

On Visionary Art: A Traditional Critique

By Hieromonk Silouan

But the natural man¹ does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

(I Cor. 2:14)

‘Spirituality’ has become a rather fashionable catch-word, recently appropriated by all manner of people, many of whom are disillusioned with the sterile paradigms of the mechanistic, hyper-rationalistic, materialistic and utilitarian worldview which characterizes modernity but who are also hostile to traditional religious forms which might provide the necessary antidote.

(Harry Oldmeadow)²

Introduction

In spite of the general tendency today in the contemporary art world to dismiss anything having to do with the Sacred, in favor of materialist humanism, secularism and relativism, some seek refuge from this malaise in what they perceive to be the spiritual in art. Going against the grain, they attempt to make of their art something more fulfilling, redemptive, transformative—spiritually *significant*. Nevertheless, this also has its dangers, for “the spiritual in art” is a concept as ambiguous as art itself, redolent with a kind of sentimentality that betrays its romantic subjectivism. This, I’m afraid, is something which is not solely relegated to secular art, such as can be seen in the Visionary Art movement (which

¹ Or “soulish” man, in Greek *psikikos*.

² Harry Oldmeadow, “Notes on ‘Spirituality’,” *Vincit Omnia Veritas: Collected Essays*, ed. Renaud Fabbri & Timothy Scott, ReligioPerennis, 2010, p. 155.

some like to call a “sacred art”), but can also be seen in the current revival of the Eastern Orthodox icon. For many the icon has become just another exotic option in the world of alternative spirituality. As with Visionary Art, it is pursued as a way of partaking of “spirituality” without the burden of being religious. Here we will mainly examine Visionary Art in light of Eastern Orthodox spirituality. This will help to delineate the context and currents which the icon painting workshop phenomenon inevitably faces.

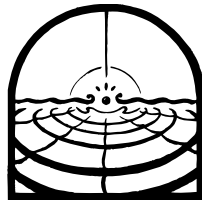
Antecedents

The pursuit of a spiritually centered art is not a unique contemporary symptom. With the collapse of the theocentric medieval civilization and the onset of secular humanism following the Renaissance, the symptom has come and gone, as unexpected bouts of fever, for more than five centuries. It can be said that Romanticism’s resistance towards the rationalism and positivism of the Enlightenment is one of the strongest bouts of fever clearly noticeable. This would be followed later on in the idealist currents of 19th century Symbolism. In the avant-garde of the early 20th century it would become theoretically encapsulated in 1910 by Wassily Kandinsky in his most popular treatise, *On the Spiritual in Art*. Therein he promulgated with fervor the advancement of a new abstract art that would help bring about the spiritual revitalization of society. Then, Surrealism comes along experimenting with “psychic automatism” as a method of peering into and uncovering the mysterious subconscious. These currents can also be seen as converging once again in some versions of Abstract Expressionism. But this only scratches the surface and the symptom continues.

In one way or another all of these movements wanted something more than meets the eye. Naturalism, empiricism in art, the surface of appearances was not enough. Moreover, it was felt by a large sector of the avant-garde that the scientific paradigm and its accompanying industrialism had brought with their onslaught disarray, injustice, disillusionment, and spiritual sterility to civilization.³ So they immersed themselves in the subjective and mystical, sought the otherworldly and ideal, the Absolute. To arrive at this new way of looking at the world, a

³ For an overview of this side of 20th century art see, Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth century Art*, Shambhala, Boston, MA, 1989.

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