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## Thoughts on Reading Frithjof Schuon's Writings on Art

We live in a time of utmost confusion in which the sense of what is qualitatively essential to life is continuously obscured by an unrestrained quantity, both of ideas and of products. As a result what is often conceived as a means to recover that sense of what is essential only serves as a contribution to further confusion. Given that this confusion is both engendered by and in turn engenders fresh errors, there is an exemplary case for proposing that only arguments based directly on universal truths are adequate to throw light on our unprecedented situation. At the end of a civilization, and by way of recompense for the relative depletion of grace from the cosmic setting, there is both a need and an obligation to overcome the “metaphysical depreciation” incurred by the passage of time by essential summary—a recall to both order and orientation. Only universal truths can satisfy the needs of that condition that is the mental turmoil and spiritual demoralization of modern man. Indeed, one might ask whether the necessity for such a metaphysical perspective is bound to give rise to the articulation of the required truths. The writings of Frithjof Schuon have this providential function.

Any reader, coming across Schuon's writings for the first time, might find themselves nonplussed by the absence in them of what is usually regarded as historical context. For the most part we are accustomed to studying art as a repository of “exhibits” and the part these play in the evolution of cultural history. What is frequently overlooked is that this approach to art surrenders both culture and history to a purely horizontal progression that obscures the value of art. Values are intrinsic to a vertical dimension that links subjective experience of outward forms to the “absolute” objectivity of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness, and all that is inherent in them with respect to the human vocation. Schuon's

discussion of art takes all its bearings from this vertical dimension, centered as it is on the integral nature of man's deiformity.

If we were to ask what might be a possible precedent for these writings,<sup>1</sup> we could, with appropriate reservations, point to the example of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy. Certainly Coomaraswamy was the first scholar to propound universal criteria of art based on the study of its conceptions and practices in both East and West. His scholarly brilliance was put to the study of the metaphysical, doctrinal, and practical evidence for the conclusions he arrived at. The prodigious range of his scholarly grasp and the depth of his penetration into the meaning of the texts and works of art he studied, was presented by him as the "theoretic" evidence of a truth one might choose to deviate from but which one could not confute, being as it is part of a body of wisdom that has a "self-authenticating intelligibility". This observation is not meant to illustrate anything other than that in Coomaraswamy's writings there is less the sense of a being living at the heart of the doctrines he expounded and more the sense of a mind of almost superhuman concentration and concision whose whole effort is to demonstrate truth by means of what, at its most extreme, one might call a sort of semantic calculus.

With Schuon, on the other hand, in an exposition that makes use of a certain "poetic" coloring and flexibility, the author persuades us that he is a witness to truths whose very being he shares. This is not to infer the superiority of one approach over the other, but to accentuate the unique characteristic of Schuon's elucidation of the metaphysics of art, one that is otherwise without precedent in its power to illuminate the spiritual, psychological, and productive significance of art in all its applications. Schuon's observations, one might add, are made all the more radical and, at times, astringent by the nature of the errors they are meant to challenge.

<sup>1</sup> A Bibliography of these can be found in Frithjof Schuon, *Art from the Sacred to the Profane: East and West*, edited by Catherine Schuon (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2007), which is an anthology of selected passages assembled from the writings in question.



As has already been hinted, the reader will quickly go astray here if it is not recognized that, in common with the whole of his writings, the necessary sense of valuation and judgment in his discussion of art is established on the fundamental distinction between the Absolute and the relative—the necessary being of the Supreme Principle that, sufficient unto itself “cannot not be” and which, through its transcendent and immanent modes, reverberates through the relative cosmic substance in order to affirm its unicity in each and every formal expression. This macrocosmic “operation” is recapitulated in the human microcosm in virtue of the totality and objectivity of intelligence.

This totality of intelligence permits man to stand apart, mentally and creatively, from the phenomenal flow that is both his inner and outer experience. Thus he is able to situate himself, according to substantial values, within a hierarchy of knowledge, the order of which is symbolic of the unity of all things in their first principle. This explains a noticeable characteristic of Schuon’s exposition in which whatever the point at issue, whatever the theme requiring explication, the explication itself has an eye to all levels of being, so that art is here always placed within the context of a sapiential knowledge rather than accorded a quasi-absolute and therefore idolatrous status of itself. These writings never grant an invalid “absolute” value to contingent modes of thought and judgment.

This being the case one cannot turn to these texts for the sort of analysis and assessment that more commonly passes for the study of art and aesthetics—the elaboration of theories and valuations in which no account is taken of the relativities of human thought and action in the light of the ultimate principle of life. In Schuon’s writings we have a series of fundamental observations, not systematically propounded, but assuredly essentially comprehensive, that with the utmost transparency reveal the inter-relationship uniting intelligence, spirituality, nature, the senses, creativity, work, skill, and human destiny as they are prefigured in man as he is created in the Divine Image. In virtue of this transparency, Schuon’s thesis, adducing some reflection of the Divine in the least act of thinking and making properly performed, sustains

a cognitive conviction that transcends the usual categories of art theorists and historians.

In so far as these writings are a recall to the order of mental orthodoxy they are a reminder of the central importance of Beauty as the dynamic principle at the heart of aesthetic experience—for the latter is merely an animal function if it is not transfigured by a contemplative dynamic that moves the soul away from the diversity and dissipation that is worldliness as such.

In so far as these writings are a corrective of orientation of spiritual volition they are a reminder of the symbolic function of nature as a sanctuary that nurtures those resonances of affinity that exist between God's creation and the theomorphic principle of human creation. These writings never for a moment lose sight of the fact that the order and orientation provided by art (traditionally, the principle of manifestation of forms in perfect work) in all its manifold applications and detail has an intimate bearing on every stage of the journey of the human soul towards its destiny. Here, the overarching requirements needed for the realization of that last end are the adjuvant function of art towards "what alone matters as regards our latter end . . . that one should have a qualitative, and symbolically adequate, notion of cosmic causality in as much as it regulates our posthumous destinies".

If humanism amounts to the process whereby the idea that man is created in the Divine Image is gradually eroded, then modernism is the process whereby man's theomorphic nature is finally eradicated. Once this has been achieved, as the last century bears witness, only questions of technique remain—hence the machine; hence the whole industrial milieu; hence man's alienation from nature and the modern world as we know it. This same world is one in which it is willfully forgotten that the works of man can only possess value and meaning on the basis that there are realities

of the Spirit beyond the mere construing of matter and that man has realizable affinities with those realities.

Modern art, based as it is on the elevation of spontaneity and innovation as “absolute” value, forgets that man only has need for what is truly useful, a fact that presupposes a certain limit of equilibrium in the production and arrangement of the arts of life. Beyond that the exponential growth of fabricated things, whether as mental theories, works of art, or material products, becomes counter-productive. For this natural law of balance between inner and outer, once breached, becomes disastrous as the body of objective experience becomes subjectively unsupported. Schuon, by implication, points to the parallel between this development in modern art and its analogous development in the modern material sciences, a development that is irreconcilable “with the ends of human intelligence” and which is for that reason spiritually unsustainable.

Once the theomorphic “pattern” is removed from the human microcosm then the human state as such is reduced exclusively to the capacity of its insufficiencies so that art, instead of taking the measure of what man ought to become, runs the risk (a risk it is seldom, in practice, unable to avoid) of being the measure of his diminishment. Such aberrations of contemporary art as “reflect the human condition” (as they are so frequently characterized) are noticeable for their reductive criteria in which there is no adequate or operative sense of objectivity and subjectivity—hence no acknowledgment that intelligence demands some means of weighing the extent to which truth is in all circumstances imposed upon man in virtue of the very objectivity of his total intelligence.

The *raison d'être* of the human state, as Schuon constantly reminds us, and all the paradoxes that flow from it, can be traced back to the fact of man being created in the image of God. Which is why art that has only a human character (Schuon allows for the “sensible consolations” afforded by such an art “with a view to an equilibrium conducive to the spiritual life, rather in the manner of the flowers and birds in a garden”), can have an air of contrivance and superfluity that traps man in the confines of what he has failed to become. Such art, naturalism, and worse, its perversions, lacks that essential dimension which would lend it both an inte-

gral dignity and a formal transparency in the face of a Truth that is always more than man can embody merely by the sum of his thoughts and actions. In the final analysis art must have a spiritual content because the spiritual is man's true vocation.

The relationship between God and man can be understood in this analogous sense: ocular vision proves the existence of a world outside the human subject, but the objectivity of that world cannot be known outside the "subjective" mode of the intelligence. Subject and object must therefore partake of the same cognitive reality. The presence of the intellect in man proves the existence of God as an "other", both beyond and within the interiority of consciousness, for man cannot be at one and the same time both the author and comprehender of cognitive reality. God is both that transcendent and immanent reality to which our being and knowing are called. Just as there is no division of consciousness between the observed and the observer in the act of vision, so there is no essential division of intellect between man and God in the direct intuition of being. Hence Schuon's characterization of intelligence as "total" and "objective".

The importance of artistic form is due to the fact that Beauty is the cognitive agent that, as it were, permeates both cosmic illusion (*māyā*) and human perception (ugliness is always a deviation from the real) in order to demonstrate the latter's sufficient and direct affinity with the Absolute without recourse to reflexive thought, according to the principle that like is known by like. Were this not the case then the beauties of nature would be entirely invalid as symbols of support to intellection—as if God had made the world to be of diverse effects that in no way reflect their causes in an ultimate principle of unity. In which case the forms of nature (*natura naturata*) would be models of total deception, instead of, as is the case, the substratum of an illusion that exhibits the structure or play of cosmic forces. If external manifestation were to have no relation to the truth of an internal essence then all cognitive action would be an arbitrary exercise wedded to invincible error—a process in which pleasure and truth could

*Thoughts on Reading Frithjof Schuon's Writings on Art*

have no effective correspondence. In which case, why art at all, seeing that it is the purpose of art to in some sense convey the truth of Beauty? “The elements of beauty, be they visual or auditive, static or dynamic, are not only pleasant, they are above all true and their pleasantness comes from their truth; this is the most obvious, and yet the least understood truth of aesthetics”—which explains why “the abolition of beauty . . . means the end of the intelligibility of the world”.

*Homo faber* is nothing if not a creature for whom the act of cognition of necessity seeks the true beyond objects of sensation and whose perceptions seek the being beyond appearances; consequently “The full understanding of beauty demands virtue and is identifiable with it. . . . There is a *distinguo* to make, in sensing the beautiful, between aesthetic sensation and the corresponding beauty of soul.”

beauty → contemplation → recollection  
beauty → aesthesis → dissipation

Beauty and cognition are fused (but not confused) in an intimacy that is one with our human vocation for “in beauty man ‘realizes’, passively in his perceptions and externally in his productions of it, that which he himself should ‘be’ after an active or inward fashion”.

Schuon points to the paradox of art: that man, who is after all a part of the creation, must assume the role of creator. Thus, in a sense, he must act as if he were God but in the knowledge that he cannot operate as *homo faber* outside the order of contingent things. Or at least he cannot do so without invoking the supra-human principle that is within him and by the measure of which he is granted the gift of creation by way of compensation for his fallen condition. Apart from invoking his innermost substance his only other choice, in so far as he may appeal to what is, in a sense, “beyond” him, is to invoke the infra-human—the sub-human—precisely that which plunges him into the insufficiency of the human state as such. There is no other choice.

A related paradox: *homo faber* cannot, like God, create from *nothing*. The fact that he must create from that which is already created means that strictly speaking he re-creates. To “create” from what is already created brings him up against the defining limits of subjectivity and objectivity—inner and outer worlds. Is the substance of art to be merely a solipsist agenda or an untransfigured naturalism? In the former case how can any artist, as subject, be more worthy of consideration than any other subject? In the latter case how can any artist’s perceptions and their expressive manifestation be more “valid” than those of any other artist, seeing that the absolute objectivity of human perception, though it can be embodied, cannot be proven? The more the modernist agenda of art closes upon the *reductio ad absurdum* of its own activity, so it comes to embody the extremes of this relativist dilemma, to the point where it becomes impossible to distinguish art from non-art.

In either case—that of solipsism and that of naturalism—a limit is imposed upon works of art such as to undermine any justification for their being called into existence for the sake of a human good. The ultimate justification of such a good is that it opens on to a plenitude that goes beyond, in the case of a solipsist art, the arbitrary projections of subjectivity, and in the case of naturalism, the veil of externality that clothes appearances. For what other purpose would man want an art other than to take him beyond the limited disclosures of his own subjectivity on the one hand and external appearances on the other?

The specifically human task of the artist is to be a legitimate translator of works, first mentally conceived and then realized outwardly according to the spiritual content of his intelligence and not according to the passional energies of his soul. If art is essential it is because it is the vehicle of beauty and beauty—as Schuon time and again insists—is identified with Being and virtue. If modern man is content to consider Beauty as an optional attribute of sensation, while regarding the practical as a necessity of the material order, that is because he builds a division within himself—he divides the spiritual from the material, the essential from the inessential among the means to life because he will not be persuaded of the law by which no means can ever serve an end



*Thoughts on Reading Frithjof Schuon's Writings on Art*

that is not already presupposed in those means—the spiritual *in* the material.

A legitimate art is one that recognizes that the world is beauty and that all human actions, making and doing, from the most humble task discharged with right mindfulness, to the building of cathedrals, must in some measure return us to the beauty from whence we have come.

The Absolute in its immanent and transcendent modes in relation to normal art: the crafts attempt to seize upon the immanent essence of substance; the major arts (i.e. architecture) seek to embody the conception of a transcendent principle. The one penetrates to the “secret” of what comes commonly to hand; the other soars to the height of what has been revealed. No purpose is served by insisting that these are exclusive categories.