway.

<sup>9</sup> Smith's method involved an 'automatic' procedure which foreshadowed, at an exceptionally early date, the psychic automatism which Surrealist artists and writers later strove so hard to achieve.

membership in secret societies had terminated (Schuler, 1971, p. 37). Klee (1966) had used the symbol of a tree to describe his understanding of the artist as a medium for the transformative process of nature. The artist is the trunk of the tree and from the tree roots; the sap rises up into the artist and flows through him to his eyes. Thus, he is moved by the force of the current and directs his vision into his work.

Smith's painting *Castle of Pain* (1906) demonstrates the perplexing nature of her symbolism. The painting is dominated by a colossal battered tower carved from a rocky outcropping in the center of an immense and comparatively unremarkable plain. In the foreground, a pensive and despondent figure of indeterminate gender reclines on a rock while in the foreground; three heads obtrude unexpectedly into the frame, one appearing to be female, one male, and the third, the head of an ox or bull. The eyes of both the human faces are closed, conveying the impression that they are in a trance, while the bull's eyes remain open. None of the three heads appear to be aware of the others, nor do they seem to notice the reclining figure. About halfway between the monogram and the bull's head is a small inverted triangle bisected by another line. An upright triangle bisected by a line is one of the symbols used to represent the element air (Silberer, 1971, p. 194).

Smith briefly wrote about towers once, and the rather mysterious tenor and content of her statements suggested that for her, as for Yeats, towers symbolized the sacred knowledge accessible only to the adepts of mystical doctrine. "I often see towers white and tall standing against the darkening sky. Those tall white towers that one sees afar topping the mountain crests like crowns of snow...but gives the sign and enters in towards that sacred way" (Parsons, 1987, p. 86). The tower appeared most often in Yeats's late works. For instance, The Black Tower represents the defence of spiritual wisdom against the ignorance of the world at large (Yeats, 1956, p. 340). The themes of sacrifice in the tower were repeated in *Castle of Pain* by the triad of heads in the corner of the image. Esoterically speaking, the primary message of the painting is the suffering and sacrifice necessary for spiritual purification and rebirth.

Franz Marc spoke in terms of the animalization of art since he believed so strongly in the possibilities held by the representation of animals. It should be noted that Marc spoke in terms of pantheistic empathy with regard to his objectives in representing animals and nature. He associated blue with masculinity, and red and yellow with femininity since they

are more earthy colours, but he also associated yellow with joy and happiness. Blue was viewed by Marc to be the most deeply spiritual of the three colours. His decision to apply non-representational colours to animals could perhaps have been an attempt at stepping away from the material world and identifying the need to use non-worldly colours in order to portray the spiritual. Marc states that he endeavored to create “symbols for the altar of a new spiritual religion” (Marc, 1974, p. 64). Marc was considerably influenced by Kandinsky’s mysticism and claimed that there was no great or pure art without religion. From such understandings, he used abstraction as a “second sight” which was totally Indian-temporal. The European eye had perhaps poisoned and distorted the world, and therefore Marc instead sought this second sight (Ringbom, 1966, pp. 409-410). As noted earlier, the colour blue in Kandinsky’s Theosophical colour symbolism has special spiritual import. We can see the early manifestation of Marc’s colour symbolism in a work entitled *Blue Horse I* (1911).

According to Levine (1979, p. 58) “The animal, rendered solely in tones of blue, is seen facing us . . . the blue fore and hind legs of the horse upon an area composed solely of shades of deep red and violet.” Ultimately, Marc would become more skilled in his Theosophical colour symbolism, making no reference to at all to the physical phenomena of the outer-world. This movement towards total abstraction is evident in his painting *Fighting Forms* (1914) which was painted on the eve of the First World War. In this image, there is only reference to the “objectless” forms of the pure colour-system of the psychic “inner-world.” A monumental bluish form dominates the entire right-hand part of the composition and is in conflict with the red mass on the left; at the apex, yellow zigzags are in conflict with the red form, while spears of green erupt from the bottom-left (Moffitt, 1987, p. 117). Marc’s art was apocalyptic in its intentions and it reveals occultist perceptions of certain hidden forces in nature and of the need for a cataclysmic and millennial refreshing of culture, nature, and art.

Alfred Stieglitz<sup>10</sup> wrote to Sherwood Anderson in December 1925 describing the gallery he had just opened in a small room in New York. At the Intimate Gallery, references proliferated with a mantra-like uniformity to an art that would help viewers to achieve an

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<sup>10</sup> Alfred Stieglitz was an American photographer and modern art promoter. In addition to his photography, Stieglitz is known for the New York art galleries that he ran in the early part of the 20th century, where he introduced many avant-garde European artists to the U.S. He was married to the painter Georgia O’Keeffe.

enlightened awareness of a spiritual realm (Wilson, 2003, p. 746). Stieglitz had declared that he had photographed God (Greenough & Hamilton, 1983, p. 208). By emphasizing the physical immediacy of work by Georgia O’Keeffe, John Marin, Marsden Hartley, and Arthur Dove by calling attention to the artists’ ability to infuse their subject matter with a vibrant, animated sensibility, Stieglitz’s pamphlets presented the art, in turn, as an animating agent for the viewer. The viewer’s empathetic response was meant to cultivate an embodied awareness of the physical world and, from the spiritual resonance of that physical world, an experience of oneness with both the natural and the Divine (Wilson, 2003, p. 757).

Marsden Hartley incorporated mystical references and symbols into his art. During his stay in Germany from 1913 to 1915, he executed a group of paintings he called his “Amerika” paintings. These works combined abstract arrangements of colourful shapes, signs, and symbols drawn from German military pageants and Native American motifs. Hartley was concerned by the avarice of modern industrial society and thought that the answer to such a corrupt civilization lay in the spiritualism of the primitives. His *American Indian Symbols* (1914) is painted in bold, flat patterns. Similar formal elements appear right through the series: a central triangular tepee (as noted earlier, a triangle is a Theosophical symbol) luminously coloured, striped, and circular forms; stylized seated figures with striped headdresses; and spherical star forms and broad blanket stripes suggesting Indian ornamentation. Immersed in the study of Theosophical mysticism at the time, Hartley believed he might glimpse divinity through communion with nature.

Arthur Dove’s painting *Sunrise* (1924) emphasizes the painter’s belief in a link between raw nature and the divine order of the cosmos and echoed the tenets of *transcendentalism*. The undulating waves of colour seem almost generative, evoking mystical and spiritual feelings through a visionary treatment of material form. The painting is composed of a repeated series of yellow circles emerging from behind vividly coloured forms a montage of views of the sun rising from behind a mountain. Each larger circle of yellow is surmounted by even larger coloured masses; it is as if the sun, rising through the sky is pulling the earth with it. Dove prolongs their separation through ever larger suns and mountains, until suddenly all is condensed into a small circular form; the risen sun exuding a divine white light. Dove’s image does not convey observed fact but, rather, re-enacts the expectation and wonder of divine revelation that he experienced before such a sight.



In her abstractions, Georgia O’Keeffe swathed colour around the ethereal. Arguably, she was greatly influenced by the writings of the British author, D. H. Lawrence. There was a tall tree in front of the small house where Lawrence had lived when he was in New Mexico. When he left New Mexico in 1925, Lawrence intended to return, even though he was already sick. By the time O’Keeffe traveled to New Mexico in 1929 for her first extended stay, visiting Lawrence’s friend and disciple Dorothy Brett at his ranch and painting *The Lawrence Tree* (1929), she had been deeply affected by his visionary celebration of organic nature. Moreover, Tree of Life symbolism was believed to chart out the movements of cosmic forces from their divine origination.

Eliade (1959) has classified patterns of religious behavior which generate archetypal symbols. Among the forms Eliade describes are the threshold, the *cosmic mountain*, the world tree and the sacred center. Without the center there could be no order and consequently no sacred space—for the center makes life understandable by linking cosmic regions in harmonious unity. One has only to look at Buddhist mandalas or Navaho sand paintings to see the archetype of the center imagined in spherical form. Paul Klee (1966) claimed that it was the artist’s mission to penetrate as far as possible that secret place where primal power nurtures all evolution, in the womb of nature—the primal ground of creation where the secret key to all things laid hidden.

Klee’s *Omphalo-Centric Lecture* image (1939) is an affirmation of what he felt was the mission of all artists: to move toward this mystic center as the start of all creative thought. Klee describes this creative center as a point which he associated with the navel of the human figure: When central importance is given to a point, this is the cosmogentic moment and “it corresponds to the idea of every sort of beginning” (Klee, 1961, p. 4). The mystifying figure in *Omphalo-Centric Lecture* faces the viewer directly, and in its cupped hand we see a radiant navel: the internal celestial light from which all knowledge exudes.<sup>11</sup> Symbolically, this center represented the Earth Mother.

Essentially, the Surrealists had created a new definition of Man as divinely inspired by the imagination: dreams and imagination acted together as “sacred messengers” heralding a perception of the Divine. One of Giorgio de Chirico’s early images, *The Nostalgia of the*

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<sup>11</sup> Symbolically, the navel has further importance because of its overt associations with the womb, birth, creation, and the continuation of life. As the Omphalos, it is also a life/death symbol of special import to Klee because he had a terminal illness and continually dealt with images of death in his last full year of life.

*Infinite* (1913), exerted a vital influence on many Surrealist artists who adopted his visual techniques to create uncanny and disturbing effects in their imagery. In this image, the world seems to be too immobile; the only moving objects are the flags adorning the lonely tower which dwarf the insignificant isolated figures that stand below motionless. The Surrealist Philosophy of Immanence led to an extraordinary perception of the object and this pervasive and diffuse sense of “significance” was akin to Otto’s (1959) notion of the numinous or holy.

The Surrealist and Dadaist artist, Max Ernst, wove alchemical symbols into a complex matrix of meaning and personal revelation in his imagery. Ernst reached back to techniques of Poe, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud for inducing inspiration deliberately, a Promethean attempt to steal the fire of the gods. Consciously adhering to the Rimbaud’s formula *I is another*, he devised methods of creation which, as he put it, “reduced to a minimum the active part of what until now has been called the ‘author’ so that the artist could “attend simply as a spectator the birth of his work” (Rosenberg, 1975, p. 222). Alchemical philosophy offers many symbolic parallels to Surrealist thought. Ernst’s *Une Semaine de Bonté* (1934) both in its structure and iconography, reveals his interest in alchemy. The novel has seven sections for each day of the week and each one illustrates one of Ernst’s seven deadly elements, including water and fire. Warlick (1987) points out that in *The Lion of Belfort* (1933),<sup>12</sup> Ernst creates a sepulcher out of a billiard table. A man is buried in a casket under the table attended by a lion and a young woman. The seven bells above represent the seven perfect tones, and also relate to the metals and planets. The lion appears to be in a state of majestic calm as if guarding the buried prima materia and awaiting the end of the stage of putrefaction.

As noted earlier, the tension between the spiritual and artistic was underpinned by Constantin Brancusi who wanted us to free ourselves from the religious baggage of previous centuries. Zen Buddhism seems to have influenced the artwork of Brancusi. His understanding and belief in Eastern mysticism is an underlying influence on his abstract works. For example, the monument in Targu Jiu, Romania is a memorial to Romanian heroes who fought the Germans in World War One. It comprises of three components placed in precise distances along a walk beside the Jui River. The spatial context and meditative

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<sup>12</sup> The Lion of Belfort (1933), *Une Semaine de Bonté* (Plate 14).

walk performed by the viewer whilst contemplating the work is an integral aspect of the experience. The first ensemble is the *Table of Silence* (1937-1938). Spatiality is at the core of Brancusi's sculptural expression.

The imagery of Jackson Pollock seems to have a destiny of its own: It is never a question of imposing the image but of letting the image result from the act of painting. In a primitivistic sense then, Pollock believed that he was “possessed” and his painting became a kind of spiritual entity which could communicate its energy. For Pollock, the key to creation was to enter into what he called “contact” with the painting he had begun, so that it would guide him as if it were an outside spiritual force. “I have no fears” he said, “about making changes, destroying the image, and so on, because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through.” Here, the artist conceives himself as a vehicle or medium of an entity beyond himself, a version of Rimbaud's *I is another* (Rosenberg, 1975, p. 231). Accordingly, the artist enacted the role of a medium or shaman who lets the spirit come through him. That Pollock is “possessed” implies not that he is creative but that he is made creative in much the same way as the primitive, when the spirit takes possession—“something thinks in him” and through him (Levine & Pollock, 1967, p. 368).

The sense of time in Pollock's work is also related to the mythical experience. Since there is no sense of beginning or end in Pollock's painting, movement has no specific direction. Nor is there any progression from foreground to background with its concomitant sense of a time element - past, present and future are undistinguishable. Each movement in his drip paintings contains something of every other movement.<sup>13</sup> The four main colours used in Pollock's *Alchemy* (1947) are black, white, red, and yellow: they symbolize the four stages of transmutation in the alchemic process (Welch, 1987, p. 197).<sup>14</sup> When one views Pollock's *Alchemy*, one experiences the forces themselves that gave rise to it, for the creative idea which engendered the canvas is the painting itself, in other words, the aesthetic components are also its spiritual elements.

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<sup>13</sup> As Cassirer (1944, p. 173) points out: “Mythical time has no definite structure; it is still an eternal time. From the point of view of the mythical consciousness the past has never passed away; it is always here and now.”

<sup>14</sup> Pollock used aluminium paint, so the silvery coloured paint may symbolize quicksilver (mercury) which is analogous to and sometimes identical with prima materia. The number ‘4’ may symbolize the concept of completeness and the number ‘6’ may represent the fusion of male and female. Welch (1987, p. 199) underscores that “alchemical ideas and mythology may have contributed materially to Pollock's ‘drip’ technique in general and specifically to this image.”

Barnett Newman's famous stripe paintings are based on the esoteric teachings of mystical Judaism known as Kabbalah. To create a primordial space for the universe, God contracted into himself. Next, God sent out a ray of light in which he revealed himself as God the Creator. This act set the cosmic process in motion. Subsequently, the first being which emanated from this light was Adam—he is the first and highest form in which the divinity begins to manifest itself after the “Tsimtsum” (Baigell, 1994, p. 33). The single stripe (frontispiece) may be understood as representing the first ray of light and the first man.

However Scholem (1946) postulates that from Adam's eyes, mouth, ears, and nose, the lights of the divinity burst forth in an undifferentiated mass. By making the stripes and the rectangular fields appear to be on the same plane, Newman captured on the pictorial surface the very moment of creation - the moment of the first ray of the light of creation, before matter, and therefore space, became differentiated. To achieve this surface, Newman manipulated depth cues based on the size and colour intensity of the forms. Normally, we read both large shapes and intense colours as projecting toward us, and small shapes and weak colours as receding into the distance. But in his stripe paintings, such as *Dionysius* (1949), by making the stripes and the rectangular fields appear to be on the same plane, Newman captured on the pictorial surface the very moment of creation - the moment of the first ray of the light of creation, before matter, and therefore space, became differentiated. Newman's stripes might be understood as an act of resistance as well as a celebration of renewal and rebirth, an affirmation of life during a time of Jewish trauma and national revival. Nourished by his cultural rather than his religious identification as a Jew, Newman created the stripes as one person's single and solitary gesture, a raw assertion of the self against a society and a god that did not merit his full respect.

During the 1940s and especially the 1950s, Zen Buddhism started to influence American artists such as Jackson Pollock, Willem De Kooning, Franz Kline, Philip Guston, Ad Reinhardt and Brice Marden. In Seattle during the 1930s, Mark Tobey had been greatly influenced by Zen Buddhism. By the 1950s, the San Francisco Bay Area had become the center of Zen Buddhist influence on the West Coast. Mark Tobey's structured compositions such as his *White Writing* (1951) inspired by Zen Buddhist calligraphy resemble Abstract Expressionist imagery. It seems that Zen Buddhism not only introduced a whole world of

alien mythology to Western artists but inspired them with new ideas. According to Pearlman (2012), Zen Buddhism's influence on the post-WWII American avant-garde was particularly dominant. Buddhism was dispersed throughout the arts in America by D.T. Suzuki's famed pupil and composer, John Cage, as well as through the work of the Abstract Expressionists, the Beats (Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac), and Fluxus artists.<sup>15</sup> In America, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the world, and life itself, became a legitimate artist's tool, aligning with Zen Buddhism's emphasis on "enlightenment at any moment" or "to see without seeing."

Yves Klein was a Rosicrucian. His anthropometry painting,<sup>16</sup> *Suaire de Mondo Cane* (1961) is one of the unusual *anthropometries* executed on gauze and it was envisaged under precise circumstances. It could almost be interpreted as the shroud of the artist himself.<sup>17</sup> The spiritual nature of the colour blue was highly influential in his image production. Klein focused on the spirituality of pure colour and even invented his own shade called International Klein Blue. Klein believed in the creation of a new world where human beings would initiate an ideal life, freed from physical constraints and boundaries in what Klein considered a new Eden. This new world is clearly connected to the rest of Klein's artistic work, with its emphasis on primal elements, air, fire, water, and its use of the void. For Klein, space was never simply a vacuum; it was always filled with spiritual, cosmological energy, and the forces of human perception. According to Klein, perception went beyond the tangible world, beyond visual discernment: perception is being in the world—it is a continuous process that integrates all the senses, the physical as well as the social body.

In 1964, Mark Rothko agreed to provide paintings for St. Thomas Catholic University Chapel being planned in Houston. He was adamant about the spiritual nature of his paintings, observing that the "people who weep before my pictures are having the same

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<sup>15</sup> The Fluxus art movement is an international network of artists, composers and designers noted for blending different artistic media and disciplines in the 1960s. Fluxus is sometimes described as intermedia.

<sup>16</sup> Anthropometry literally means the measurement of humans for the purposes of understanding human physical variation.

<sup>17</sup> In 1961, the movie director, Gualtiero Jacopetti, proposed to include Klein in his movie *Mondo Cane*. Klein consequently made an anthropometry on two layers of translucent gauze so that the camera could record through the fabric and from behind the bodies, the 'living brushes', imprinting themselves onto the canvas. For Klein, such imprinted bodies were anthropometric symbols that served as the pure standard of human proportion and they were the most intense expression of vital energy conceivable. He believed that the model's impressions represented the health that brought humans into being, and that their presence in the work transcended personal presence.

religious experience I had when I painted them” (Rodman, 1957, pp. 93-94). The chapel venture, which conjured his heart, his soul and his total energies, evokes the pursuit of mystics, entering into “silent darkness” (De Menil, 1971, p. 250). Rothko’s color-field painting aimed to uncover the emotional force of pure colour (Baal-Teshuva, 2003, p. 10). Pure colour was thought to express invisible states of mind. Akin to altar-places, his canvasses are meant to force the viewer into deep contemplation, to achieve what he termed “spiritual communion” (Weiss, 1998, p. 307). Rothko believed that art is “an anecdote of the spirit” and he was determined to use his work as a means of transcending the limits of human experience (Baal-Teshuva, 2003, p. 39).

## Conclusion

As stated previously, it is important to point out to the reader that the scope of this paper is vast and for reasons of space it is impossible to cover everything that relates to “Prior Knowledge of Spiritual Symbolism in Modern Art.” Another limitation of the study is that there is a lack of discussion on the use of modern Asian art from the same period that the western images were selected. Moreover, it would be interesting to explore the notion of spirituality in contemporary Asian art as there is a dearth of western scholarship in this field.

Nevertheless, this study underpins the importance of visual literacy in art education. The findings show that visual literacy is the ability to understand and use visual images, including the capacity to think, learn and express oneself by means of visual images. Many aspects of cognition are demanded, such as personal association, questioning, speculating, analyzing, fact-finding, and categorizing. In addition, the importance of visual literacy as a means of expression and communication in human civilization makes it an essential field in the theoretical and applied research of education systems and instructional settings.

The findings underpin the importance of visual literacy as a means of expression and communication in human civilization makes it a crucial field in the theoretical and applied research of education systems and instructional settings. It has also been underpinned that visually literate students should be more resistant to the controlling use of images in advertisements and other contexts and also should be capable of inferring, understanding, and appreciating the meaning of visual messages. Additionally, visually literate students should be adept in communicating more effectually by applying the basic principles and

concepts of visual design and also capable of producing visual messages using computers and other technology and use visual thinking to conceptualize solutions to problems.

The findings of this study are informative and heuristic for the teaching and research of modern art appreciation, art history, and art criticism. The study underlines the importance of learners activating and transferring prior knowledge (Bransford & Johnson, 1972) and how this influences the degree to which new information and ideas are comprehended. It underpins the importance of art-specific prior knowledge activating and determining students' understanding (Koroscik, 1982) of spiritual imagery in modern art.

As stated earlier, several studies in art education have stressed the importance of interpretative and historical understandings of art students in their comprehension of imagery (Cason, 1998; Forker, 2002, 2009; Forker & Chang, 2007; French, 1992; Short, 1996; Stavropoulos, 1992, 1995, 1996). Accordingly, this study claims to be central to art education because it offers the opportunity for non-western art students to expand their visual literacy and their interpretative and historical understandings and prior knowledge (Koroscik, 1982) of symbolism in the depiction of the Divine by 19<sup>th</sup> century and 20<sup>th</sup> century Western modern artists. Accordingly, the study investigated various notions of symbolism, Man's old relationship with the Divine, Man's new relationship with the Divine, the development of abstraction in modern art, modern prophets for a modern art, and spiritual influences on Western modern artists.

The findings also show that Japanese imagery influenced Western modern art. For instance, the animated brushwork used by Zen artists (Zenga) is evocative of abstract forms in Western modern art. Moreover, it is manifest that Zen Buddhism influenced 19<sup>th</sup> century Western artists such as Paul Ranson, Paul Serusier, Odilon Redon and Vincent Van Gogh. It is also apparent that many Western modern artists were highly influenced by Theosophy.

In terms of art education, it is vital that non-western art students understand the multivocality of symbols (Turner, 1967) employed in the selected imagery. For instance, in their symbolic interpretations of the Divine, western modern artists employed yellow Christs, a submerged pyramidal Buddha, the Tree of Life, Hina (the goddess of the Moon), sacred centers, sacred geometrical symbols, alchemical symbols, Theosophical color symbolism (especially, the spirituality of blueness), mystical towers, a blue horse, German military and Native American symbols, supernatural lion symbolism and Earth Mother

symbolism.

It is patent that the rise of modern art was due to a rejection of materialism and realism as a result of the overthrow of old values in a time of change. It is also evident that many of the Western modern artists discussed in this study were not “religious” in the conventional sense of the word. Most of them rejected traditional Christian iconography and the quest for a personal God. We cannot claim that the quest for the Divine was the most significant objective in these modern artists’ creations but we can claim that spiritual symbolism played a significant role in their artistic development. Moreover, many modern Western artists were interested in making their art serve some truth higher representation of nature and their artworks were reactions against what were thought to be the limitations of a rationalist and materialist worldview. They sought knowledge of the occult in conjunction with a search for a personally innovative style. Spirituality was no longer necessarily related to religion; particularly when artists attributed their personal meanings to that word.

Conversely, this interpretation of modern art offers yet more confirmation that the religious landscape has undergone fundamental shifts as traditional Christian symbols could no longer be relied on to create a synthesis of religion and culture (Roof and McKinney, 1987). These artists were radical innovators and were driven by an unquenchable urge for spiritual transformation. For each artist, their spiritual quest and artistic experimentation became inseparable. Furthermore despite their different techniques and philosophies, these artists shared one goal; explicitly, to break a path to a new, ultimate pictorial truth in their quest for the Divine.

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