

Green Knight Multimedia Project

Episode 2:

Revelation and the function of Beauty in Traditional Arts

Today we will be contemplating on Traditional Arts.

To awaken the sense of beauty, I have selected a few passages from *Art From the Sacred to the Profane: East and West*, writings of Frithjof Schuon, edited by Catherine Schuon and extracts from the chapter: The Degrees of Art in *Esoterism as a Principal and as a Way*.

I propose to elucidate the function of revelation in the artistic process of a practitioner of traditional arts and to answer some important questions related to the role of art and Beauty in human life as receptacles of Truth. To express the ideas discussed through a visual medium, a traditional Bharat Natyam dance performance will follow at the end of this presentation.

- *What is the most effective way to communicate Beauty, the vehicle of saving Truth?*
- *What is the most appropriate way to convey the metaphysical nature of things through the beauty of forms?*
- *How can we provoke the same state of contemplativeness in the other by realizing a “contemplative disinterestedness” in the act of creation ?*



- *How can traditional art become an "upaya", a "provisional means" to convey metaphysical truths ?*

These questions are relevant for any field of traditional arts. There are many aspects of sacred expressions such as writing, recitation, calligraphy, painting, architecture, sculpture, clothing, pottery, dance, music... My experience, in particular, refers to the sense of the sacred in the art of gesture and sacred dance. However, the practitioner of any field of traditional art and the appreciators of art will find resonance with the ideas discussed here.

Introduction:

Traditional art proposes in its mode of operation an homogeneous worldview, being an integral expression of the social, religious, ethical, practical and spiritual dimensions of existence. Thus, this kind of art is a natural expression of life. It has the power to hold together several streams of a specific culture and to express its true values. In our present times we no longer have the traditional framework of existence, but still the blessings transmitted by tradition allows the serious seeker in the field of art to experience its essence. Art, conceived in a traditional way, encompasses all aspects of life, expressing higher values, revealing truth and metaphysical wisdom. In this context, art assumes a very different role from the superficial modern approach in which art is considered mere entertainment or just merchandise. On the other hand, the traditional approach to art is that of a metaphysical and religious phenomenon, which is intrinsically connected with Revelation. Art is thus, none other than a channel for



revelation of the sacred content of a particular religion. Being rooted on symbols provided by Revelation, traditional arts has a function related to esoterism as it reveals the metaphysical and mystical meanings inherent in the canons established by tradition. Thus, the creative process is an experience connecting earthly existence with transcendence; encompassing man's personality as a whole in which the Unified Reality beyond forms, once realized in depth becomes gnosis, where intellection meets Revelation.

As in the medieval conception: "**Ars sine scientia nihil est**", which means that the practice of art without knowledge is nothing, establishes that the creative process must be rooted in knowledge, reason and established principles. The creative activity must be guided by three principles: **intuition** of metaphysical realities, **understanding** by which the intellect grasps the universal symbolism and "**scientia**", the skill necessary to realize the work. Thus, this kind of art requires discrimination, rigor of practice and dedication to tradition, as it includes specific knowledge and definite principles to be mastered. Likewise one acquires a skill of realizing the union of the knower with what he knows, which allows, spontaneously, the activity of creation to happen.

The artist has to surpass himself through the mastery of the artform in its aspect of contemplation and action. Art becomes an exercise of purifying the mind by the contemplation of divine models, leading the mind back to its original Reality.

In this process the artist realizes his own essence, or what he should be or become, expressing his ultimate purpose in life. Creation is thus a sacrament as says Coomaraswamy; a necessity of life and its mission is to express, through beautiful



forms, spiritual values, whether these are cosmic aspects, saving truths or liberating beauty.

I quote Schuon:

“Sacred art is first of all the visible and audible form of Revelation and then also its indispensable liturgical vesture. The form must be an adequate expression of its content; in no case should it contradict it, it cannot be abandoned to the arbitrary decisions of individuals, to their ignorance and their passions.”

“No art in itself is a human creation; but sacred art has this particularity, that its essential content is a revelation, that it manifests a properly sacramental form of heavenly reality, such as the icon of the Virgin and Child, painted by an angel... or such as the statue of Shiva dancing or the painted or carved images of the Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and Taras.”





Avalokiteshvara, bodhisattva of Mercy, Nepal, c. 12th century

In this iconographic image, we can note that the weight of the body of the bodhisattva is slightly moved to the left leg allowing the right foot to be lifted up over the ground, suggesting the possibility of liberating oneself from the samsarik earthly existence.

What is the most effective way to communicate Beauty, the vehicle of saving Truth?

Beauty is a direct expression of Truth. In order to restore the fall inherent in existence and to convey the saving Truth, the contemplation of aesthetic expressions manifesting celestial intentions is indeed an effective way to awaken the sense of divine Beauty.



Thus, the true purpose of art is to become a support for the contemplation of God. Consequently, the beauty expressed in the artwork is above all that of the soul of the artist, alchemically transformed by the creative process, and finally exteriorized in his work.

Any beauty has three aspects in all: truth, goodness and bliss, as shown in the Hindu formula: ***Satyam Shivam Sundaram***. The worth of the work of art will reflect the qualities of truth, beauty and goodness of God's creation. Something universal which can be felt by the heart, which has a meaning, but is not understood by reason alone. The aesthetic influence which emanates from such artwork conforming to truth, beauty and goodness provokes a contemplative state of mind as it reverberates in the heart like the remembrance of our origin.

The beauties of this world can exteriorize the soul attracting to its objects of perception. However, there is a possibility of appreciating an external object as a means of spiritualizing beauty. This is the mystery of "Exteriorization in view of Interiorization" as thought by Schuon, in which the sensible beauty, which would exteriorize the soul, becomes a spiritual access to the heart by the attraction of the inward pole, or God's grace.

Far from this perspective, is the aesthetic pleasure that emanates from most of the modern and profane artwork, which is a kind of forgetting of the stress of life in an irreverent way. Such creations are often inspired by the subconsciousness of the artist. This free inspiration being disconnected from the quest of truth, only expresses the psychological states of mind of the artist, revealing the narrow scope of his individuality.



I quote Schuon:

“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.”

On the other hand, in the light of the *Philosophia Perennis*, the understanding of a traditional artwork becomes a path to reveal the mysteries of the Universe, the universality of existence. We come back to the land of the spirit and to divine Beauty.

I quote Schuon:

“It is the spiritual element or the connection with what transcends the element of beauty in the world, that reveals the roots of beauty itself. Beauty as uncreated, before manifestation is Divine Beauty and this is the root of manifested beauty.”

“It is important to understand, first of all, that the purpose of art is not a priori to induce aesthetic emotions, but to transmit, together with these, a more or less direct spiritual message, and thus suggestions emanating from, and leading back to, the liberating truth.”





Qutab Minar minaret or the "Victory Tower" 1199-1220, Delhi, India

The ascending motion of forms in sacred architecture reminds us of our final destination.

What is the most appropriate way to convey the metaphysical nature of things through the beauty of forms?

Traditional art must have a purpose, it must serve the needs of our material and spiritual existence. Dealing directly with the sacred, traditional arts is a powerful means to actualize the recollection of spiritual realities through the liberating grace inherent in the exactness of forms, leading thus as Schuon mentions, to an “integral aesthetics which reveals not only the beauty that can be sensed, but also the spiritual foundations of this beauty”. Thus, the sense of the beautiful comes from aesthetic discrimination,



that is to say from the understanding of forms. This awareness of forms is directly related to discrimination of Reality. However, one must have a purified heart to access the intuition of essences and to express it; the same is required from the appreciator of such kind of art.

The beauty sensed coming from an artwork, must in some way awaken the recollection of our originary state of perfection, something which reminds us of the state of harmony, completeness, expansion and goodness. In this sense, the function of traditional art is to awaken the sense of the sacred through the correct form, revealing the esoterism of its symbols and becoming thus, a powerful means to reveal the consciousness of theophanies.

I quote Schuon on this topic:

“When we relate beauty to its transcendental and metaphysical plane, beauty has the role of a spiritual awareness in connection with contemplation and internalizing remembrance of the Divine.”





Detail of a panel in Kailash Temple Ellora, 756 – 773 C.E. Maharashtra, India

Woman is the prototype of earthly beauty par excellence. As her essence in the metacosm, she manifests the overflowing qualities of abundance, goodness and generosity. The transparency in this carved image challenges the nature of stone, which is transmuted into a fine tissue, suggesting the delicacy of femininity.



How can we provoke the same state of contemplativeness in the other by realizing a “contemplative disinterestedness” in the act of creation ?

Understanding and relating the spiritual life to the artistic process, the artist becomes an instrument, a universal receptacle for the divine breath. As he consecrates himself to his art, he becomes a *Kala-Yogi*, “a yogi of art” or a manifestation of the un-manifest; void of himself, he contemplates and expresses the wide scope of Reality through beautiful forms. Contemplation and activity are two natural aspects of life.

Contemplation or wonder of life, enables the soul to rest in its transcendental nature. As the real nature of man is his godlike essence, this natural process of rest enables one to retreat from the world and to contemplate the Self. Through contemplation, the intellect reveals symbols which illuminate his creation. Like a reflection on a mirror, the creative power of Reality acts and creates through him. In this process, contemplation and action becomes a unique reality that enables the artist to forget his empirical “I” and act as pure substance; fashioning the artwork as he fashions himself. Emptied of everything, he becomes the spiritual content which is pure *ananda*, bliss. The result of this process has the power of efficiently transmitting *ananda*, the joy of existence; deeply touching those to whom the work is addressed, as *ananda* is the substratum of Reality, encompassing all. Here lies, the secret of effectiveness of spiritual influences, conveyed through realization of the Self, by a means of an intelligible work of art.

I quote Schuon:

“There is something in our intelligence which wants to live in repose, something in which the conscious and the unconscious meet in a kind of passive activity, and it is to



this element that the lofty and easy language of art addresses itself. The language is lofty because of the spiritual symbolism of its forms and the nobility of its style; it is easy because of the aesthetic mode of assimilation.”



Detail of the Buddhist Temple of the Emerald Buddha *Wat Phra Kaew*, 1783
on the grounds of the Grand Palace in Bangkok, Thailand

*The musicality of the golden details of the roof suggests and indicates our luminous ascension to
Heavens*



How can traditional art become an "upaya", a "provisional means" to convey a metaphysical truth?

Upaya in *Sanskrit* refers to expedient means or "skill in means". The practice of a traditional art exposes the artist to be involved with symbols of a celestial order which nourishes his imagination and life. One must not confuse a symbol with a mere analogy, expression of some rational or irrational possibility of imagination. Traditional symbols unveils the essence of archetypes and allows the imagination to perceive the real analogy between the immaterial and the material aspects of Reality.

To be able to represent the ineffable, the un-manifest of a metaphysical reality by means of the formal, the practitioners may use their own specific methods or techniques in accordance with tradition, that fit the message to be conveyed. The exercise of skill to which it refers, *upaya* or the ability to adapt one's message to the audience, is of enormous importance.

The words technique and art have distinct functions. Technique being understood as the mode of producing something material by means of a specific instrument, rule and purpose, and art as the mode of producing, presumably, the "immaterial" and never entirely foreseen before, if we understand art as not only representing naturalistic expressions.

By observing a work of art and analyzing what it produces of "immaterial", one can thus distinguish what is truly art and what is merely technique. What they express as "immaterial" or what they contain beyond the simple material content is the "inner



vision" or the fruit of the cultivation of inwardness and this is the subtle aspect that has to be conveyed to the appreciator. To be able to suggest and materialize the subtle aspect of Reality, one must become it by means of absorbing the Real.

Becoming an *upaya*, in the sense of conveying the "imaterial" into sensible forms, traditional arts in its varied manifestations provides a provisional means to bring down immediate awareness of metaphysical realities beyond the mere naturalistic aspect of things. When an artistic expression has the power to make the subtle primordial essence of things manifest, it enables the soul to expand out of the boundaries of worldly existence, opening a door to perceive a deeper interpretation of life. This is the meaning of a symbol.

Be it painting the infinitude of the blue sky, sculpting the meditative semblance of a bodhisattva or representing the rhythm of the ocean in a noble calligraphy, a perfect symbol always reveals a true aspect of Reality, transcending a mere naturalistic expression. In this way, traditional arts becomes an *upaya*, a provisional means to efficiently awaken the sense of archetypes.

I quote Schuon:

"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 individual improvisation. "ars sine scientia nihil". The work of the artist or craftsman comprises two perfections, namely perfection of surface and perfection of depth. At surface level, the work must be well done, in conformity with the laws of the art and the demands of the style; in depth, it must be able to communicate the reality which it expresses. This explains why traditional art is related to esoterism as regard



its form and to spiritual realization as regards to its practice; for the form expresses the essence and an understanding of the form awakens the need to transcend it with a view to its essence or archetype. The artist in fashioning the work—the form—fashions himself; and as the purpose of the form is to communicate the essence or celestial content, the artist sees this a priori in the formal container. Realizing the form from the starting point of the essence, he becomes the essence by realizing the form.”

(from: Esoterism as a Principal and as a Way) –





Posture of traditional Indian classical dance. Goddess Saraswati playing the Veena at

Mukteswara Temple, 10th century, Bhubaneswar, Orissa India.

In ephemeral arts such as drama and dance which have no material support like a canvas, a paper or a stone to fixate the artwork, it is the soul of the artist which serves as support for the fixation of the transient artwork as the whole being of the artist and his work is one and the same thing.



Back to the video:

As the subject to be expressed is always life itself or “heavenly life” in the case of mythology; the artist in oneness with the model becomes a spontaneous result of an immediate understanding of Reality, bringing the sensitive audience closer to the same realization in a similar way. This is the meaning of sacred theatre; to become a mirror of the phenomenon of life while abolishing particularity to express a Universal Form. In this way, “Being” or the perfect container of humanness; the symbol, assumes its primordial Form to express its eternal Essence, allowing celestial fragrances to emanate the liberating Truth.



The following video expresses the poetic universe of mythology with its symbols through the language of Indian classical dance.

Video : *Prasthar* - The dance of the Ganges

“Nritya Ganga”, the dance style created by Guru Sucheta Chapekar, is a synthesis of Bharat Natyam- the South Indian classical dance and Hindustani music- the North Indian classical music. Ganga is the holy river of the North, which is revered all over India. The river also signifies a flow of tradition forever going ahead, growing, assimilating changes...

Nritya Ganga beautifully reveals this flow of tradition.

Gondeshwar Temple Sankranti- January 2012, Sinnar, India.

Composition: Dr. Sucheta Chapekar

Thank you for this opportunity of sharing this noble art of ancient India

