

The Influence of Theosophy on Visual Artists

Pamela Lowrie, 2008

The great epoch of the Spiritual which is already beginning, or, in embryonic form, began already yesterday...provides and will provide the soil in which a kind of monumental work of art must come to fruition. Wassily Kandinsky, 1910-1911

Countless generations of artists have been intrigued by the mysteries offered by spiritual writings and belief systems. In the 1890's interest in the occult and mysticism fused with the genesis of abstract painting, then in its 'embryonic form,' Kandinsky in Germany, Kupka in France, Malevich and others in Russia and Mondrian in the Netherlands created a pure abstract vision that embodied their involvement with esoteric thought. (from the catalogue for the exhibit THE SPIRITUAL IN ART: ABSTRACT PAINTING 1890-1985, Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art)

For centuries painting was a way of visually recording the landscape, historical events and the appearance of important personages. In some of this art one can see the expressiveness of the artist as in the sweetness of the Madonna, the agony of Christ on the cross, the gentleness of Jesus with the little children and their innocence, and sometimes the malevolence of a monarch. While recording outer reality, the artist included his own subjective feelings about the subject matter. DaVinci used some of his art to express his enjoyment of life's mystery. Think of the Mona Lisa with the mysterious smile and the strange background. The painting represents a kind of material world and yet is strangely mysterious. Some historians have theorized that the portrait is not a woman at all but a male friend of DaVinci's.

The industrial revolution of the 19th century changed society in many ways and strongly affected the artists. Materialism, science and mechanization reigned. With the invention of the camera painters began to wonder if they had become redundant. Late in the 19th century many people felt a loss of the soul. The re-emergence of spiritualism and interest in the occult filled the gap. The impressionist painters dealt with the situation by painting what they called their impression of light yet they were still painting the landscape. A Russian painter named Wassily Kandinsky who was painting with a group in Germany began to explore the possibility of expressing his inner feelings and emotions on canvas. He wanted to find a way to make paintings free from material representation the way composers of music could express feelings purely with vibrations. His paintings began to evolve into compositions consisting of shapes and colors without reference to the outer world. The Theosophical movement was important to Kandinsky's as it was to other artists of the time including Kupka, Klee Malevich, Marc and Mondrian who became a member of the society in 1909. Whether Kandinsky was actually a member is unknown however he had many books on Theosophy in his library and referred to Theosophical concepts in his writing. With the publication of Ledbeater's MAN VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE in 1902 and Ledbeaters and Besant's book THOUGHTFORMS in 1905 the artists had references for their visible expressions of feelings. The clairvoyent representations in these two books of the appearance of various emotions in the human

aura and a chart in Ledbeater's book demonstrating the appearance of the colors of various emotions was just what the artists were looking for.

Here we looked at color samples and responded to various shapes.

In his book *CONCERNING THE SPIRITUAL IN ART*, published in 1911, Kandinsky describes his theory: *...colour is a power which directly influences the soul...form-harmony must rest only on a corresponding vibration of the human soul...*

Thus to create a painting calling forth an emotional response, the use of shape (form) and color is essential and the inclusion of objects is unnecessary.

Another artist of interest Hilma af Klint, a Swedish artist, who used some of Blavatsky's symbols as well as symbols from Rudolph Steiner whom she admired. She painted in a trance state guided by her 'leaders.' She did not exhibit her occult paintings during her life and requested they not be exhibited for 20 years after her death in 1944. They were first exhibited in 1985.

Contemporary Theosophical Artists

We discussed and viewed the work of three contemporary artists all of whom are members of the Theosophical Society and all of whom have examples of their art work hanging in the building: Callicutt, Kruse, and Lowrie. The material was drawn from a thesis paper, *THE SPIRITUAL IN ART*, by Kathleen Hall that is available in the library. In her paper she includes interviews with these artists.

Information was also drawn from the book *THE SPIRITUAL IMAGE IN MODERN ART* compiled by Kathleen J. Regier – A Quest Book, 1987

of this site was to help people understand the mysterious quality of the energy that connects mind, body, and spirit. The great importance of this to the future of humanity and the cosmos was discussed previously in Chapter Four. In my opinion, what Beth Ames Swartz is doing is exactly what art in the Post-Modern era is responsible for; it is the healing of spirit through art.

Suzie Gablik also relates Beth Ames Swartz' work to Frantisek Kupka's at the turn of the century. She claims that it reminds her of the metaphysical tradition in twentieth-century art and the rhythmic simultaneity of Orphism as seen in the work of Frantisek Kupka's series of works, *The Disks of Newton*: "cosmic color wheels that are a whirling matrix of dynamic movement where everything is in perpetual energetic relationships" (Gablik, 1992, p.156-57).

Pamela Burt Lowrie

Pamela Burt Lowrie was born in Geneva, Illinois. Her heritage is Anglo/European/American. She was raised in the Episcopal Church; attending Sunday School, and participating in the ritual of confirmation. Although she was affiliated with a specific religion, she was given the freedom to explore any ideas that were of interest to her. In regards to spiritual enlightenment, she views it as a difficult question to answer in that she "...has never had a moment of spiritual enlightenment or [has had] so many that they seem part of [her] life... if, however, spiritual enlightenment refers to feelings of euphoria and oneness with all, that happens rather often" (Lowrie, 2000). Describing her current spirituality, she refers to a research project she was doing on the origins of abstract art. Having learned that Theosophical ideas influenced the development of

abstraction, she went to the library at the Theosophical Society in Wheaton, Illinois to find out what Theosophy was about. In this process Pamela Burt Lowrie discovered that:

...many of the ideas were similar to what I had always believed without a formal structure. Ideas such as reincarnation seem to always have been with me but because this is not a generally accepted point of view in Christianity I kept it to myself. The idea of unity of spiritual and material, the exploration of the overlap of physics and spiritual ideas, the practice of meditation and the continuing exploration of ideas, without the demand for belief in dogma, found in Theosophy were simpatico with my orientation to spirituality. I was quite happy to find an organization of people of reasonably like mind (Lowrie, 2000).

Lowrie explains the evolution of style and content in her art in relation to her spirituality. Having come to a "dead end" in her own work after realizing that producing a likeness was best done by a camera, she began to explore the realm of the unseen spiritual world that artists such as Kandinsky, Klee, and Chagall were expressing in their abstract paintings, and began to look for something to say. This came in the form of the Mexican myth of Quetzalcoatl who represented the joining of contrasting elements.

I wanted to represent the unification of opposites in a contemporary way and I decided to do this by combining several unlike systems into one unified work. I finally settled on a translation of written poetry into the phonetic system, a system of color and spaces based on the Fibonacci series of numerical relationships (Lowrie, 2000).

Lowrie also explored other symbolic representations of connective opposites:

For example the cross can be interpreted as the unification of the vertical spiritual plane with the horizontal material plane and the six pointed star consists of two triangles, one pointing up and the other down. In my paintings I represent the idea of the unification of opposites by combining amorphous *and geometric* shapes into a harmonious whole (Lowrie, 2000).

Light is Both Particle and Wave (Figure 35), is a painting that was inspired by the opposites of light behaving as both matter and non-matter. It is also profoundly spiritual and significantly related to Theosophical concepts:

This painting contains the vertical and horizontal lines of the cross, the symbol of spirit (vertical) and of matter (horizontal) located behind a gold "sun (son) burst". Gold is the color of God. Jesus the son is the spirit made manifest, the intersection of spirit and matter (the cross). He is also referred to as the light of the world. The spectrum of colors radiating from the center symbolizes white light broken into its component parts. Another way of looking at this is to see it as the origin of all that is, matter and energy, in the burst of light at the time of the creation of the Universe. The oval in the center might refer to God's eye or the cosmic egg (Lowrie, 2000).

Mandalas are also an aspect of spirituality in Pamela Burt Lowrie's art. "In many traditions, the mandala represents the doorway between the macrocosm and the microcosm"; her paintings "are an invitation for the viewer to enter that doorway" (Lowrie, 2000). These forms began to "appear" in her work, then were later recognized and became intentional; the center became "a message from the Universe". She explains that "Much of what is in my paintings was not put there consciously and often I do not immediately see all that is there. There is an ongoing dialogue between the artist and that

which the artist creates which allows for new insights into each work and the progression to the next" (Lowrie, 2000).

Lowrie's work as well fulfills the purpose of art in the Post-Modern era. As K. Martin-Kuri writes in her essay entitled, "The New Spiritual Art: Balancing the Inner World and Outer World of Expression" in *One Source Sacred Journeys: A Celebration of Spirit and Art*: "There is a need for an objective art-form that expands beyond the individual artists and can relay the truth of the spiritual world... If we can expand our focus to the balance point between the inner and outer world, we find ourselves at the threshold of miracles [where] the Divine can meet us there through our art" (quoted in Markowitz, 1997, p.18). Lowrie is communicating a divine message for the planet through her work. She is attuned to and hears the voice of spirit.

Donald Kruse

Born in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Donald Kruse experienced a Christian Fundamentalist upbringing. His father died when he was six weeks old, leaving his mother as a single parent to raise two children in poverty during the heart of the depression. She was eventually remarried to a singing minister, which meant "...endless Sunday and Wednesday night sermons, revivals, camp meetings etc. By the age of sixteen, it all seemed embarrassingly silly and meaningless. It was the most powerful anti-Christian indoctrination one could possibly create for a bright young man" (Kruse, 2000).