



ON FINDING CERTAINTY IN UNCERTAIN TIMES THE CONFLUENCE OF (ABSTRACT) ART AND SPIRITUALITY IN POST-WAR EUROPE

Not very long ago, in the late 1970s, Rosalind Krauss, an admired American art critic, seemed indescribably embarrassed by the sheer mention of art and spirituality in the same sentence. Her reserve hit the nerve of time: she and other influential critics of her day proselytised in many textbook entries that, with very few exceptions, art with a recognisable religious or spiritual iconography no longer commanded the attention of the most innovative or prestigious artists throughout most of the 20th century. Instead, their analyses of modern art tended to focus on the designs, colours, and techniques these artists were using and downplay any religious or spiritual content when it was present unless the artist was regarded as ‘eccentric.’

Nevertheless, spiritual beliefs of any kind continued to flourish throughout the 20th century and motivate many modern artists to express metaphysical ideas, spiritual feelings, or a yearning for a utopian future in their own coded or private artistic languages. Some of these artists took up occult iconographies in their art and painted their own tarot decks. Others were on a quest to see if art could inspire a transcendental state akin to the sublime feeling that nature could inspire. In their eyes, non-objective art provided a powerful refuge and outlet: the freedom of interpretation would allow the viewers to gaze at abstract surfaces or forms and experience a spiritual revelation or at least a profound meditative feeling at their own pace.

Many stories about the therapeutic properties of religious iconography survive, indeed, especially from war veterans. In one case, for example, the viewer had recently returned from the trenches and was visibly moved by the wise, fragile, compassionate gaze of the Virgin in Sandro Botticelli’s *Madonna and Child with Eight Singing Angels* (1477). Abstract art, however, did not elicit similar emotions or feelings from the viewing public at the time, if one believes a catalogue essay by Maurice Tuchman. Undeterred by the public’s cold shoulder towards abstraction, Tuchman staged the now-legendary exhibition, ‘*The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890–1985*’, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986. He was one of the first curators to associate the developments of abstract art with the spiritual beliefs of the turn of the previous century and included paintings by more than 100 artists, both canonical figures and little-known practitioners, early modernists and contemporary artists, in the landmark exhibition in Los Angeles. Each case study revealed a profound connection to spiritual, utopian or metaphysical beliefs.

Today we no longer share the sentiments of the seventies or eighties when it comes to our taste in abstract art or understanding thereof. Judging from our popular culture, we have come to almost revel in a minimalist and reduced use of forms. The non-objective has become fashionable and decorative, the freedom of interpretation an option, not a mistake.

We even tend to read the post-war period with a new pair of eyes. Gone are the days of a singular file. We now shine a light on the overlooked and rejoice in the plurality of the past. Rather than paraphrase or regress from it, we attempt to add to it and verbatim our history – as has recently been done with the likes of abstract painters from Luchita Hurtado to Emma Kunz or Hilma af Klint.

With Spirituality & Abstraction in Post-War Europe, our current show at HFA, we delve into the gallery's extensive collection with a fascinating fresh perspective. While preparing this exhibition during these times of uncertainty, we found incredible solace in the new avenues of thought that opened up with each further reading, philosophical or spiritual thought different from the ones we were used to in established art historical literature.

1945 and the end of the second world war remains the defining historical marker or lens through which we presently judge the second half of the 20th century in Europe. Characterising for the art from the immediate post-war period is a confluence of the old and the new, horror and hope, pain and courage, trauma, and healing. In 1949 Theodor Adorno postulated how it was possible 'to write poetry after Auschwitz.'

Painters of the 'Abstraction Creation' group in Paris loosely included some of the early 'fathers' of abstraction. One of their members, the Swiss painter LEO LEUPPI worked similar to a Mondrian or Van Doesburg and believed that reducing art to its purest form would reveal its spiritual properties. Spiritually, he looked to philosophers like Hegel to manifest the 'absolute truth' in his geometric abstract works.

Though a return to the premediated pre-war vocabulary of forms and symbols was not necessarily a noticeable trait of the immediate post-war period, on the contrary, many artists outrightly rejected this kind of formal vocabulary to the point of rebellion. Hence, many different loosely affiliated artist groups or movements formed across Europe: from Art Informel in France to ZERO in Germany or Arte Povera in Italy, striving for plurality at all costs. These movements eschewed a singular file of art styles in favour of finding new uses of forms. Artists suddenly belonged to several movements or styles at a time and mingled with each other. Like ZERO or Arte Povera, some of these movements stipulated a clean slate following the barbaric atrocities of the second world war and argued for a return to the basics in art and life.

CLAUDE BELLEGARDE shared similar sentiments with these newly emerging developments between Italy, Germany and France. Between 1953 and 1957, he painted exclusively in white, in a similar vein to Yves Klein's monochrome paintings, and made several of these so-called achromes during this intense experience of spiritual rebirth. Bellegarde closely followed the spiritual teachings of Charles Leadbeater and his protégé Krishnamurti as well as Lanza del Vasto. He would soon indulge in colourful outbursts with his Chromagraph paintings, which illustrated the spiritual resonances of aural energies and colours. Annie Besant & Charles Leadbeater had first published vibrant diagrams of these aural energies in 'Key to the meaning of colours' in 1901 and developed the notion of the colours seen in the human aura as indicative of the bearer's character and mental state.

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875. Her writings on Theosophy merged several branches of metaphysical thought: from a mixture of

Western occult traditions to 19th-century American spiritualism and Eastern religions, especially Hinduism and Buddhism. Besant and Leadbeater belonged to the second generation of Theosophists of the London branch and penned the influential and lavishly illustrated book 'Thought-forms' together in 1902. 'Thought-forms' expanded on the visualisations of thoughts, experiences, emotions and music. Leadbeater later also produced an illustrated study on auras. In Germany, the architect Rudolf Steiner belonged to the Theosophical Society before he fell out with Besant and founded his own Anthroposophical Society. From Vasily Kandinsky to Piet Mondrian, many early proponents of abstract art expressed interest in the theosophist concepts of universal harmony, which underlie the apparent chaos of the natural world. Kandinsky's essay 'On the Spiritual in Art' referenced many of these theosophist ideas. Gradually he developed a justification for abstract art as a representation of spiritual reality reached through inner vision.

Kandinsky's elaborations on synaesthesia, a condition that causes a blending of senses and links colours to letters, numbers, or sounds, played an essential role in SERGE CHARCOUNE's artistic practice. His undulating abstract paintings are believed to stem from this sensory condition. LEON ZACK's paintings, on the other hand, always allude to a particularly Russian sensitivity in tone, which is almost mystical.

London was also home to the Swedenborg Society, which was established in 1810 and rooted in the teachings and writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, an 18th-century Swedish scientist turned visionary cosmologist who believed he was a conduit for spirits and angels. Swedenborg was courted by the King and Queen of Sweden and suggested reforming religion in his 'heavenly doctrine' Arcana Coelestia in 1749. The Russian émigré Cubist painter LEOPOLD SURVAGE, who became heavily influenced by the teachings of Swedenborg, often featured particular references (man, sea, building, flower, window, curtain, bird) to Swedenborg in his abstract compositions.

Meanwhile, France also became a favourable breeding ground for occultism and esoteric beliefs following the French Revolution. At the same time, the Catholic faith also experienced a somewhat revived academic interest at the turn of the previous century. Amongst these occult tendencies was Rosicrucianism, an esoteric variant of the Catholic faith, which was promulgated by Max Heindel and his essay 'The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception' or 'Mystic Christianity'. It fused medieval legends around Christian Rosencreutz with Catholic doctrines and called for a reformation of humanity through a reconnection with the spiritual realm. This is not to be confused with the Salons de la Rose + Croix, an esoteric-leaning art salon with six exhibitions, frequented by many Symbolist painters but rejected Heindel's belief system.

MARIE RAYMOND was a famous follower of Heindel's Rosicrucianism. She was well versed in esoteric literature and often shared respective books and essays with her son Yves Klein. Raymond intended her abstract compositions, full of metaphysical iconographies, as windows to the spiritual world and hoped they would help the viewer transcending the material world. She was also an early yoga practitioner, having been introduced to Eastern spirituality and meditation and breathing techniques by her sister Rose's doctor husband.

SILVANO BOZZOLINI, a member of Groupe Espace, also shared an interest in Eastern tendencies. Although his abstract geometric compositions are firmly Western, he integrates hidden references to Eastern iconographies like the 'om' sign in his works. Across various

Indian religions, 'om' is a spiritual sound and sacred symbol, signifying the essence of ultimate reality or consciousness. In Hinduism, for example, it is one of the most spiritual symbols and often found at the beginning and the end of chapters of spiritual texts.

This brings us to ALFRED RETH, who famously followed Vedic Manasara scriptures. Famous for rejecting the early and rational Cubism, he followed the principles of geometry as laid out in the spiritual scriptures. Also known as 'sacred geometry', these scriptures ascribe sacred meanings to geometric shapes and proportions. Reth developed this further by including earthy materials like sand and natural colours in his works.

Like RETH, sculptor EMILE GILLIOLI was also interested in materiality, and his golden shiny bronze 'Paquier' is a focal point of HFA's exhibition. While GILLIOLI was not necessarily interested in occult or esotericism, he nevertheless sought inspiration from spiritual sources. The object of his desire was a curious Roman chapel dating from the 12th century in the town of Paquier at the foot of the alps. He was charmed by the building and would spend many hours contemplating its irregular lines and asymmetrical forms. He understood sculpture as a fusion of architecture and art, and the choice of material was paramount in determining the form of the object. He worked with a wide range of materials, including granite, marble, crystal, onyx, agate and lapis lazuli – although here, he used bronze, and referred to the sculpture as channelling the infinite.

Meanwhile, painter MARCEL POUGET found spiritual transcendence in the artmaking process. While critics identified 'hallucinatory visions' in his works, he referenced Arthur Rimbaud in his first abstract painting, 'Le Bateau Ivre', to style himself as a prophet. Indeed, his style was both romantic and desperate, often leaning towards a mystical attitude to corroborate his visions of the world in his works. Pouget belonged to the CoBrA movement, which united artists from Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam. Another member of CoBrA was GEORGES COLLIGNON, whose fascination with the surreal subconscious was translated into a more surrealist-leaning abstraction. He would later develop the abstract-mysticist arm of the CoBrA movement, through which he found international acclaim.

Returning to the beginning and Rosalind Krauss voicing embarrassment at the mere thought of 'spiritual' and 'art' in the same sentence: these ten artistic positions in our current exhibition assert that the spiritual vein was very much alive in abstraction, but also in painting and sculpture in general, and has continued to prosper throughout the 20th century. In fact, many post-war abstract artists often resorted to spiritual or philosophical language in their writings – from artistic statements, to essays or diary entries – and often used phrases like 'the absolute' and 'the absolute truth', 'universal mystery' or 'the inner self' in their writings. As to the question of how Krauss's embarrassment could even solidify or manifest, we might look to the writings of Susan Sontag: she explored in her essay 'The Aesthetics of Silence' (1969) that silence mediated the role of art as a form of spirituality in an increasingly secular culture.

[Published on the occasion of HFA's exhibition "Spirituality & Abstraction" 2021]

Reading List:

Annie Besant & Charles Leadbeater - "Thought Forms" 1901

Charles Leadbeater – “Man Visible & Invisible” 1902

Rudolf Steiner “Theosophy: An Introduction to the Spiritual Processes in Human Life and the Cosmos” 1904

Max Heindel - "The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception" 1909

Kandinsky – “On The Spiritual In Art” 1910

Beatrice Irwin “New Science of Color” 1916

Gaston Bachelard - "Air and Dreams" 1943 (L'air et les songes)

Roland Barthes – “Mythologies” 1957

Susan Sontag – “Styles of Radical Will - The Aesthetics of Silence” 1969

Bede Gallery – “Art of the Invisible” 1977

LA Museum of Art – “The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985” 1986

Umberto Eco – “How to Travel with a Salmon & Other Essays” 1998

Suzi Gablik - "The Reenchantment of Art" 1991