

Spirituality and the Process of Creating Art

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I. INTRODUCTION: Struggling, embracing images

When I look back at the many hundreds of works I have created over the last 35 years, I see some images dragged up from the depth of unconsciousness to the shore of my consciousness just like sunken ships, recovered and reconstructed. I see some images hanging like a tapestry which first appeared very far away in the heavens and gradually came down with enormous weight to just above my head, shining. And I see some images in the midst of an unknown forest where I sometimes traveled, solemnly standing in the darkness, tangled tightly with creeping vines and roots, without revealing to me still yet who they are, just leaving me alone with a deep sense of awe.

Many visitants (that is what I call them) entangled in the roots of trees, hidden in the broken engines, confined in the horseshoe crab's armor-like shell, still keep coming to me again and again. They are wounded, bleeding, paralyzed, groaning out for help. Those visitants are often grotesque and ugly, cut out from the huge vitality of the universe until I struggle with them, embrace them in my arms and pull them up into the pictorial space where the power of irony does its work most dramatically: there the most grotesque, ugliest thing turns into the most sublime thing, there the most blackening darkness turns into the most dazzling light.

*Requiem for an Executed Bird* was born from long years of this struggling and embracing although the actual working on paper took only 6 weeks. I want to avoid giving you the wrong notion that the artist has a clear idea before she engages in creating the series and that she just illustrates or translates that idea into visual images. It is easy to fall into that assumption when the art works are displayed in a linear order as they are here, according to the progression of a narrative which has already been comprehended and analyzed.

But art is a primary act of dealing with reality, forming consciousness in its essential characteristics. For the artist her personal visual image is the only guide. Every stroke of line she puts on paper is one step along the road which is opening up in front of her. It is a terrifying journey requiring of the artist great risk and sacrifice. Without knowing the destination the artist continues her journey, just as the children of Israel followed the Pillar of Fire at night through the barren desert.

#### Philosophical base and definition

The idea that art is a primary act of dealing with reality, a way of forming consciousness, is found in Ernst Cassirer's Philosophy of Symbolic Forms<sup>1</sup>. Cassirer said that art, myth, religion, cognition, every function of the human spirit embodies an original formative power which does not merely *reflect* the empirically given but rather *produces* it in accordance with an independent principle. He believes that each of these functions creates its own symbolic forms, and that these forms enjoy equal rank as products of the human spirit. He says, "None of these forms can simply be reduced to, or derived from, the others; each of them designates a particular approach, in which and through which it

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<sup>1</sup> New Haven, Yale University Press 1953

constitutes its own aspect of 'reality'." -- These words of Cassirer, quoted in a Japanese translation of Herbert Read's, Icon and Idea<sup>2</sup>, had an enormous influence on me when I encountered them in my 20's while I was still in Japan.

When I use the word "art" I have in mind what R.G. Collingwood defines as "art proper"<sup>3</sup>: it is art created without any distinct preconceived idea. That is, the result to be obtained should not be preconceived or thought out before being arrived at. In other words there should not be any distinction between means and end, nor between planning and execution in the process of creating art. Under Collingwood's criterion, the first thing to be eliminated from the realm of "art proper" is craft, and then most of representational art, and then art which is made for entertainment.

By "art proper" Collingwood does not mean to refer to a subcategory of art nor to any art-historical phenomenon. Instead he makes an idealistic attempt to establish the purity of art by identifying its essential characteristics. After Collingwood had introduced this definition, what we now call "modern art" -- the most profoundly revolutionary movement in art history -- found its philosophical basis and justification. I myself found in his discussion a strong philosophical basis for the way I create art - by painting in the altered state of consciousness which I want to describe for you now.

## II. THE PROCESS OF CREATING "REQUIEM FOR AN EXECUTED BIRD"

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<sup>2</sup> Schocken Books, New York 1965

<sup>3</sup> R. G. Collingwood, The Principles of Art (1938, reprinted Oxford University Press 1982), pg. 105-151.

A. Studio laboratory notebook, Altered state of consciousness

Since the early 1970s, I started realizing that the key to the mystery of art is hidden in the process of creating art itself. What really happens in the artist's psyche when she is working in the studio? To prepare myself to investigate this question seriously, I started keeping a laboratory notebook in my studio, something like a diary, a record of my working, fragments of ideas and visual images that came to me. In other words I undertook to play three separate roles concurrently: artist, scientist, and Guinea Pig for myself.

Throughout my diary you will see that my consciousness is altered during those creating periods -- sometimes quite drastically changed from everyday consciousness. I call this an altered state of consciousness. This state occurs rather regularly whenever I go into a creating period and after many years of strong rejection and fighting against it I came to accept this state of mind. During these periods, and contrary to what I feared, my intellect does not disappear: rather it becomes sharpened and its whole function of observing and controlling my ego becomes especially keen. Observing myself in these periods, I have found that this consciousness moves through a clear progression of four stages -- stages which repeat themselves albeit with sometimes different degrees of intensity. I call those four stages (1) Departure; (2) Deep Altered State; (3) Transcendence; and (4) Return:

**1. The first stage: Departure From Everyday Consciousness**

On May 20th, 1991, as I was just beginning to work on this series, I wrote in my studio diary:

"A huge vortex is dancing in the heavenly sky and it pulls me up like a vacuum and sucks me in; and yet this vacuum

misses me so I fall down on the ground and again this vacuum sucks me up and again I am crushed down. Today I have to go to the grocery, tomorrow I have to go to the Gallery but those tasks are getting more difficult to manage.”

This is the beginning of the Departure stage. My mind becomes inward. I talk to God in my mind more than I talk to people. The conflict between everyday consciousness and the altered state of consciousness becomes increasingly violent. It is like trying to cross a busy highway to go to the other side. A fear of losing my ability to cope with this world, my ability to drive, to speak in my second language English, and of losing my ability to handle all my other social obligations intensifies.

The studio diary entry for May 25<sup>th</sup> reads,

It got dark around me, it becomes darker and darker. Finally I went through death. Without being able to speak, lying in bed three days have passed."

I recorded this only after I went through. It is impossible to write in the midst of that darkness. This death of everyday consciousness sometimes lasts a few weeks.

But departure begins: I have finally crossed the highway and I am on the other side. I am extremely grateful to God for letting me cross the highway. I became calm and decisive. Nothing can distract me from the incredibly difficult and dangerous journey ahead of me. I meditate, pray and sleep -- sometimes for 10 hours at a stretch. In a feeling of grace, I think of what St. John of the Cross describes: "One dark night/Fired with love's urgent longings/Ah, the sheer grace!-I went out unseen/My house being now all stilled.”

## **2. The second stage: Deep Altered State of consciousness**

I am now in the second stage: the deep altered state of consciousness. You have noticed that I have not started any tangible work yet nor did I know even what theme I was going to work on. It is in the beginning of this second stage that I usually encounter some visitants. They draw me deeply into them and arouse my sense of urgency to embrace them, and then to bring them into my pictorial space to work on them till they are finally transcendent and become universal symbols.

In the particular process of creating which led to this series, one object which was not new to me appeared under a different light. This object I had purchased at a junk store four years prior to the time of writing this part of my diary. You have already seen it here, displayed in the Library as a part of the exhibition. It is ugly, grotesque and sick -- especially when you realize that this is a wine decanter: you are supposed to pour wine from the neck of this bird where his head was chopped off.

My phobia of birds, which I had suffered from since I witnessed the bird slaughtered, had prevented me to work on this object for four years. But now for the first time I sat and placed this wine decanter in front of me. The May 29<sup>th</sup> entry in my studio diary reads,

With bursts of crying in my chest I enter the studio this morning. Just like a flood, art rushed into me. It rushed at me so fast, my hand couldn't catch up with it. I was crying in my mind. I hear my own loud crying voice burst and it echoes in my bones, and yet my horror and pain are circling wild as if it were joy. All at once the first 6 works are completed."

On May 30<sup>th</sup> I wrote in my diary,

Freely, freely, painting splashes out. My hand might be too

sloppy, but the essence is intensely beautiful. Works numbers 7 through 19 were completed.

In work No. 22 the red roses which I was already putting next to the bird presented themselves to me as stained glass and all of a sudden I realized that this bird was in a cathedral and that in painting this series, I was singing a requiem for him. The June 16<sup>th</sup> entry for my diary says,

This is a requiem for the bird! One after another, the bird looms up from the depths in the painful figures. However I try to comfort him, however I try to save him with red roses, the bird shows his most helpless figure. Oh God, only you can comfort him! One after another, the cry comes up from the depth. This is a requiem for my bird!

### **3. The third stage: Transcending.**

After this, I entered the third stage, Transcending. The diary entry for June 24th, 1991 reads:

With tears of gratitude I am writing this. My hands are trembling. Works 24, 25, 26, 27, and 28 are born and all the works were done in 25 minutes. God responded to my prayer. He let me work through this. I feel God is in my body and my body is almost exploding. I feel I am rewarded for all the suffering.

On work 24 the violent tone is fading and a glorious gold tone is appearing. I added Japanese letters saying, "The bird is dying." Two circles almost appeared. Suddenly my consciousness level shifts deeper and I wrote,

The bird is dying . The bird is dying. The helpless bird, the wings which are made to fly into the expanse of the sky are

bent down and hang down powerlessly. The feathers are stained with blood and tremble.

The bird is dying ... the world is listening and the world cries bitterly. ...However decorated with red roses, however lamented with the melody of crying, the bird is in pain, in pain. The world continues to sing this pain, forever singing this pain.

... The bird who wanted to fly to the broad sky of freedom, has been executed.

Some strange vibration came to my head. I could not breathe well. Then the floor swayed and I was struck by terror. I saw the unfathomable abyss under the ground on which I was standing and I felt that the ground swayed towards it like quicksand. I thought that I was pulled into insanity, a darkness which is darker than any darkness I ever experienced, and I would never be able to come back unless right now I got out of it - got out of the studio. Torn between fear and the desire to keep working, I panicked. Then I noticed that my consciousness had dropped one level deeper and that my hand started writing on a piece of paper on the floor near me:

Draw this melody which rises up towards you from the darkness. Don't be afraid of this melody. Bring this singing into the light. Then you will know that this darkness is the light. Light is gushing up everywhere. Light is gushing up everywhere.

As works 25 through 28 were completed I wrote, "Oh God, what a freedom I feel now. You are celebrating me, a newly born me. I am writing



this with the deepest gratitude." For the next 2 weeks I continued painting.

Clear circles appeared continuously. The bird exists in the circle. His feathers are now spotted with gold, not red; golden air, golden space, and he exists there. He is finally free. The transcending process has happened and is almost completed. Works 29 through 41 were born.

#### **4. The Fourth Stage: Return**

Then I arrived at the last stage: the stage of leaving the series. My diary entry for July 3d, reads

I feel my mind is empty; I realized this series is coming to an end and yet I still feel something not too emotional, very different from the earlier feelings I had. I have to paint one more."

I decided to drive to Sycamore Beach before starting the last work, after many days of confinement in the house. Being afraid that a sudden change of scenery might make my altered state of consciousness fade away, I walked like a person who carries a container full of liquid up to its brim -- with both hands together, being careful not to spill even one drop. The sea was vivid, every edge of each wave looked sharp and bright. The sound of the waves rising far away from the beach reached my ear with clarity. The light dancing on the top of each wave, which moved constantly, was brilliant, delicate and overwhelmingly complicated. A feeling of undoubtedness, that I understood the meaning of this whole scene, struck me. The whole sky and the sea, the air and the light had tremendous meaning for me. I had a sudden realization that some most serious divine work is in progress right now, in this moment, and through creating my art I was participating in that process in no matter how small a way. It was a most solemn realization which

moved me to awe.

I came back to my studio and finished 4 more works: strong not emotional. This is it. Looking at the 4 beautiful works I felt extremely happy.

Thank you very much God, for letting me work such a long time. I am deeply grateful. I have to go back to the world: the time to study my work will begin. I will contemplate this work, study it, write about it in order to understand your mystery."

My laboratory diary of this series ended here. Since then I have contemplated, studied, and written many essays on this series, a huge body of new works gushed out of me as if a dam had collapsed, and my personal life changed drastically.

B. The Bird as a Symbol

1. **The Bird Symbolized Death**

When the traumatic experience of the slaughtered bird happened in 1943 I was surrounded by death. I was awakened by my parents every night when sirens began and I hurriedly put on my jacket on which my name, address and blood type were sewn. We said it was for my medical attention but we knew in reality, it was for my death identification. We crawled into a damp and smelly hole underground to avoid the bomb attacks. From that hole we saw the night sky lit up with thousands of thousands of enemy airplanes, B29s, aligned like a chessboard moving above the big city where already huge curtain-like flames were hanging bright red in the sky. "A carpet bombing," I heard

the desperate whispers. And still I could not figure out what was this dark shadow which was chasing all of us. When I saw the bird hanging upside down I suddenly saw what we had been running from: death. For the first time in reality I experienced death itself. And it made me realize how incredibly vulnerable all we mortals are.

## **2. The Bird as a Victim of Fascism**

Another old terror came back: the terror of the Japanese fascistic government authority which we lived with all through the war. We were afraid of them almost more than we were afraid of the enemy. We were afraid of our neighbors because we were all forced to spy on each other. As little as I was, I saw very clearly the essence of totalitarianism, without any intellectual knowledge of it whatsoever: it is the hatred and destruction of freedom. By commanding blind obedience to an irrational authority, and by torture and execution, they accomplished their goal. I was in terror all through my short life of revealing who I was. The slaughtered bird crystallized this terror for me instantly.

The encounter happened when I was taken away from my home. The epidemic had spread over the unsanitary town and its citizens, worn out by the attacks and under-nourished, were infected. It had finally struck my two sisters: they and my parents who had to take care of them were isolated and quarantined. I was sent alone under the charge of my uncle who was a powerful respected doctor who owned a hospital. He was a cold authoritative figure feared by people around him. It was there that I encountered this bird in his fancy Japanese-style living room, in the living quarters of his eerie, empty hospital. When he killed a beautiful bird, my whole terror of fascism took a most realistic shape.

The artist creates from empathic imagination. While I was

painting these works I was a little girl myself, helpless, vulnerable, numbed with terror. At the same time I was myself a bird being punished: because I wanted to fly I was tortured and executed for the guilt of being who I was. "Am I the executioner too?" I asked. I saw myself in the midst of darkness standing in a pool of blood gushing out of the victim's body on which I put my hands. And last, I was God too, who looked over the whole scene in perfect stillness. I felt anticipation of a wind rising in me: will it grow into a whole movement? Will the universe be set in motion? Listening to myself, I was intense.

### **3. The Phobia**

The most immediate notable change after completion of this series was my recovery from the phobia. The ending of the phobia meant more than just healing. I re-experienced and faced pain and my own vulnerability fully consciously for the first time. Phobia is an ugly, negative thing; it grows bigger by its own nature. The original fear absorbs other fears and grows into a deformed figure. That wine decanter symbolized for me the deformed shape of an original fear, the figure it defiantly took after many years of repressing the fear.

The phobia is like a wall preventing one from seeing the reality that is too threatening for his ego to deal with. One could say, "What I am terrified of is only a bird!" Thus he does not have to face the real issue, which is his biggest terror of all. -- But you could say at the same time that my phobia was a blessing: because of that wall, the little girl was able to keep enough of her sanity to keep living in the midst of an absolutely insane society, a society to which no one should ever adjust. The overwhelming desire to continue creating my work was a desire to embrace the bird's pain and release him from it. And the grace which filled me comes from the realization that he, my bird, had kept

protecting me with his ugly figure until the little girl became strong enough to face this most diabolical part of life.

This wall is found not only in phobia, it can be found in everyone's unconscious as a form of repression, prohibition, taboo -- it is just a matter of difference in the levels -- which keeps him unfree and prevents him from achieving further integrity of personality in one way or another. One has to make a journey to the abyss and do enormous battle with the engulfing power of the unconscious at the risk of not being able to come back. And he confronts it, struggles with it, breaks it and embraces it until it becomes a new part of his consciousness. This is the journey of striving towards the growth of all humanity: towards the emancipated ego, towards consciousness and individuality. These works are the traces on paper of my journey and my struggle.

### III. CONNECTION TO THE CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION

#### A. Theme of crucifixion/resurrection

This exhibition here at GTU has presented another challenge to me in keeping the vow I made to God when I finished this series, to continue to study and find the meaning of my experience of these works. It has made me think that my series might have deeper meaning than I ever anticipated.

When Bonnie Hardwick invited me to have a show at the Library in conjunction with the course on Crucifixion/Resurrection, she asked me for works from my series titled, *Topological Deformations of the Cross*. Of course, that seemed logical and I was pleased. But when I began to think about which works were really most directly concerned with issues of crucifixion and resurrection I realized that I had to show works from this series, *Requiem for an Executed Bird*. This was so even

though I was not thinking of crucifixion or resurrection at all when I was creating this series, and even though no Christian symbols are consciously suggested in the works. Bonnie got the point of this series instantly in the deepest way the first time she saw the works in my studio. With her enthusiastic support, the works are exhibited as you see them here.

The theme of this series might be summed up as follows: The artist witnessed the cruel, unjust murder of a bird who symbolizes freedom and transcendence. The murder was done as a form of execution, punishment for the bird's guilt of being who he is. It was done by a dark force which hated freedom and individuality. The Artist suffered a trauma and developed a phobia of birds. But much later while creating the art, she witnessed an amazing process: the dead bird was reborn from the pool of blood and appeared to the artist as a peaceful solemn figure, and he ascended to heaven. He has transcended his suffering and his death. The scene of the rebirth of the bird was so illuminating, and so powerful, that it freed the artist from her life-long terror, and liberated her and transformed her to wholeness. The theme of this series overlaps in large part the theme of crucifixion and resurrection.

B. The Relationship of Art with Religion.

And there are other reasons that I wanted to show this series in this setting: the series illustrates perfectly three important aspects of the relationship between art and religion. First, that art and religion both have strong irony at their core. Second, that Religion brings forth narrative to the community and art brings forth images. And third, as I hope I will have made clear throughout this talk, that the act of creating art itself includes religious experience at its core.

1. **Irony and Transcendence**

How cruel, how gruesome, the image of the crucifixion actually appeared to my innocent eyes when I first saw it as a little girl, can probably never be imagined by a person who grew up in a culture surrounded by this image. My shock and disgust at seeing the statue of a man hung from a piece of wood by nails and bleeding, pierced by arrows, is far beyond what we feel when we see the photo of a murder victim from a forensic laboratory file on TV. For in that case, the cruelty is softened by the scientific intention which prevents us from being too empathic with it. But the image of the crucifixion demands your empathy, demands participation directly from you. It tells you what happened to this man and tells you never to release the terror: the terror of the tremendous dark force of injustice, of hostility in the world, and the terror of our mortal complete vulnerability to it.

But an even more shocking thing is to find out that a large group of people in a certain cultural realm believe that this man on the cross is God's own son, that he died on the cross to rescue us from our sins, that he is a king of heaven. And his statue is hung on the bedroom wall or on the church altar -- not to remind us how hostile the world is and make us horrified, but to remind us of His Grace. Here is some enormous turning upside-down of a shocking image. Where is there in the world such a huge lever to make this overturning possible: from victim to victor, from suffering to glory, from gruesomeness to beauty, from hostility to love, so profound an irony?

Sometimes I open my Japanese art book to *The Nirvana of Buddha*, painted on silk in the 11th century, over 7 feet square, still hanging in a temple in Mt. Kooya, near Kyoto. Buddha, wearing light soft-color robes, is lying on a low bed placed on the ground dying in the woods. Disciples and all kinds of deities gather from heaven and earth

and sit around him crying. A lion, who represents all the animal kingdom, is attending in the corner of the scene, too. Beyond the trees Buddha's late mother appears. Further away in the mountains, small deer stand almost invisible on the rocks. The pictorial space is filled with intense mourning for Buddha. And yet the solemn pleasure of the gathering crowd, which includes animals and trees, at having encountered Him in their lifetime reaches my heart. It is moving to see that even death, if it is the death of one who is enlightened, brings a luminous experience for all things in the universe. How different Buddha's death is from Christ's!

Yet Buddhism too, though quiet and peaceful, has irony at its core. The most exquisite irony is found in the idea of Bodhisattva. The system of reincarnation, as we know, is part of Buddhism's basic cosmology, and it is very rational and scientific. Karma, the cycle of cause and effect, functions like a diet chart: if you ingest excessive calories then as a result you will gain weight. There is no hostile entity in heaven saying, "Take this weight, take it as a punishment for what you ate" -- but there is no merciful grace either. The spirit of the whole system is scientific.

Around the first century A.D. Mahayana Buddhism developed the concept of Bodhisattva, and turned this scientific system upside down. Bodhisattvas are souls who reached enlightenment on this earth and are destined to go to the eternal happiness of nirvana. They no longer have to be reborn into this sorrowful world. But they have made a vow to reincarnate over and over in order to save people until the very last soul is saved. A Bodhisattva often takes the figure in his reincarnation of a physically or mentally disabled person, one who is sick and troubled -- of figures who need other's hands most and yet are most



rejected by society.

The notion of Bodddhisatva was an enormous overturning of conventional thinking because it was believed that all those forms of misery were fair, direct results of the karma which those unfortunates had created for themselves in their previous lives and which they deserved. But now we had to turn our thoughts 180 degrees upside-down: any of these people might be a divine Bodhisattva. We started seeing people in rags, the disabled, the sick, beggars, lepers, criminals, all under a different light, as Boddisatvas reincarnated. It required an internal revolution to be able to see divine beauty in those figures which we ordinarily want to avoid seeing because they are strong reminders of our own vulnerability. Yet this new doctrine taught that these unfortunates do not just exist as Bodddhisatvas reincarnated: instead, they journey all the way back from death expressly in order to save us from darkness. They confine themselves in those imperfect figures for our sake. You could say that each one of the Bodddhisatvas is himself crucified and that he continues to be crucified again and again until the last living soul is saved.

Every great religion has irony at its core -- and so does all great art. If you paint beautiful things as beautiful, the art cannot be powerful. But "*A pair of shoes*" by Vincent van Gogh is a completely different thing. This work from a series of paintings of shoes created in 1887, while Gogh was staying with poor peasants, radiates divine light more than many altarpieces in the great cathedrals of the world. A pair of shoes that a potato-farming peasant took off, worn out, torn, dirty with soil and sweat, smelly, hardened with frost and rain – they moved viewers to tears: those shoes exist as a divine presence in the pictorial space forever.

Irony is the expression of transcendence and transcendence is a central concern in both religion and art. But what is transcendence?

I often think about a little mole who lives underground. He believes that there is some better world above the surface and he longs to see it. But when he finally comes out of his hole, he feels a flaming fire and the thundering sound of wind around him. His body is burnt by sunbeams and in the light of the day he becomes blind and deaf.

In this same way, the Divine world is beyond human senses. There must be a dazzling light which can be perceived only as darkness; there must be a beauty which can be perceived only as ugliness for our limited human senses. So if one ever glimpses it, even for a second through the smallest crack in the mole hill, he suffers bitterly. It is an experience of *thanatos* – it will become his deepest secret. He tries to interpret this secret with his reason but his reason comes to the edge. “The primary break with the sense world”<sup>4</sup> happens and he sees the abyss under his feet – the abyss between the world of reason and the place beyond it. Only through his enormously intense creative effort can he jump to the place beyond reason, beyond all categories of thought. He accepts the secret. It is transcendence: there the problem will not be solved but resolved, there expression can take only the form of irony. The deeper the abyss he saw under his feet the sharper the irony becomes and the bigger becomes the lever to turn things upside-down.

Religion and art are our most powerful, and yet very humble attempts to interpret this secret, and to interpret our world in relationship with this unknown and unknowable: religion through narrative, and art through images, both attempt to respond to this secret and share it with the community. When the secret is presented in

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<sup>4</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (E.P. Dutton/New York 1961)

narrative in human words, or as images which the eye can see, the secret will be transcended. -- Without those creative responses, the experience of the divine would lead humans only to insanity. But after it becomes narrative or image, the experience will remain in society as a healthy part of human consciousness, as religion and as art.

## **2. Religion brings forth narrative**

How is religious narrative born? And what makes it powerful? What keeps it alive from generation to generation?

For someone to be executed for who he is, for what he believes, is not an unusual incident in the world. There must be uncountable people who became unjust victims but most of them are forgotten. Those who are remembered may be respected as heroes for their courage and integrity, or we may feel remorse for them. Some may even become gods and goddesses. Shinto, which is the native Japanese religion, has a long list of those gods and goddesses: suffering gods, bleeding goddesses, the head-chopped-off goddess, the goddess whose head could not be chopped off. The amazing thing is that no one pays attention to them at all, people on the street do not even know that such narratives ever existed. Those narratives ceased to captivate people's mind at some point of history. We cannot identify ourselves emotionally with them any more, they are now off our radar screen of empathy and participation.

This is so even though still today Shinto practice attracts the biggest following among all the religions in Japan and even though the Japanese ethos and aesthetic which have been formed with Shinto seem to be unshaken. Every single day some religion dies and is wiped out from the surface of the earth. And every single day new religions are born: as the Japanese say, "just like bamboo shoots come out in the

forest after a rain.”

Why has the narrative of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus kept such compelling power over people in the world still now? For a person who is outside of the Christian faith and culture, and who is outside of any formal study of religion, and yet who believes there is something essential in common between the life-history of religious narratives and the life-history of artistic images, this is a most intriguing question.

How serious a trauma it must have been for people around Jesus to witness the most horrifying death of their beloved teacher. I am choosing just one anonymous person at random from among them, and I concentrate on his inner movement here: What exactly did happen in his mind? This is similar to the question I asked myself 30 years ago about art: "What does exactly happen in the artist's psyche when she is in the studio?" I started my studio diary to find out. I feel strongly that if I could trace the movement of that anonymous person's mind through every step along his way, then just as the process of creating images in art became clear to me, the process of creating narrative would be revealed to me also.

He must have tried to put his overwhelming traumatic experience into the context of his belief system but the system itself was broken. Didn't he trust that his teacher would somehow get out of this horrible situation at the last moment and take his rightful place as the King of Israel? When he realized this did not happen, he must have been thrown into chaos. A dark journey to his unconscious must have taken place. One needs a powerful narrative, powerful enough to lead him to his own transcendence. When did that happen? Later he was transformed completely, we know. Was it the resurrection which made him complete his narrative and transformed him? The only thing that I

can assume rather surely about his whole experience is that it must have been like what an artist feels, that God seized him.

This narrative grew into a very strong structure of dogma and rituals. In this respect, religion is different from art which never elaborates dogma and rituals in quite the same way, and which does not construct any social organization analogous to a church. The Christian narrative had received a strong foundation from Judaism, and it absorbed many narratives from other civilizations. Every part of that structure must have been perfectly organically related to the other, and this made possible the integrity of the whole. And the powerful church and community which Christianity built up created a place where people who came later, who did not witness the events at first-hand, could experience – and are required to experience -- some active personal participation in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Through the centuries, new deep personal religious experiences worked new transformations, great and small, in the believers' everyday lives.

### **3. And Art Brings Forth Images**

We tried to imagine how narrative may have been born and become religion. Now I would like to focus on the way images are created and brought to the society.

The artist creates images from strong experiences just like the founders of religion must have created narrative from their original religious experience. It is not too extraordinary for the artist during the process of creating art, to go through some mystic experiences, glimpsing the divine world through the cracks: transcending, illumination, trance, visions, epiphany, revelation in varying degrees. In religion, once the narrative is established, it becomes sanctified, repeated, and becomes authority. But the artist keeps bringing original images from his

experience to the conscious world not only in every work but also in every brush stroke; and the artist never becomes an authority in the same way.

Joseph Campbell<sup>5</sup> said about the Shaman and the priest, that Shamans functioned in early societies as artists do now. --A priest is a functionary of a social sort. The deity to whom he is devoted is a deity that was there before he came along. But the shaman's powers are symbolized in the deities of his own personal experience. His authority comes out of a psychological experience, not a social ordination.

Just like the shaman, the artist sets off on his frightening journey alone. He struggles and fights, he does not know what he will encounter till he embraces the image in his arms, then he has to crawl back to the pictorial space where the images are transcended. This little space is the artist's universe in which everything happens and in which the artist is the creator. The artist wants nothing more than this little universe and this little universe is all he offers to the society.

But why to society? And why does society care for these images - if it does care? Because the viewer will see his own mind in them, the things that are so dark, so ugly, that he had denied them and forbidden himself to see them. And just like I went through the wall of phobia during my process of creation, the viewer will break his own preventive wall and see what he had been afraid to see. His own journey will start. If the artist's journey has reached the extraordinary depths and taken him to the divine world, it is possible that the viewer will also glimpse that world through the art work and will share the artist's deepest secret. It will be an ironical image, and it will never fall softly on the viewer's eye. Because it is the function of art to make us see what it

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth (with Bill Moyers) Doubleday, NY 1988, pg. 99.

has been prohibited to see, and to reveal what is closest to *thanatos*, great art often makes us uncomfortable. But at the risk of viewers' displeasure, the artist keeps offering his work. And the images the artist brings forth, as ironical as they are, can come to be accepted as a part of society's constructive consciousness.

#### IV SPIRITUALITY

##### A. Art has taken a subordinate position

As we all know, western art has taken a subordinate role to religion for many centuries in its history. It is true that artists have received great images from the religious narratives and that the strict iconography which has been imposed on artists has often stimulated their imagination. It is true as well that there are always some who are sincerely devoted to the faith and that their honest emotions are fully expressed in that confined framework. But if you agree that art is a primary way of dealing with reality directly, then working inside a framework that is given to you is already a fundamental compromise.

Art is an endeavor independent of religion – much as science is. If a scientist had to work from given conclusions rather than starting from his independent investigation of nature, and if these conclusions were predetermined at the hands of one who is an outsider to science, as we saw in the early 20th Century disputes over Darwin and evolution, the scientist would lose the base of truth-seeking and would become corrupt – whether he was a devoted Christian or not. And the same is true of art.

It is still a deep-rooted habit of thought for western culture, to think about art only from the religion side where the relationship of religion to art is concerned. But as often as the question is asked, "How did the narrative of the crucifixion inspire artists?", we ought to ask,

"How did this painting of *a pair of shoes* inspire religion?"

B. Modern art

Art has fought for its independence valiantly, to the point of risking its own existence, and made a glorious victory of it. But what art fought against was not the church, not government. Art fought against art itself, against its own traditions: its theories, ideas, fixations and training, all of which determined art's method. What Modern art did around the turn of the 20th century was the greatest revolution in art history - one that divided before from after. Through this revolution Renaissance scientific perspective technique, with which we are all familiar and which makes 3-dimensional objects capable of being represented in 2-dimensional pictorial space, lost its authority altogether. This was the system that made representational art possible, to an extreme degree. It had governed Europe for 500 years and its sacredness had been considered eternal. It was more than just style: it was an epistemological, metaphysical declaration of how we should recognize the world. "Holding up the mirror to nature" was the command<sup>6</sup>.

Artists won their freedom from this long-lasting spell and became free from the obligation of illustrating and depicting objects under a predetermined idea of what reality should look like. Spontaneous, direct and vital spiritual expression flourished. The journey to the unconscious world through the process of creating art became possible. The idea of art as a means of truth-seeking was established. Without this freedom, painting in an altered state of consciousness such as I do would have been out of the question. When Paul Klee said in the 1920s, "art does not reproduce the visible but

<sup>6</sup> See Leonardo da Vinci, Notebooks, tr. Edward MacCurdy (NY 1908) vol. I, pp. 167-168.



makes the invisible visible"<sup>7</sup>, his words replaced the traditional motto, "holding up the mirror to nature", and this opened the way for artists to a new possibility of spiritual religious art.

But art history did not develop quite as happily as we might have hoped. As recently as within the last decade, books appeared with titles like, "The Death of Art"<sup>8</sup>, "the End of the History of Art"<sup>9</sup>, and "After the End of Art"<sup>10</sup>. Contemporary art had come to that. But as long as artists create images through dealing with reality directly, without taking the easy way out, without illusional, deceptive solutions, they will contribute to form and expand human consciousness one step at a time. In that way, the serious attempt to understand the deepest secrets of the universe, and to participate in it, will continue – as it has continued throughout history.

## V. CONCLUSION

Art does not become religious or spiritual because it uses "religious images". Whatever its theme, the art becomes religious or spiritual only if the transcendence which the artist went through during the process of creation makes the viewer follow a journey to his own transcending.

For this to happen requires earnest participation, responsibility, and commitment from both the artist and the viewer. In this way, the artistic process is like the religious process: for the believer after all must bring a certain state of mind to participate in the narrative, just as the viewer must bring a certain state of mind to the art to participate in the process of its creation. If you view the crucifixion as

<sup>7</sup> Paul Klee, The Thinking Eye, Lund Humphries, tr., 1961. vol. I, pg. 43. Originally in *The Creative Credo*, 1920.

<sup>8</sup> The Death of Art, ed. Betel Lang, Haven/New York 1984.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Belting, The End of the History of Art, tr. Christopher S. Wood, U. Chicago Press (1987)

<sup>10</sup> Arthur C. Danto, After the End of Art, Princeton U. Press (1995)

an event which happened to someone else 2000 years ago in a faraway land, you cannot participate in the narrative and it will not lead you to any kind of transcendence. In a similar way, if you view art as a mere representation of something you already know – and which the artist already knew – then you cannot be transformed by it.

When all is said and done, the experience of transcendence is something beyond anyone's arbitrary act of will. When it happens it is a blessing. If we are thus blessed we might see with our own eyes that religion and art reveal themselves -- their function, their goals, their mission -- under a new light and that they are encountering each other in much more intriguing ways than we had ever anticipated.

**Junko Chodos**

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