

A brief introduction to the “Traditional Doctrine of Art”

© 2007 Timothy Scott

Originally published as ‘A brief introduction to the “Traditional Doctrine of Art”’

(*Vincit Omnia Veritas* 1.2, 2005)

---

The first thing which strikes one in a masterpiece of traditional art is intelligence: an intelligence surprising either for its complexity or for its power of synthesis; an intelligence which envelopes, penetrates and elevates. (Marco Pallis)<sup>1</sup>

Traditional art derives from a creativity which combines heavenly inspiration with ethnic genius, and which does so in the manner of a science endowed with rules and not by way of improvisation. (Frithjof Schuon)<sup>2</sup>

Sacred art is made as a vehicle for spiritual presences, it is made at one and the same time for God, for angels and for man; profane art on the other hand exists only for man and by that very fact betrays him. (Frithjof Schuon)<sup>3</sup>

When considering the Traditional doctrine, or understanding, of art we must first guard against any confusion of the term “traditional” with simple “conservatism,” or with the term “classical,” in any scholastic sense. What we have in mind is not a classifiable period of “art history,” such as modern academia might envisage. Tradition, as we are speaking of, is firstly the primordial wisdom, or Truth, immutable and unformed, the supra-formal essence that informs Creation yet is of itself not created; secondly, it is the formal embodiment of Truth under a particular mythological or religious guise, which is transmitted through time. Marco Pallis, observed this second aspect of tradition as ‘namely an effective communication of principles of more-than-human origin...through use of forms that will have arisen by applying those principles to contingent needs.’<sup>4</sup>

In recent times the best exposé of the school of thought labeled “Traditionalism” has been provided by Kenneth Oldmeadow’s, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy*. The point is well made that this “school,” far from offering a unique philosophy of its own, is instead based upon the rediscovery or reaffirmation of the orthodox traditions of this world. The preeminent Traditionalist writers of our age are René Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon. Of these Coomaraswamy focuses the most on traditional art.

For the sake of recognizable examples of what is meant by Traditional art we might consider the like of Mediaeval and Oriental art. Still these are simply the most

---

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000, p.660.

<sup>2</sup> Schuon, ‘The Degrees of Art’: *Studies in Comparative Religion* X, iv, 1976, p.194, cited in Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism: Religion in the Light of the Perennial Philosophy*, Colombo: Sri Lanka Institute of Traditional Studies, 2000, p.102.

<sup>3</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, London: Perennial Books, 1987, p.31.

<sup>4</sup> Pallis, *The Way and the Mountain*, London: Peter Owen, 1960, p.203.

recent examples of this mentality and traditional art may equally be recognized in prehistoric art. On this point Coomaraswamy, remarks:

We [and here he is talking of the modern mentality] feel that we should have liked to have taught the primitive or savage artist ... to draw in “correct perspective.” We take it for granted that an increasing naturalism ... represents a progress in art. ... It hardly occurs to us that prehistoric art was a more intellectual art than our own; that like the angels, prehistoric man had fewer (and more universal) ideas, and used fewer means to state them than we...<sup>5</sup>

He continues to add, ‘The ideas and the art of the Middle Ages and the East, even at the height of accomplishment, are far more nearly related to the ideas and the art of prehistory than they are to those of our advanced decadence.’<sup>6</sup> This last comment shows that, from the Traditional perspective, the so-called “art” of the modern world, and this may be said to begin with the Renaissance, is regarded as a deviation from the what the Traditionalists regard as the true nature of art.

In referring to a “supra-formal” or “beyond formal” essence we are considering the doctrine of archetypes, which has been espoused the world over through all times excepting our own modern age. This doctrine lies at the root of all traditional art. It is universally taught that this natural world is only an image and a copy of a heavenly and spiritual pattern; that the very existence of this world is based upon the reality of its celestial archetypes. ‘Make all things according to the pattern which was shewn thee on the mount’ (Ex. 25:40 & Heb.8:5). ‘A form’ says the Christian gnostic, Jacob Boehme, ‘is made in the resigned will according to the platform or model of eternity, as it was known in the glass of God’s eternal wisdom before the times of this world.’<sup>7</sup> The fifth century Chinese painter, Hsieh Ho, observes that ‘The painters of old painted the idea (*i*) and not merely the shape (*hsing*).’<sup>8</sup> This doctrine is given its most definitive European expression in Plato’s Theory of Ideals or Forms.<sup>9</sup>

The natural world, the world we inhabit, was understood by all traditional peoples as symbolic.<sup>10</sup> The English poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, describes the Cosmos as ‘one vast complex Mythos, or symbolic representation.’<sup>11</sup> The Traditional idea of symbol refers to a sensible entity that directs the understanding from the physical towards the supra-physical levels of reality. Traditional art is thus functional, its utilitarian value being spiritual. The ultimate purpose of Traditional art is the leading of the human to the Divine. There is nothing of the modern “art for art’s sake” mentality about Traditional art.

<sup>5</sup> Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’: *Selected Papers Vol.1: Traditional Art and Symbolism* (ed.) Roger Lipsey, Surrey: Princeton University Press, 1989, p.53.

<sup>6</sup> Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’, 1989, p.53.

<sup>7</sup> *Signatura Rerum*, XV,43; in *The Signature of all Things and Other Discourses*, By Jacob Boehme (from William Law’s English edition, 4 vols. London, 1764-81), London & New York: Everyman’s Library, 1912-1934.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934, p.15.

<sup>9</sup> See Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism*, 2000, Ch.9 ‘Symbolism and Sacred Art’. For worldwide examples of this doctrine see Whitall Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000, pp.670-74. On the Platonic Doctrine of Symbolism see Adrian Snodgrass’ excellent *Architecture, Time and Eternity* Vol.1, New Delhi: Sata-Pitaka Series, 1990, Ch.2.

<sup>10</sup> On the Traditional understanding of symbolism see our ‘Understanding “Symbol”’: *Sacred Web A Journal of Tradition and Modernity* No. 6, Vancouver: Ali Lakhani, 2000, pp.91-106.

<sup>11</sup> Coleridge, *Essays on the Principles of Method*.

In the Traditionalist view there is no distinction between the artist and the artisan. Coomaraswamy:

The concept “art” is not in any way limited to the context of making or ordering one kind of thing rather than another: it is only with reference to application that particular names are given to the arts, so that we have an art of architecture, one of agriculture, one of smithing, another of painting, another of poetry and drama, and so forth. It is perhaps with the art of teaching that the mediaeval philosopher is primarily concerned...<sup>12</sup>

St. Chrysostom, in his *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, says, ‘The name of art should be applied to those only which contribute towards and produce necessities and mainstays of life.’<sup>13</sup> In this he includes both the physical necessities such as food, shelter, dress, so forth—and certainly in Traditional society the simplest drinking bowl and the family’s house were works of art—and the spiritual necessities such as poetry, dance, drama, painting, teaching, meditation, and so forth.

Traditional art is inspired from the Divine. It is not then, in the current sense of the word, “self-expression.” Traditional art is anonymous.<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that we are not now aware of the names of artist whose work we can say is inspired and Traditional, but that these artist themselves would not claim “ownership” of the work. Rather it was said that they were “in possession of their art” in the way of being possessed or directed by the art. Coomaraswamy: ‘The possession of any art is such a participation. The possession of an art is, furthermore, a vocation and a responsibility; to have no vocation is to have no place in the social order and to be less than a man’<sup>15</sup>.

In contrast to this sense of anonymity, Titus Burckhardt, Islamicist, art commentator and publisher of the *Book of Kells*, observes that,

the modern study of art derives most of its aesthetic criteria from classical Greek and post-medieval art. What ever its latest developments may have been, it has always considered the individual as the real creator of art. From this point of view, a work is “artistic” in so far as it shows the stamp of an individuality.<sup>16</sup>

In the modern study of art, as Coomaraswamy remarks, ‘we are nonplussed by the possibility of substituting a knowledge of biographies for a knowledge of art.’<sup>17</sup>

Schuon conceded that the art of the Renaissance retained some qualities of “intelligence and grandeur” but felt that the Baroque style that followed it ‘could hardly express anything but the spiritual poverty and the hollow and miserable turgidity of its period’<sup>18</sup>. ‘When standing before a cathedral,’ says Schuon, ‘a person really feels he is placed at the centre of the world; standing before a church of the

<sup>12</sup> Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’, 1989, p.51.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’, 1989, p.51, n.28.

<sup>14</sup> On the notion of anonymity in Traditional thought see Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism*, 2000, Ch.1.

<sup>15</sup> Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’, 1989, p.46.

<sup>16</sup> Burckhardt, ‘Perennial Values in Islamic Art’ from *Mirror of the Intellect*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1987, p.220.

<sup>17</sup> Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’, 1989, p.50.

<sup>18</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.33.

Renaissance, Baroque, or Rococo periods, he merely feels himself to be in Europe.’<sup>19</sup> On this point, Schuon remarks that Traditional art is essentially concerned with an expression of what is beyond time rather than the expression of a particular “period”: ‘An art that does not express the changeless and does not want to be itself changeless is not a sacred art’<sup>20</sup>. This is not to deny ethnic genius. Schuon: ‘A style expresses both a spirituality and an ethnic genius, and these two factors cannot be improvised.’<sup>21</sup>

From the Renaissance, and the so-called “Enlightenment” period that followed in its footsteps, came the humanist conception of art with its “mania” for novelty, which later came to be regarded as “originality,” in contradiction to the very meaning of this word, for originality is a return to the “origin.” In traditional worlds, to be situated in space and time is to be situated in a cosmology and an eschatology respectively. Space and time are symbolized by the centre and the origin respectively, and it is to these that traditional art direct. Thus traditional art guides one towards an increasing sense of unity. Modern “originality,” on the other hand, is a fleeing into an ever shrinking individuality that can only end up in absurdity and bizarreness, into the abnormal and the monstrous and thus surrealism.<sup>22</sup> For Oldmeadow, the “liberation” of the Renaissance ‘ends in the grotesqueries of a Dali!’<sup>23</sup>

Here we might admit, as in fact St. Augustine did, that, ‘some people like deformities.’<sup>24</sup> But the beauty of sacred art is not dependent upon our recognition. ‘Art’ according to Hindu tradition, ‘is expression informed by the ideal beauty (*rasa*).’<sup>25</sup> For Plato, ‘Nothing makes a thing beautiful but the presence and participation of Beauty in whatever way or manner obtained...By Beauty all beautiful things become beautiful.’<sup>26</sup> According to tradition, Muhammad declared that ‘God is beautiful, and he loves beauty.’<sup>27</sup> Moreover, as St. Thomas Aquinas remarks, ‘Beauty relates to the cognitive faculty.’<sup>28</sup> In like sense, the Chinese monk and painter, Tao-chi, observes, ‘The works of the old masters are instruments of knowledge.’<sup>29</sup> Traditional art partakes of the supra-formal Ideal of Beauty. It is not we who judge art but art that judges us.

For Thomas Aquinas, ‘Art is the imitation of Nature in her manner of operation.’<sup>30</sup> This is not to say that it is “naturalistic” in the modern sense. Coomaraswamy:

<sup>19</sup> Schuon, *The Transcendent Unity of Religions*, Wheaton: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1993, p.65 fn.

<sup>20</sup> Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, London: Perennial Books, 1965, p.13.

<sup>21</sup> Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds*, 1965, p.12.

<sup>22</sup> The distinction of Unity as opposed to uniformity is examined by René Guénon in his masterpiece, *The Reign of Quantity & The Signs of the Times*, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1972, Ch.VII: ‘Uniformity against Unity’. One should also see Ch.VI: ‘The Principle of Individuation’.

<sup>23</sup> Oldmeadow, *Traditionalism*, 2000, p.113.

<sup>24</sup> St. Augustine, *De musica* vi.38. cited in Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’, 1989, p.60.

<sup>25</sup> *Sahitya Darpana*, 1. 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Phaedo*, 100 E.

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, 2000, p.664, by way of Burckhardt, *Etudes Traditionnelles*, 1954, p.160.

<sup>28</sup> *Sum. Theol.* I, 5, 4 ad.1.

<sup>29</sup> *Hua Yü Lu*, Osvald Siren, *The Chinese on the Art of Painting*, New York: Schocken Books, 1963, p.191.

<sup>30</sup> *Sum. Theol.* 1.117.1 cited in Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’, 1989, p.52.

The “truth” of traditional art is a formal truth, or in other words, a truth of meaning, and not a truth that can be tested by comparing the work of art with a natural object. The artifact need no more resemble anything than a mathematical equation need look like its locus. The Apocalyptic Lamb is seven-eyed, and to have depicted one with only two would have been “untrue” to the first cause of the work to be done, which was to represent a certain aspect of the “nature” of God.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time ‘disproportions do not make sacred art, any more than correctness of proportion by itself involves the defects of naturalism.’<sup>32</sup> ‘The reproach of “naturalism”’ remarks Schuon, ‘cannot properly be leveled merely at a capacity to observe nature; it concerns rather the prejudice which would reduce art simply and solely to the imitation of nature.’<sup>33</sup>

The “manner of operation” of Nature is hierarchic. Sacred or symbolic art operates by the unfolding or unveiling of Reality through a progression of symbolic initiations, acting like so many rungs on a ladder leading “upwards” to the Divine. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Traditionalist and Islamic scholar, says, ‘The symbol is the revelation of a higher order of reality in a lower order through which man can be led back to the higher realm. To understand symbols is to accept the hierarchic structure of the Universe and the multiply states of being.’<sup>34</sup>

This hierarchic structure is reflected in social structures. When this hierarchy is recognized as a guiding principle for the society—it is not recognized today, even through this by no means eliminates it—then the society at hand must produce an art that is equally relevant at all levels of its structure. The essential needs, both physical and spiritual, of the aristocrat and the peasant are of the same kind.<sup>35</sup> Under these conditions we get what is called a “folk art.” In contrast the modern idea of art is precisely class-ist and exclusivist. Traditional art is an art for Everyman.

In the final analysis Traditional art can be summed up thus: God, in creating the Universe, is the Divine Artist. The human is made in the image of God. Thus everything we do is an act of creation and a work of art. The Divine art is the creation of the human; the art of the human is, as a reflective image, the “creation” or recognition of the Divine. This is the purpose and the end of humankind. All art is strictly a science and a craft. In its highest form it is the science and craft of the Beautiful, the Ideal or principle of all beauty. Its purpose is always the return of the human to the Origin through contemplation, meditation, and action, which find their perfection in participation.

---

<sup>31</sup> Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’, 1989, p.47.

<sup>32</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.33.

<sup>33</sup> Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 1987, p.33.

<sup>34</sup> Nasr, *Sufi Essays*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1972, p.88.

<sup>35</sup> Coomaraswamy, ‘Mediaeval and Oriental Art’, 1989, p.58.