

The Creative Inspiration: Symbolism and Seeing

Karel Fontaine

Hallowed be the Lord in whose hand is the source of dominion. He createth whatsoever He willeth by His Word of command 'BE' and it is ... Unto Him pertaineth all glory and majesty in the kingdoms of Revelation and Creation and whatever lieth between them ... He is the Creator of the heavens and the earth and whatever lieth between them, and He truly is a witness over all things.¹

Every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God is endowed with such potency as can instil new life into every human frame ... Through the mere revelation of the word 'Fashioner', issuing forth from His lips and proclaiming His attribute to mankind, such power is released as can generate, through successive ages, all the manifold arts which the hands of man can produce. This, verily, is a certain truth. No sooner is this resplendent word uttered, than its animating energies, stirring within all created things, give birth to the means and instruments whereby such arts can be produced and perfected.²

The creative impulse is a gift from God. Each of us is endowed with its magic. When I was a little girl in wintry London, wrapped in yellow fog that turned my world into a mysterious, swirling Turner painting, I would spend hours, even days, creating washing peg people clothed in Mother's sewing scraps and stitched with her cottons and threads. Other times, racked by asthma and struggling to breathe, my distress was soothed by the soft scratch and rub of pencils colouring pages of outline drawings in my Windsor & Newton books of people in historical or national costumes or flowers, plants, birds and butterflies.

1. The Báb, excerpts from a prayer for protection in *Bahá'í Prayers*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991, pp. 133-135.

2. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, No. LXXIV in *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, a Compilation*, New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1986, p. 448.

I'd sit up and look from my little bed down the length of a narrow basement room to French doors which gave onto a long narrow garden dominated by a giant horse chestnut tree, grass, and a bomb shelter under a pile of earth. Above my head the rest of the mid-Victorian town house rose five more storeys to attics with their gabled windows. It was all bomb-blast damaged, run down, and the fifteen rooms were rented. A motley assortment of Jewish refugees, eccentric artists, women of dubious morals, ex-servicemen, Russian émigrés and elderly impoverished gentry shared their lives closely with me and my parents. I was always the only child around. The sounds of gramophone and radio, as well as piano being played, filled the dark stairways where the light bulbs seldom worked. The smells of tenants' meals prepared by candlelight in makeshift kitchens on dark stair landings wafted throughout the building. Two bathrooms served us all, second floor and fifth floor, and three pence in an ancient 'Ascot' geyser - turn on the water and look out when you strike the match! - gave a tolerable bath once a week. I shared with mother to a certain age and then went it alone. Everything I did was done alone.

The richness of experience in my growing up, the curiosity for otherness engendered by the location and time of my youth, the cultural opportunities at hand - only a six penny bus ride in those days to the Tate Gallery or Science Museum or Zoo - all compounded my fascination with the inventiveness of human endeavour and the diversity of existence.

*Again among His signs is the dawning sun of His knowledge, and the rising moon of His arts and skills, and His demonstrating perfection in all His ways, as testified by the learned and accomplished of many nations.*³

Little did I know when I was six, eight or ten that at fifty I would produce a suite of costumes representing my understanding of the progressive stages made by the human soul in its journey towards its Divine Creator, as articulated by Bahá'u'lláh in *The Seven Valleys*. Those eight costumes incorporate influences born of old, new and growing interest in earthly subjects such as geology, land form, environment, architecture, as well as the more esoteric area of symbolism, philosophy and the arts.

Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent

3. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997, para. 4.15, p.18.

*testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light ... To a supreme degree is this true of man, who, among all created things, hath been invested with the robe of such gifts, and hath been singled out for the glory of such distinction. For in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed. All these names and attributes are applicable to him. Even as He hath said: 'Man is My mystery, and I am his mystery.'*⁴

For me, the creative impulse is inherent, subtle and shy. The influences upon it accrue. It is harboured within us and naïvely manifests itself in child-like ways and in many active forms until it either shrivels for lack of encouragement or we become too self-conscious or secretive, if criticised, to be productive. Then the force becomes latent, or pustulates and erupts in other activity, ill-guided or disruptive. But the creative impulse which blossoms into mature self-expression through a profession, or becomes an adjunct to day-to-day life, is satisfying, encouraging, health-giving and lauds its Source. The creative impulse is a driving force which inspires, stimulates and informs the obsessions and passions of achievement. The journey of life, with its changes born of inner alchemy and circumstance, is the only constant, and the periodic metamorphoses are what is so exciting about the process of making art from the raw materials of experience.

When I found the following quotation from Tolstoy, it thrilled me to know that my beliefs on the nature of art were the same as his:

*All human life is filled with works of art of every kind - from cradle-song, jest, mimicry, the ornamentation of houses, buildings, monuments and triumphal processions. It is all artistic activity ... To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling - this is the activity of art.*⁵

As an artist who is a Bahá'í, I have a responsibility to make art that embodies divine principles and spiritual qualities, and offers to the onlooker an ennobling and enriching experience. It is the onlooker who will interact with the art and who will, according to their capacities, read, feel and understand what is contained therein.

4. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, op.cit., No. XC, p. 464.

5. Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art? And Essays on Art*, trans. Aylmer Maude, New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1960, pp. 49-51.

*It hath been revealed and is now repeated that the true worth of artists and craftsmen should be appreciated for they advance the affairs of mankind.*⁶

The theologian Paul Tillich declared that:

*Art strives to communicate ideas about ultimate meaning, the most profound apprehension of reality ... [the 20th century] is a period in which the religious dimension has appeared with astonishing power in non-religious works.*⁷

And the potter, Cecilia Davis Cunningham, stated:

*In that rather large task of world salvation, the artist plays a modest but real role; to create epiphanies of beauty in the mundane surroundings of every day life.*⁸

French author Anaïs Nin wrote:

*Art must be for women like a personified ancient ritual where every spiritual thought is made visible, enacted, represented. Art must be like a miracle. Art is a miracle.*⁹

The writer Nietzsche said: 'One must have chaos inside to give birth to a dancing star.'¹⁰

I started at sixteen as a painter, but very little remains of that thirty-year period. Now I work in textiles. My work is about turmoil and resolution, light and movement, form, gender, diversity and unity. In all my work the textile surface, with its colour and texture, becomes a canvas ripe for embellishment and manipulation. Through form, line and textural contrast I build up the emotion, ambience and symbolic language of the piece.

It is important for the artist to gauge his position correctly, to realise that he has a duty to his art and to himself, that he is not a king but a servant of a noble end. He must search his soul deeply, develop it and

6. Bahá'u'lláh quoted in *The Compilation of Compilations, The Arts*, Maryborough: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991, p. 3.

7. Paul Tillich, *The Dilemma of the Artist* quoted in Ann Gordon Atkinson in *The Creative Circle*, Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1989, p. 58.

8. Cecilia Davis Cunningham, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 58.

9. Anaïs Nin quoted in *ibid.*, p. 58.

10. Nietzsche quoted in *ibid.*, p. 69.

guard it, so that his art may have something on which to rest and does not remain flesh without bones.¹¹

Although to outward view, the wayfarers in this Valley may dwell upon the dust, yet inwardly they are throned in the heights of mystic meaning; they eat of the endless bounties of inner significances, and drink of the delicate wines of the spirit ... Only heart to heart can speak the bliss of mystic knowers; No messenger can tell it and no missive bear it.¹²

1994 Bahá'í Studies Course at Yerrinbool, Sydney

My textiles work is aimed at off-the-wall structures, free standing tapestries woven with copper wire and silk. I am also excited by the notion of the body being a moving canvas - that costume can become mobile art expressing form from nature and abstract ideas of energy or emotion. I am fascinated with dress as the maker and concealer of identity; how it can elicit responses from the body, influence the mind and mirror the soul; how the individual and society can transform, as witnessed in history through religious revival (eg. the Reformation and Puritanism) or social upheaval and its attendant practicalities (eg. World War I and the lifting of the hemline above the ankle and even to the knee by the 1920s).

During the 1994 Yerrinbool Bahá'í Studies Certificate Course, in the inspired atmosphere of group study and contemplation of the Sacred Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, it occurred to me that metaphysical, numinous and spiritual concepts might be represented in the phenomenal world by deriving structure from non-object based inspiration. To represent, in concrete form, in costume, the states of being experienced during the spiritual journey described by Bahá'u'lláh in *The Seven Valleys* became an all consuming and compulsive desire. After Summer School, back in Tasmania, I was overcome with a pure creative impulse of design and production which consumed my life, filling me with joy, excitement and a passion that replaced sleep or relaxation. Like the gestation of a baby, the work was completed in nine months and displayed in an art gallery to delighted acclaim. Every aspect of making the work, even construction difficulties, were challenges met with rapture. I seemed to be endowed with super-consciousness, working with both creative intuition and intellectual insight, analysing and unifying the symbolic and material aspects of each of the eight costumes I designed and made: one for each Valley, and the eighth figure, The Beloved, The Friend.

... eternity is in love with the productions of time¹³

11. Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, New York: Wittenborn Art Books, 1947, p. 75.

12. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991, p. 30.

13. Erdman, *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, New York: 1965, p. 35.

Impulse, Integrity and Intuition

Rigour is a part of artistic creativity, and an artist employs the God-gift of creative impulse together with their capacity for synthesis, evaluation and metacognition. Through an integrated centre of being, an artist may delight, entertain, educate, provoke thought, chronicle, influence, open and illuminate pathways to the sub- and unconscious of individual and collective.

Being an artist is hard work. As the potter and poet, Bernard Leach, said, writing of his painter friend, Reginald Turvey: 'The genuine artist is usually speaking a language which the average man does not understand'. Both men were Bahá'ís dedicated to their art disciplines and creating an art paradigm for the New Era. Of his own art, Leach said: 'If a pot does not speak, what can a potter say?'

The impulse to create is compulsive, ideas are revolutionary, boundaries of normative perception are pushed and stretched, social morés are questioned and values are condemned or reinforced. Art's history is a saga of brave discoveries, triumphs, passion, poverty, revolts, heresies, isolation, suicide, mystery and rejection. To maintain their integrity, artists in all disciplines employ introspection, contemplation, intellect and vision. Working with their intuition they manifest the creative impulse that drives them.

*Likewise, reflect upon the perfection of man's creation, and that all these planes and states are folded up and hidden away within him.
Dost thou reckon thyself only a puny form,
When within thee the universe is folded?*¹⁴

And the museums and galleries of the world are crowded with remnants from past glorious civilisations as well as more contemporary movements in artistic expression. Theatres and opera houses resound with the marvels of the stage arts, both past and present. Libraries are stacked with volumes of the written word.

*A primal creative urge belongs to all human beings, but has been submerged by the development of civilisation.*¹⁵

Cardinal uses the words 'submerged by the development of civilisation'. Perhaps Cardinal's view relates to his perception of 'the masses' being subverted and crushed by the manipulations of an immoral political, religious and economic structure with the attendant vicissitudes of a contemporary lifestyle. This perception differs markedly from the Bahá'í perspective, which believes fundamentally in the advancing evolution of human civilisation and spiritual enlightenment as the individual's goal.

14. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, op. cit., p. 34.

15. Roger Cardinal, *Outsiders - Singular Vision*, London: Studio Vista, 1979, p. 24.

The mainspring of Bahá'u'lláh's message is an exposition of reality as fundamentally spiritual in nature, and of the laws that govern that reality's operation. It not only sees the individual as a spiritual being, a 'rational soul', but also insists that the entire enterprise that we call civilization is itself a spiritual process, one in which the human mind and heart have created progressively more complex and efficient means to express their inherent moral and intellectual capacities.¹⁶

Surviving the pressure of the creative impulse by exerting will over circumstance, artists tend towards the 'outside' of ordinary society and their endeavours often become the guide-posts of history and innovators of change. The imagery of Hieronymous Bosch (1450-1516), for example, indicates an unusual perception. Although he lived a quiet life, Bosch was accused of heresy and madness, but worked on steadily as allegorist. Bosch's symbology is rooted in European tradition and religious history. His 'abnormality' may be seen in the intensity of his message against hypocrisy, greed, treachery and folly. Bosch's work acknowledges his own potential madness if the battle against evil be fought and lost.

Of Mark Tobey, painter and Bahá'í, Marzieh Gail writes:

To him, the artist was the eyes of the community, his function being to teach others to see ... 'After all,' he said, 'that is the essence of art: revealing the concealed ... I want to paint what nobody else sees,' he told us. 'The ignored and forgotten things. The unregarded.'¹⁷

Presentation - Melbourne 1999

Visual culture has always been central to the life of most societies, and the attentive eye is the focal means through which understanding, representation and consciousness become manifest. Symbols are the time-proven forms that characterise and represent important markers for societal groups and cultures; mnemonics of secrets and hidden knowledge understood by the initiated, seldom explained and held in awe by the populace. Today, with the reward of open access to information sought since the Renaissance and demanded during the 20th century (the Century of Light, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá described it), we can interpret symbols through our individual education, experience and insight and use them as a short-hand for expression and description.

My presentation at the 1999 Bahá'í Studies Conference, Melbourne was titled 'The Creative Impulse, Symbolism and Seeing'. Using two projectors

16. Bahá'í International Community, *Who is Writing the Future?*, Mona Vale: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1999, p. 5.

17. Marzieh Gail, *Other People, Other Places*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1982, pp. 206, 209-10.

and 180 slides, I offered a visual journey for the observer who was asked to watch the relationships and correspondences between images in each section of slides. The watcher would be looking at a mind-scape of the textile artist, Karel Fontaine, and also at a sketchy representation of human progress and social evolution. The presentation was designed to be given without speaking other than to answer specific questions arising out of images and should have been accompanied by music (very carefully chosen and timed but forgotten in the anxiety of the moment!) It was for the observer to look, perceive and intuit their interpretation, understanding and feelings. The eight image sections were titled as follows: Genesis; The Dualities; Creative Impulse at Work; Sign, Symbols and Communication; Structures; Form, Time and Progress; The City; The Spirit.

Images were drawn from printed sources (by taking slide photographs from books), friends' travels and art (especially the brilliant macro photography of fellow Bahá'í, Mark Keeman), my personal collection of travel slides, and images of my work, in particular details from the suite *Veils of the Spirit*. Augmenting the images were quotations from Bahá'í Sacred Writings, other writers and artists.

For the present purpose, however, I have adapted that presentation and have chosen a few examples of visual art through which to demonstrate seeing the creative impulse at work together with the overt and subtle symbolism inherent in the pieces. I have chosen work by André Derain (1880-1954), Georgia O'Keefe (1887-1986), Mark Keeman (b.1948), Martin Schaffner of Ulm (d. circa 1549), Mick Gubargu (b.1926) and Karel Fontaine (b.1943).

Symbols

*Are there symbols which may be called constant; proper to all races, all societies, and all countries?*¹⁸

*The old account in the Book of Genesis had, however, the advantage of indicating by a few bold strokes of symbolism the essential spiritual meanings of the story, as a master painter may, by a few strokes of the brush, convey expressions which the mere plodder with the most laborious attention to details may utterly fail to portray.*¹⁹

All symbols are a dynamic and polysymbolic reality, imbued with emotive and conceptual values - with true life. A symbolic element is present in all art, in that art is subject to psychological interpretation. Much in arts of

18. César Daly in *Lethaby, Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*, London: The Architectural Press, 1974.

19. J E Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, (4th ed), 1974, pp. 188-189.

all forms has moved from the representation of an objective reality towards the expression of subjective states of feeling. It has been suggested that man is a symbolising creature, and that science and technology have not freed him from his dependence. Indeed man's need for and use of symbols began at his naissance (eg. fertility statuettes and cave paintings) and has increased with his intellect and social constructs (eg geometric symbols used in Islamic cosmography for architectural decoration). Symbology is now regarded as a science with a long history and future.

A prophet however much he may appear to be in opposition to his age, yet in a peculiar way represents that time. He is the antidote, or balance, the complement, and his is the voice which awakes all those who are ready to be like minded. If he is wholly successful, and his teaching is absorbed, it may afterwards hardly be understood how anyone might have believed otherwise. The flashing inspiration becomes a common place. It is the prophet's aim to be thus absorbed.²⁰

From the towering temple constructions of incised plinth and slab in ancient Egypt to the aspiring spires and arches of Gothic architecture, symbolism has been at the core of religious building design - at the inner heart of ancient buildings were wonder, worship, magic and symbols. Modern design, asserts Lethaby, must now be for human service, intelligible purpose, and verifiable science.

All architecture - that is, all that is worth the name - is one vast symbolism; symbolism controlled by and expressive of structure might be the definition of architecture in the higher sense.²¹

Architecture began when the world was likened to a building with 'heavenly vaults' and 'azure domes', 'gates of sunrise', and 'canopies of light' - all survivors of a time when the earth was deemed the immovable centre of the universe, the floor on which the sky was built and the whole a chamber lit by the sun, moon and stars.

The idea of the temple incorporated cosmic symbolism founded on notions of sacred geometry and acting as heaven on earth, observatory and almanac. The foundations, placed four square and solid, reflected the 'walls of the firmament' - still seen in modern churches. These edifices served the initiated for sacred ceremony, together with their regalia and robes, and the uninitiated with guidance, whether through awe, fear, or

20. Godfrey Rubens, Introduction to *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*, op cit., p. v.

21. W. Lethaby, *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*, op cit.

crushed imagination. The massive and grand of the past was cemented with the blood and sweat of suffering humanity. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: 'there will be a new art, a new architecture, fused with all the beauty of the past, but new.'²² And as W. R. Lethaby states:

What, then, will this art (architecture) of the future be? The message will still be of nature and man, of order and beauty, but all will be sweetness, simplicity, freedom, confidence and light; the other is past, and well is it, for its aim was to crush life: the new, the future, is to aid life and train it, 'so that beauty may flow into the soul like a breeze.'

Perhaps Lethaby, writing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, foresaw something of the ideal to be realised in Bahá'í Houses of Worship around the world.

Symbolism and seeing

Through the impetus of the Islamic Revelation, the European Renaissance gave rise to a regional renewal of arts and letters. It began in Italy and moved across Europe, ushering the dawn of 'the Modern Age': man-centred, outward-looking and technologically innovative. As stated by the humanist writer Lorenzo Valla (1407-57):

*The arts of painting, sculpture, modelling and architecture had degenerated for so long and so greatly that they almost died with letters themselves, but in this age they have been aroused and come to life again.*²³

This renewal was informed by the secret teachings of the Cabbalists, Hebrew Scriptures, writings of Plato and the Gnostics and Hermetic texts (first brought to Florence in 1460 and translated by order of Cosimo de Medici).

Although science and superstition were still inextricably blended in the 16th century, it is interesting to see the visual symbols employed to illustrate contemporary thinking and the progress of the age. The 'Painted Table Top', 1533 (illustration 1) was made by the German painter and wood engraver, Martin Schaffner of Ulm (d. 1549). It shows, in schematic form, the cosmic harmonies thought to hold good between the planets (in the centre), the days of the week and Liberal Arts (seated women), the virtues (their attributes), the colours (their dresses) and the metals (the vessels standing next to them). Beginning at the top left with a scholar, possibly the owner of the table, who is drawing up the whole scheme, and continuing in anti-clockwise order, come

22. *Star of the West*, Vol. V, (facsimile reprint), Oxford: George Ronald, 1984.

23. Peter Murray, 'A New Vision', in *The Age of the Renaissance*, Denys Hay (ed), London: Thames & Hudson, 1967, p. 76.

the Sun (Sunday, Grammar, Hope, yellow, gold); the Moon (Monday, Rhetoric, Faith, white, silver); Mars (Tuesday, Arithmetic, Strength, red, copper); Mercury (Wednesday, Logic, Love, grey, quicksilver); Jupiter (Thursday, Geometry, Justice, blue, tin); Venus (Friday, Music, Holiness, green, lead); and Saturn (Saturday, Astronomy, Prudence, black, iron).

Incorporated in the landscape of the table painting are numerous symbolic forms such as flowers (transitoriness and beauty); rabbits (fertility); mountains (loftiness of spirit and ideal, aspiration); forests (the female principle - Great Mother/Earth - luxuriant vegetable life free from control or cultivation, and symbol of the unconscious); rivers (ambivalent symbol of fertility and irrigation of the soil as well as the irreversible passage of time, loss and oblivion); bridge (connecting two worlds, heaven and earth; what can be perceived and what is beyond perception; the Covenant between God and Man; transition from one state to another and desire for change); globe (the sphere is a whole - the mystic 'Centre'; symbolic of the soul, perfection and felicity); books (Chinese symbology - power to ward off evil spirits; allegory of written inside and out - esoteric and exoteric - linked to symbolism of weaving); farm - cultivation (associated with the mysterious world of seeds, buds, flowers and fruits following cosmic order; guardian of rites and regeneration); winding road (the journey of life). The image of a castle - and there are many forts and castles depicted on the table - symbolises the transcendent soul and the heavenly Jerusalem. The height of the hill also adds to the level of meaning. Shape, form and light all play an important part in defining the symbolism of the castle image, which generally depicts the ever watchful and embattled spiritual power. Castles usually protect 'treasure' and signify the will for salvation.

All symbols are functions and signs of things imbued with energies, and the serpent or snake is, by analogy, symbolic of the pure energetic force. The snake has a great variety of symbolic meanings which relate to its multitude of characteristics: undulating and sinuous movement, its association with trees, its shed skin and darting tongue, speed, stealth, hiss and capacity to kill. The snake is associated with temptation facing those who have overcome the limitations of the material and have entered the realm of the spirit and resurrection. In this way the serpent is symbolic not only of personal sin but of the principle of evil and the equal and opposite principle of mastery or control over dark forces and the spiritual development of humanity. In the middle of the marvellous Sistine Chapel ceiling, Michelangelo depicted Adam and Eve's Temptation and Expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The Tree of Knowledge is entwined with a massive serpent epitomising the symbolic and ambivalent energies of the snake, offering knowledge tempered by the wisdom of insight.

In the symbolist painter André Derain's work 'La Dance', 1906 (illustration 2) serpentine symbolism is not only blatant (the huge bright green snake coiled around the dancers' legs) but is also implied in tree form, body form and dress decoration. Emblematic creatures, such as the gryphon-like bird (top left corner) symbolise guardianship of the road to salvation and hover near a sinuous, fruit-bearing tree (the Tree of Life). In psychological terms it symbolises the relationship between psychic energy and cosmic force. The gryphon in mediaeval Christian art represented both the Saviour and the Antichrist (Cirlot). Derain's painting of the three ecstatic dancers therefore contains many statements relating to the three women enjoying their outdoor dance, the dance of life, amongst the trees. Perhaps he suggests the diverse opinions and interpretations that might be made about their activity. Derain's symbolist palette, inspired by Delacroix and influenced by Gauguin, is rich in deep, pure and forceful colour ranging from lemon yellow in the sky to brilliant orange and purple in the garment of the left side figure. The composition of flat areas of colour broken by forceful line and the colour of deep shadow is a direct relationship with the artist's state of mind. Swirling with movement and figures drawn from erotic Indian and Romanesque sculptural forms, Derain has composed a painting steeped in correspondences between line, colour and emotion and a combination of spiritual references and corporeal classicism of the 16th and 17th centuries. By this means he creates a synthesis between tradition and modernity, the fixed and eternal, offering lyric and theatrical qualities for the beholder's eye to absorb and interpret.

The Cross

Complex in its symbolism, the cross is represented in a multitude of forms. In primitive cultures the two sticks were associated with kindling fire by rubbing the one stick (male) on the other (female) giving rise to the cross as a symbol of fire and suffering. Pre-dating Christianity the cross, like the Tree of Life, stands for the 'world-axis'. Placed in the mystic Centre of the cosmos, it becomes the bridge or ladder by which the soul may reach God. There are some versions which depict the cross with seven steps, comparable with the cosmic trees which symbolise the seven heavens. In addition the horizontal (or diagonal) arm cutting across the upright stands for the conjunction of opposites, joining the spiritual (vertical) principle with the phenomenal world. The vertical cross is also the simplest graphic depiction for a human.²⁴ The cross is also a potent symbol of unity. In Celtic symbology the circle joining the four arms of the cross signifies taking a step out from the centre and travelling the journey of life which the circle, like the wheel of life, describes.

24. J E Cirlot, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962, p. 68.

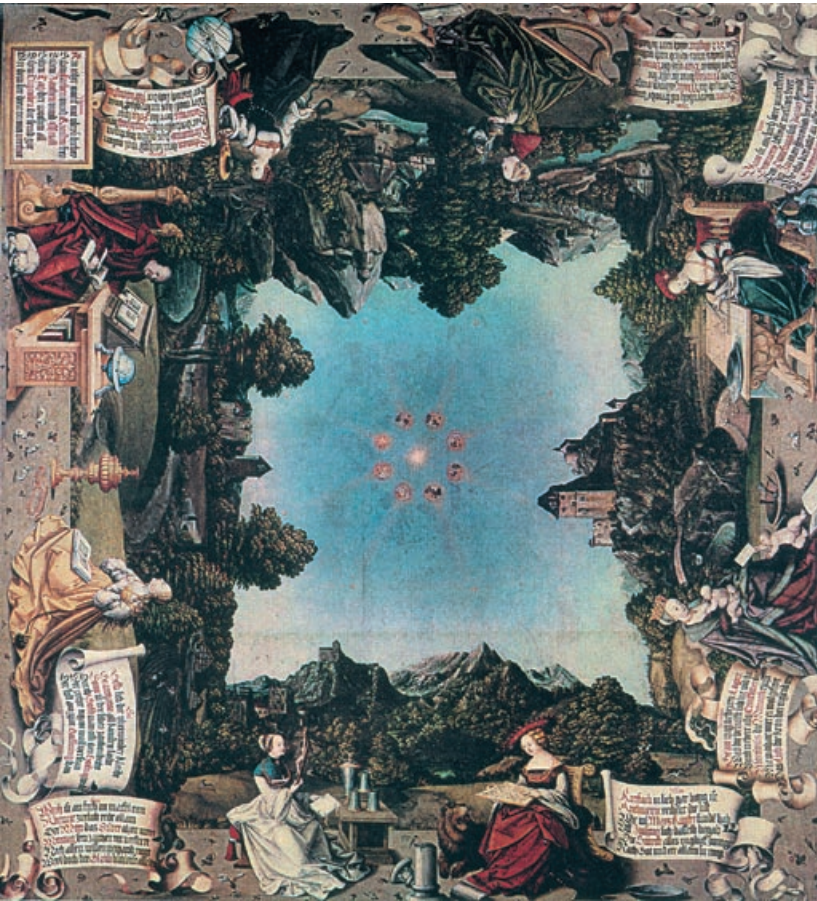


Illustration 1



Illustration 2

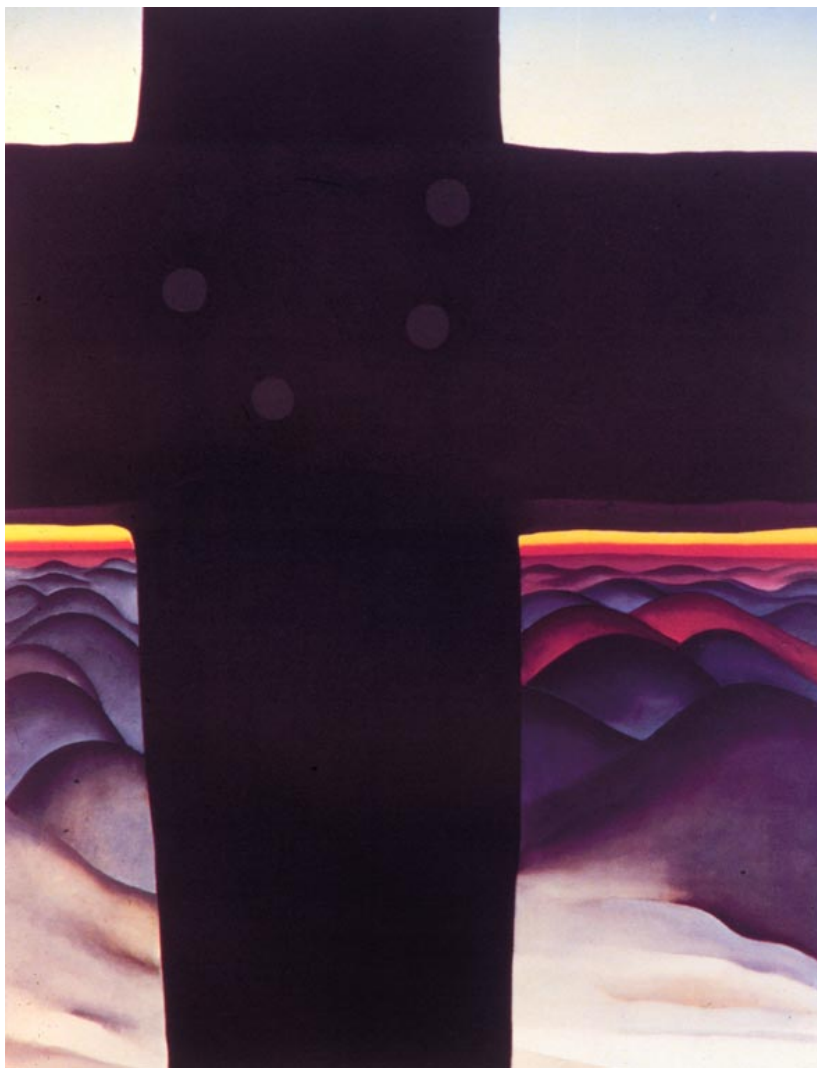


Illustration 3



Illustration 4



Illustration 5



Illustration 6

In her 1929 painting 'Black Cross, New Mexico' (illustration 3) Georgia O'Keefe has painted a structure in a profound and pensive dark colour which is nearly black. The cross almost fills the picture plane, it looms in the absolute foreground, top to bottom, side to side, leaving only small quarters in each corner. Where the two arms join there are four small round marks, a tone lighter in colour - nails. This is the cross of the Catholic Church, the sign of the crucifixion, suffering and supposed salvation. O'Keefe has experienced a particular and local cross which epitomised for her the oppressive effects of the Church upon a people. Her portrayal of the cross is like a silhouette against a relentless desert landscape seeming impossible to inhabit. The cross, so predominant in view, bars movement into the beyond. It is a point of threshold but seems insurmountable and unpassable. The landscape beyond is pathless and barren, and save for the far sunlit horizon is suffused with dark and ominous colour. Is the sun of an old religion setting for ever and will the dawn of the new day bring with it a brighter prospect?

To my eye there is something both shocking and exciting in the use of colour in 'Black Cross'. The elements of realism and landscape in the picture make it the more powerful. The horizon line of bright yellow (the sun and life), hills of red (blood and Church hierarchy) and the steep organic undulations of the tightly packed hills - like penitents kneeling before it - contrast in a stark way with the linear outline of the dark cross. The pale blue sky with its tiny white day-moon (top edge right) suggests mercy and grace.

Colors are forces, radiant energies that affect us positively or negatively, whether we are aware of it or not.²⁵

The word and its sound, form and its color, are vessels of a transcendental essence that we dimly surmise. As sound lends sparkling colour to the spoken word, so colour lends psychically resolved tone to form. The primeval essence of color is a phantasmagorical resonance, light becomes music.²⁶

By contrast, could the cross in Mark Keeman's 'Photographic Study, Tasmania', 2000 (illustration 4), suffused as it is with the bright light of morning, signify the dawn of that new day? Although in close foreground and dark it is delicate and lightweight; the edge is lit by bright ambient light. Suspended in the middle of the picture plane is a flower, withered and dead, discarded, blown by the wind into a light-trapping cobweb strung across the glass pane. The alive green background is dappled and indistinct, unlike O'Keefe's carefully outlined and focussed hills. Although the flower is faded

25. Johannes Itten, *The Elements of Color*, New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1970, p. 12.

26. Ibid, p. 8.

it retains much of its rich pink colour and, held by gossamer, hangs down as it might have on its bush, stamens stretched out in natural welcome.

Like O'Keefe's painting, this is a moment of vision caught and frozen in the frame. It is a threshold point between worlds forming the ether between the viewer, reality and the numinous beyond. Keeman's cross is rough edged, the cross in Mexico is smooth, yet emotionally in each the opposite is true. The searching eyes of both Keeman and O'Keefe have captured the mundane but each artist's work is redolent with emotional sensitivity, ambient light, colour and spiritual meaning, indicative of the universal quest for harmony and resolution. Seventy years and different continents separate their work and each artist is representative of their time and place, O'Keefe in the old world and Keeman, the Bahá'í, in the new, but both images speak of ensnarement and redemption, both images capture the essence of life, death and renewal.

Yesterday and today

During 1971, in the wilds of the Eastern Pilbara region of Western Australia, I spent four months assisting in a dingo ear-tagging mission. No made roads, no running water, pregnant and with a young baby I experienced bush life as the 'off-sider' to two men, one a dog trapper and the other my husband. We found nine dingo puppies and I saw much out there to awe me. Tropical storms off the coast loomed black and menacing over us, hundreds of kilometres inland. The sun glancing out from under the slate grey cloud billows turned the spinafex grass plains to green-gold. Silence was palpable but for crickets. Carvings stood out pale and large on the billabong rock walls. Human figures with enlarged genitals, animals and spiral symbols were incised in abundance on rocks at ground level and in high outcrops silhouetted against the blackened sky.

Namarrkon is Lightning Spirit in Kunwinjku mythology (illustration 5). He disguises himself as a grasshopper and is responsible for electrical storms, thunder and lightning. His storms can wreak heavy damage, destroying camps and even killing people. Twin circuits of lightning pass through Namarrkon's elbows, ankles, lower torso and genitals. Lightning Spirit is associated with sexuality and procreation. Stone axes protrude from his knees and hips and he makes lightning by striking his axes on the ground. His malevolent and menacing aspect is shown directly by the stingray barb emerging from his head. It is believed that *marrkidjbu*, 'clever men', can conjure Namarrkon at will to strike a particular person whom they wish to harm.

Following is my 1991 poem informed by my experience of that land and in response to the bark painting of 'Namarrkon, the Lightning Spirit', 1973 by Mick Gubargu (Kulmaru clan, Kubumi, western Arnhem Land).

Namarrkon, the Lightning Man*Namarrkon!**Come Namarrkon!**Cleave the outcrop!**Your stone axe giant knees create the scene**For your rampage.**Rend the green grey sky!**Barbed forks discharge your glaring threats.**Plains-hopper!**Strike Plains-hopper!**Jump about the bilious spinafex sea storm-sun lit**Deep and broad between the granite edges of a dream.**Deep and still the light and heat.**You promise rain but never here -**Grasshopper tease!**So far between the flash and boom**Still the earth resounds and moves a little.**Strike! Axe antennae termite head!**Namarrkon - you empty eyed electric ghoul - strike!**Set ablaze one tarry greengold grassy mass**Black billows rise pushed up by leaping vortex flame.**The knowing conjure Namarrkon**To split heads when vengeance needs**And Namarrkon engenders fear**While coitus comfort begets his fecund name.**I know you Namarrkon!**Colonial arrogance explains your physics -**No mystery here - you will wane and pass.**That special thunder light will fade,**The mood will change.**I will see you small and green again**Where no black char remains.**And nine months on new voices mewl in rebuilt camps**By river beds or outcrop water hole.**While Namarrkon awaits his season time**His chirrup guise the grind of sharpening stone.²⁷*

27. Karel Fontaine, 1991, Personal Collection.

Tomorrow

A never-ending continuum links the heritage of the past and gives stimulus to the creativity of the present in a practical demonstration of evolution. Pythagoras, born between 600 and 590 BC, coined the word philosopher, meaning one who is attempting to find out. Pythagoras defined knowledge as the fruit of mental accumulation. He believed it would be obtained in many ways, but principally through observation. Wisdom was the understanding of the source or cause of all things and this was obtained by raising the intellect to a point where it intuitively cognised the invisible manifesting outwardly through the visible - bringing itself into rapport with the spirit of things rather than merely their form. Pythagoras taught that both man and the universe were made in the image of God, and that the understanding of one predicated the knowledge of the other. Of his thirty-nine symbolic aphorisms the following are two: 'Declining from the public ways, walk in unfrequented paths', by which is implied those who desire wisdom must seek it in solitude and meditation; 'Speak not about Pythagoric concerns without light', which is a warning not to interpret the mysteries of God and the secrets of science without spiritual and intellectual illumination.²⁸

*...man should know his own self and know those things that lead to loftiness or to baseness, to shame or to honor, to wealth or to poverty.*²⁹

*O people of Bahá! The source of crafts, sciences and arts is the power of reflection. Make ye every effort that out of this ideal Mine there may gleam forth such pearls of wisdom and utterance as will promote the well being and harmony of all the kindreds of the earth.*³⁰

Illustration 6 shows 'Breastplate, Valley of Search', 1995. It is beaten copper, lined in suede leather and forms a part of the red, flame filled costume designed to represent the Valley of Search in my performance piece, 'Veils of the Spirit'.

For artists today and tomorrow, especially those who are Bahá'ís, developing a new artistic paradigm is both challenging and invigorating. Rather than relying on existential agony and the reconstruction of perceived and known data, art today and in the future can be a living and evolving dialogue between the artist, their heritage, culture and society.

28. Manly P Hall, LXV-LXVIII, *The Secret Teachings of All Ages*, Los Angeles: The Philosophical Research Soc. Inc., 1977.

29. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablet of Tarazat* in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh in Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1986, p. 187.

30. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kalimat-i-Firdawsiyyih* in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh in Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, op.cit., p. 206.

Inhibited by the climate of non-commitment and defensiveness in which our twilight generation lives and moves, we have yet to discover, to our perpetual delight, that art is one of the forms of expression waiting to serve this Cause, waiting to dance with us along the knife-edge in a condition of self-abandonment. ...The power of eloquence, the dancing beauty of utterance, the mysterious subtleties of image and sign, symbol and metaphor, that attend this Revelation are some of its most significant characteristics.³¹

Primarily it is the experience and education of an individual that informs their vision and allows them to see. Via the mechanics of the eye the messages received by the brain are interpreted by the mind and understood using acquired skill sets. We possess skills of discrimination, but we also possess skills determined and limited by our environment. If our experience and education are expanded and our minds broadened, our capacity for enjoyment, appreciation, inference and perception will likewise increase. Our vision becomes unveiled to the Light. The desire in us to seek and to know is our life force bestowed on us by Him. As we Bahá'ís say: 'I bear witness, O my God, that thou hast created me to know thee and to worship thee'.³² Those spiritually inclined will interpret the multitude of visual interests around them in moral and spiritual terms, desiring more knowledge and gaining more wisdom, translating and learning from their insights. The Creator desires us to know Him and He is the Source of all Knowledge. This is 'seeing' and through this awareness the creative impulse is stimulated to concretely manifest the Light through an artist's capacity to make art. Essentially, creative arts practice is religious practice. It is therefore an artist's role and responsibility to perfect their skills and technique, stimulate others to see, encourage inquiry and offer beauty, joy and illumination.

Bahá'u'lláh stated in His Writings:

Knowledge is one of the wondrous gifts of God. It is incumbent upon everyone to acquire it. Such arts and material means as are now manifest have been achieved by virtue of His knowledge and wisdom which have been revealed in Epistles and Tablets through His Most Exalted Pen -- a Pen out of whose treasury pearls of wisdom and utterance and the arts and crafts of the world are brought to light.³³

31. Bahíyyih Nakhjavání, *Artist, Seeker and Seer*, Bahá'í Studies, Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1982, p. 5.

32. Bahá'u'lláh, Noon obligatory prayer in *Bahá'í Prayers*, op.cit., p. 4.

33. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tarazat in Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh in The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, op cit, p. 189.