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"Sacred Art" and the "Silk Roads' Traditions": a Search for Common Grounds

Introduction

This presentation is divided into three main sections. In the first part, I will attempt to introduce and define the term "Eastern" as an identity associated with man's inner dimension. The second part is devoted to the concept of "sacred" in general, and its manifestation in the realm of art in particular. In the last part I will be sharing with the audience accounts of the transformation that my art underwent as a result of my long encounter with the artistic traditions of the Silk Roads, and the family of paintings that were produced in alignment with the sacred arts of the East. This section will be supported by a slide presentation during which time I will try to discuss and analyze the process of formation of the said art pieces.

Eastern Identity

Somehow and for some reason the terms "spiritual", "sacred" and even "traditional" are generally associated with "The East". This may be due to the fact that Eastern cultures— as a general statement—are more ancient, and that most prominent religious traditions of the world were born in the East¹. It is no wonder, therefore, that most art production that are designated as "spiritual", "sacred" & "traditional" have their strong connection with the ground on which they sprouted from and rooted into -the East.

However, the term "Eastern" carries in itself a certain degree of ambiguity, for it does not clearly refer to a single quality or attribute, nor does it identify itself with a specifically defined geographical—or even cultural—boundary.

¹ The 50 volume set of The "Sacred Books of the East" by Max Muller is a good testimony to this claim.



Instead the word encompasses a number of rich cultural, spiritual and religious orders that have contributed to the world civilization in the most diverse and colorful manner for a very long period of history of mankind, namely Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. (*I think I owe an explanation on why these three faiths were chosen as representatives of "Eastern art": Actually, in the world of arts, some traditions constitute the main body from which subordinate branches spring. Jain art, for example, may be classified under **Buddhist** art, and Sikh art is very minor as compared to the other **religious arts** of India. The art production under Jewish faith too has been quite limited, and its spread is in no way comparable to the other **Semitic**—i.e. Christian and Islamic—faiths. Christian art, on the other hand, despite its richness and widespread acceptance, does not categorically fall under "Eastern art" due to its rather Western characteristics: The Greek and Roman civilization—to whom most of the western cultures owe their identity—played an outstanding role in the formation of Christian art; besides, the development of this art took place by and large in the Western land and among Western cultures*). It is evident that the "Eastern"—especially when, it comes to the realm of "Art", "Philosophy", "Religion" and such abstract subjects that constitute one's cosmology & worldview—does not merely refer to geographical location of the lands that happen to be located on the Eastern hemisphere. It rather introduces an inner quality, something beyond a conventional division that is fabricated to serve our socio-political needs in the temporal world.

Having lived in both Western and Eastern countries, I was in constant touch with the subject, and my mind was occupied with excitement at the process of discovering the truth about this vague yet very interesting quality. This thirst and urge was remotivated and further strengthened with my inspiring encounter with Eastern world. In the process of investigating the "Eastern quality" I found "art" most appealing: I earnestly believe that art is the most sincere medium through which the qualities of a culture may be portrayed. This is especially true in the "Eastern



arts” where “the virtue and defect of any work is the virtue and defect of the race in that age”². Also as an artist I could relate to the subject emphatically and emotionally, and as a scholar of history and philosophy of art, I understood the language of artistic expression and could relate to it at an intellectual level.

Sacred Art, the Form and the Formless

I feel very fortunate for having had the opportunity to be exposed to the rich ancient Eastern cultures of the Silk Roads, through my many traveling experiences and from my living for over a decade among their people. This exposure led to a fascination for their art right from the beginning (in 1985 when my first long term cultural assignment to India began). This fascination was at first developed as a result of being exposed to the diversity of the art works, their expressive and aesthetic quality. The presence of the arts in almost every aspect of their life was truly amazing. Beyond this colorful multiplicity, however, in a deeper level of my consciousness, I felt the presence of a unifying force; something silent and invisible yet original and prominent that never failed to reveal the presence of its essential quality. Although the current of this mysterious force flew throughout the body of the traditional arts, I felt its most powerful presence, in and around the kinds of arts that are usually addressed as “sacred”. Here we need to know that the term “sacred art” does not merely mean “religious art”. A short clarification in this regard may count useful: The term “religious art” may be applied to any form of art related to the manifested body of religion, be it a painted depiction of an event in the history of religion, or a visual description of a religious subject; this subject may be of an earthly nature, like a painting of a simple religious ceremony, or it may have emanated from the supernatural and metaphysical realm referred to in the holy scriptures, like scenes of creation, paradise, the day of judgment etc. A portrait of a saint hung in church, objects of ritual importance such as robes, bells, swords and the like, and certain motifs as cross and crescent too fall under “religious art”.

The “sacred arts” however—though categorized as a branch of “religious arts”—supposedly possess a distinct quality that is not necessarily present in other forms of religious arts: the “sacredness”. Sacredness is a

² Q Coomaraswamy, A, K. Introduction to Indian Art, India, 1969



quality that transcends the material domain of religion and associates itself with divine. It's function is not of descriptive nature but of a transforming one. It is a form by which the worshipper is exposed to formless; a gateway on the confluence of heaven and earth through which the divinity manifests. This manifestation is realized only by the worshipper who is now elevated through meditations, contemplation, and concentration to a state of timelessness where he would experience the presence of divinity and become united with it. So "sacred art", in any form of it, supposedly lead us to a state beyond multiplicity, and introduce to us that original single formless source from which the diverse forms emanate, and the ultimate destination in which all forms eventually rest. The process of manifestation of the "unmanifest" or the form of the "formless" does not and cannot take place at the level of image alone. Rather the formless unveils its presence in a concealed manner, like an invisible thread that connects, relates and unifies a wide range of artistic expressions without being fully exposed.

In Search for Common Ground

I shall admit here that the intellectualization of this concept (by intellectualization I mean the process of rationalizing, organizing and verbalizing a state of being, to make it possible to be presented in an intellectual level) was a difficult task. I do not know how successful I have been in presenting such a fluid substance by using a concrete form of words. The fact is that the original process of such an experience did not take place at an intellectual level. I did not even think about the subject until the idea unveiled itself through a series of paintings that I produced in a 3-year stretch. Until then the concept was apparently being developed in my subconscious mind finding gradual expression in my art. It was only after this stage that I realized the fundamental transformation in me. The paintings started describing to me about my inner unintentional urge to search for a common ground for all sacred arts. My perception of time, space, identity, spirituality, eternity and destiny was now in a transformed stage, and my art was a witness to that. This new developed style comprises a family of paintings which share the term "Mandala" as part of their title. "Mandala" is a Sanskrit term meaning "cosmogram", a schematized representation of cosmos; it is a visual cosmology. In Jungian psychology "Mandala" is a symbol representing the effort to unify



the self. In these paintings one can trace the elements, compositions and a number of other qualities from Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic artistic traditions, unified and merged harmoniously.

I consider them children of the Silk Roads, as they are the result of an auspicious transformation that my art and I underwent via my long encounter and deep exposure to the rich artistic tradition of this historical route. Silk Roads had served humankind in a period of its long history, as routes of dialogue, culture & commerce. They contributed to the education of the nations by flourishing their culture and elevating their knowledge about one another. Through this route enlightened people traveled and spread seeds of “Spirituality” & “Wisdom”, ingredients essential for a true growth, individual or communal.

It is so unfortunate that the glory of the Silk Roads and the wisdom it once carried is fading: Today, in the age of science, technology, information and communication, man seems more lost than ever. He is disoriented and restless. Having access to the ever-growing bulk of data, sophisticated technology, new inventions and discoveries, and the power to use them, man has failed to bring to the world peace and harmony. Humanity is suffering because under the pressure of diversity it has lost that essential sense of unity. This failure is due to the lack of “Wisdom”—that sacred unifying factor that resides beyond the realm of “information & technology”. Similar problem has disturbed the world of religion as well. Though religious institutions are becoming more prominent in their outward appearances and ritual demonstrations, a revival in their innermost aspect, “Spirituality” appears to be wanting. For it is only through the grasp of this divine unifying thread, that people can connect and relate despite their natural and social differences.

We are in the middle of a true crisis, where *Wisdom* is taken over by the power of information; and *Spirituality* has gone weak under the pressure of shallow religious thinking. The remedy and cure for this universal curse is obviously beyond the reach and ability of the governments. This revival can only begin from and within individuals, spread to small communities, shared in NGOs and presented in organizations with no political agenda such as UNESCO.

I would like to use the opportunity here to present my sincerest thanks to Prof. Hirayama for initiating and supporting the Silk Roads project for a decade, and to UNESCO directors and staff for handling it so efficiently. I



am honored and feel privileged to be a part of this noble endeavor. Finally I thank God for putting me in this path, bestowing upon me the thrust to learn, to gain insight and inject the urge to continue, and the boon of enjoyment in the process. I pray for enlightenment, joy and tranquility, peace and prosperity for all.

