

**IN MEMORIAM: KEITH CRITCHLOW**  
**(March 16, 1933 – April 8, 2020)**



**‘A Geometer and Contemporary Pythagoras’**

Keith Critchlow’s publications include *Order in Space* (1969), *Islamic Patterns* (1976), *Time Stands Still* (1979), *The Hidden Geometry of Flowers* (2011) and *Golden Meaning* (2014).

In 1981 Keith Critchlow was, along with Brian Keeble, Kathleen Raine and Phillip Sherrard, a founder of the review *Temenos*, out of which grew the Temenos Academy, established in 1991. He was President, and later President Emeritus, of the Temenos Academy; he was also a Fellow, served for a time on its Academic Board and its Council. All of those involved in Temenos looked up to him as a source of inspiration.

Professor Critchlow founded the Visual Islamic Arts Studio with Paul Marchant in 1984 at the Royal College of Art, which developed into the Visual Islamic and Traditional Arts (VITA) department; it later moved to The Prince of Wales’s Institute of Architecture, with Keith as Professor and Head of Research, and is now incorporated into The Prince’s Foundation School of Traditional Arts, in Shoreditch, London. He was awarded a Higher Doctorate by the Royal College of Art in 1991.

Critchlow was the architect of the Krishnamurti Centre, Brockwood Park, Hampshire, and the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Medical Sciences in Puttaparthi, India, a hospital that is free to all inmates. Another important project was the charity KAIROS, which organised visits to sacred sites such as Chartres Cathedral and published a newsletter, full of Critchlow’s ideas and research, and worksheets of practical geometry.

# A Personal Tribute by a Former Student

By Emma Clark

‘Beauty is the Splendour of the True’

*(attributed to Plato and one of the main guiding principles of Professor Critchlow's teaching)*

It was an unforgettable experience to attend one of Keith's lectures. He walked energetically up and down the stage pointing a long stick at his two screens (old-fashioned slides in carousels with projectors)<sup>1</sup> declaring: ‘First there was One’ - and point to a dot in the centre of a blank slide, and then moving to the next slide, a line between two dots, ‘then there were Two.’<sup>2</sup> Keith would continue at feverish speed with a breath-taking array of slides of geometry, art and architecture drawn from the sacred traditions of the world, from a mosque in Isphahan (Shaykh Lutfallah was one of his favourites) to a Central Asian yurt to a Native American Indian tipi. In today's language it might be said that he was very ‘left-field’<sup>3</sup> since there was never anything so prosaic as a straightforward explanation, just electrifying and inspiring energy which we students would be totally intoxicated by, knowing intuitively that there was profound meaning here, but not necessarily having much clue what it was!

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<sup>1</sup> Keith never wrote notes for his lectures since he was guided completely by his images on the screen which he would spend much time preparing and slotting into the carousels.

<sup>2</sup> Only much later did I begin to understand that the point or dot was the Uncreated, the Beyond-form, the One, while the line proceeding from it was the beginning of creation and the manifest, corporeal world.

<sup>3</sup> An apt description since Keith was a gifted footballer in his youth, his one good eye making him a brilliant goal-keeper as well as a crack shot in the army when he did his national service!

This was Keith's particular quality of teaching – giving clues, opening doors, lifting the corner of a veil – so that for a moment you were transported to a completely new way of seeing, not only art but life itself and the universe as a whole. Each time you heard him, either in a lecture, or informal talk or a tutorial, the corner of that veil would be lifted a little higher and for a little longer.

What was this new way of seeing, this new realm he gave us a glimpse of? Perhaps his lectures on Chartres Cathedral, for which he became well-known and drew huge audiences, gave the clearest answer. Beneath his exhilarating delivery there lay quiet, knowledgeable authority, backed up by detailed architectural and geometric analysis. He demonstrated that Chartres cathedral was not only a beautiful, medieval building with exquisite stained glass and sculpture but was in fact a picture of the cosmos, the Divine manifestation itself. This was the realm that he introduced us to, most of us for the very first time, and never before in such an exciting and inspiring way. He explained that not only could the Divine take on the form of flesh and blood as in the Saviour, Jesus Christ, but also It could take the form of stone and glass. Chartres was created in honour of the Virgin Mary as her throne upon earth, an earthly palace for the Queen of Heaven. To quote Keith himself from the film<sup>4</sup>: 'We're given buildings on earth to experience heaven... for upliftment, for our self-discovery, our experience of Unity, anything that brings us closer to completeness and re-discovery of our own relationship to God.'

Thus, Keith showed his students that what might be called 'true art' is art in the service of Heaven. This kind of art is a symbolic representation of the Divine Archetype: it leads us back from corporeal form to the inward essence.<sup>5</sup> Keith was a true universalist, a long-time believer in the *Sophia Perennis*, knowing profoundly that all art from whichever tradition, radiated from the same transcendent and unifying source, placing '... us in the presence of timeless Being, that Being which sustains and gives reality to our source and our destiny.'<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> His film *Chartres Cathedral: A Sacred Geometry*, is a beautiful piece of work and highly recommended. May be available via the Temenos Academy: <https://www.temenosacademy.org/>

<sup>5</sup> The criteria for 'true art' is a whole other discussion. Readers are directed towards Frithjof Schuon's *Art from the Sacred to the Profane*, edited by his widow, Catherine Schuon and with a Foreword by Keith Critchlow, World Wisdom 2007.

<sup>6</sup> From the Foreword of the book in note 5.

A favourite method of teaching was to look at the etymology of words – one of Keith’s many passions, knowing that through the study of a word’s true meaning a whole new understanding could be opened up.<sup>7</sup> Two words Keith asked his students to define were ‘quantity’ and ‘quality’.<sup>8</sup> It is abundantly clear today that the world is measured by quantity, by the economy, by money; but Keith showed us the innate quality of things: for example, the number 1 is not just 1 apple, it is the quality of ‘oneness’ of Divine Unity. The number 2 is not only 2 apples but is the quality of ‘twoness’, separation from Unity – duality and manifestation.<sup>9</sup> The number 3, represented by its geometric form, the triangle, is the quality ‘threeness’, indicating balance and harmony: proceeding, sustaining and returning to the Divine Unity.<sup>10</sup>

By such apparently simple analyses he would direct our gaze from the outward quantitative view to a more inward and qualitative understanding. Indeed, for some, Keith’s teaching would amount to nothing less than a *tawbab*,<sup>11</sup> a complete turning around from the worldly to the esoteric, from the outward to the inward, a transformative change of heart and mind.<sup>12</sup>

Thus did Keith shine a light on the Truth and set our souls free. He did not take us by the hand after this but rather gave us wings to continue our exploration on our own, to find the path that suited each of us, always with a kind word when asked for. He created an atmosphere of warmth, enquiry and openness in which you were given the confidence and trust to ask about, for example, the soul and the spirit or the eye of the heart.<sup>13</sup> You knew you would receive a serious answer instead of

the bored scepticism of the ‘normal’ teacher who dismissed questions

<sup>7</sup> A favourite word was ‘cosmetic’ which he reminded us was to make ‘cosmic-like’. Another was ‘wonder’ or ‘One-der’.

<sup>8</sup> Echoing René Guénon in *The Age of Quantity and The Signs of the Times* (Penguin edition 1972).

<sup>9</sup> Could also be referred to as the ‘ten thousand things’ of LaoTzu. Keith would often quote from the Dao de Ching, a favourite being ‘The Dao that can be named is not the eternal Dao’.

<sup>10</sup> Keith would often refer to a stool requiring a third leg for it to stand, also in a simple flower arrangement, two looks awkward and unbalanced but three is pleasing and harmonious.

<sup>11</sup> Arabic word meaning a transformative change, a total turning around or repentance.

<sup>12</sup> So many former students have written saying that he changed their lives completely.

<sup>13</sup> He would exhort all students to read *The Book of Certainty, the Sufi Doctrine of Faith, Vision and Gnosis* by Martin Lings (Islamic Texts Society, 1992).

on the meaning of art and existence by a cynical wave of the hand.<sup>14</sup>

Professor Critchlow is known above and beyond anything else for his practice and knowledge of Geometry, one of the seven liberal arts taught at Plato's Academy. He preferred to call it Geometry of the Sacred and in fact in the film made featuring him in 2018 (mentioned below in fn.19) he referred to himself as a 'pattern-seeker'. As he writes in *The Hidden Geometry of Flowers*: 'the very word "pattern" is the origin of re-cognition. Without pattern we cannot make sense of anything so pattern is the great re-minder.'<sup>15</sup>

Patterns were drawn with compasses and the image of Keith holding a pair of compasses in his hand and speaking about their symbolism (the still centre of the point on the paper is the celestial realm while the moving point of the pencil draws the terrestrial realm) is one that hundreds of students will have inscribed on their memory. Speaking about the integral relationship between the hand holding the compasses, linked to the heart and to the head, was a lesson in itself about the transformative power of practising the art of geometry. Professor Critchlow truly understood, like few others, and revealed through his highly gifted and accomplished drawing skills, that geometry was the visible language of metaphysics: its beauty and laws reveal the Divine Truth of the universe. Why else would the phrase '*Let no-one ignorant of geometry enter here*' be inscribed on the door of Plato's Academy as Keith often told us?

He emphasised over and over again that it was through the *practice* of this art, not the abstract theory, that the secrets of geometry reveal themselves: his students would never forget this.

One of Keith's many criticisms of modern education was with the way geometry was taught to school-children - entirely from the outer perspective with no glimpse of its true purpose or meaning. This was articulated by Keith's great guide, Socrates, as described through the works of Plato. Indeed, it could well be said that Plato was the most

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<sup>14</sup> Keith spent much of his early teaching life avoiding using a direct reference to the Divine, to God, because of the negative response. He knew well what A.K. Coomaraswamy meant when writing about traditional art in museums: 'Let us tell them [the 'educators'] the painful truth, that most of these works of art are about God, whom we never mention in polite society.' From his essay 'Why Exhibit Works of Art?' p. 20, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, Dover, 1956.

<sup>15</sup> Keith Critchlow, *The Hidden Geometry of Flowers*, p. 55, Floris Books, 2011

powerful influence on Keith's life and work as a whole.

Echoing Socrates, Keith would often say to his students that he was not teaching us anything that we did not already know - what he was doing was unlocking the door of our memory so that we could discover what was already there, the Platonic *anamnesis*.<sup>16</sup> Favourite words were *re-cognise* and *re-call*: we contain within us all we need to know and learning is simply a process of 'uncovering' this knowledge in order that we may *re-member* it. Indeed, the Quran states - something Keith mentioned many times - that the greatest of all acts is *dhikr*, the remembrance of God. Geometry is a tool or language to aid us in this remembrance.

Like all languages of the Sacred, geometry is symbolic - the word 'symbol' itself means to 'throw or bring together'<sup>17</sup> - so the study and practice of this language helps direct our earthly souls Heavenwards, bringing them closer to the divine archetypes. From his vast collection of slides, Keith would show us the dazzling variety of the magnificence of Nature and the hidden geometry to be discovered therein; this was not for us simply to wonder at in awe of the outward beauty but rather was to direct us to the hidden beauty within and to contemplate and re-member Beauty Itself, leading us to the True and the Good. (*'Beauty is the Splendour of the True.'*) A treasured phrase of his from Plato was that our inner eye is ten thousand times more precious than our outer eye.<sup>18</sup> It is true to say that Keith opened up our inner eye to direct us to the Divine Beauty that is the source and the sustainer of all beauty in the world.

The following quotation from Plato sums up Keith's attitude to education:

Education is not putting knowledge into a soul which doesn't have it, just as giving sight into eyes that are blind. The capacity of knowledge is present in everyone's soul. And just as an eye turns from darkness to light, the soul has to turn away from the world of becoming towards the Being Itself until it becomes capable to see the Brightest Reality, which we call Goodness. That's what Education should be, the art of orientation. Educators should devise the

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<sup>16</sup> The idea is that humans possess innate knowledge and that learning consists of rediscovering that knowledge from within

<sup>17</sup> Diabolic being the opposite

<sup>18</sup> "This organ [the Intellect or inner eye] is ten thousand times more precious than any eye, since this is the only organ that can see Truth" (Republic 527e).

simplest and most effective methods to turn the mind towards the Light. Not to implant sight in it, because it already has the capacity, but to correct its orientation, because it is now improperly aligned and is not facing the right way. (*Republic*, 518c - d)

Besides Plato, Keith had a huge variety of sources up his sleeve upon which he could call whenever the occasion arose, from the Quran, Pythagoras and Plotinus to the Dao de Ching, the Bhagavad Gita and Ibn 'Arabi as well as his best-loved, William Blake. It was Keith who asked for, and arranged, the singing of Blake's hymn *Jerusalem* at the beginning of the Temenos film 'The Art of the Ever-true'.<sup>19</sup>

Keith was a true visionary in a world in dire need of visions, and with his passing yet another lamp in our darkening world goes out. However, his light still radiates through his books, his architecture (most recently the beautiful geometric patterns he designed for the new Mosque in Cambridge, England) and his students, many of whom continue his legacy through their own work and teaching. Buckminster Fuller, the American engineer, architect and futurist, wrote:

Keith Critchlow has one of the century's rare conceptual minds....he lauds the work of others while himself pouring forth, in great modesty, whole vista-filling new realisations of nature's mathematical structuring.... He is one of the most inspiring scholar-teachers I have had the privilege to know.

Keith was a dear and loveable man - a true gentleman with old-fashioned chivalric ways; for example, if you (a female) were walking along the pavement with him he would always walk on the outer side next to the road in order 'to keep his sword arm free' to keep off possible marauders! Warm and charming to all, and generous with his knowledge to the end - imparting wisdom to the nurses and carers who helped look after him, he will be sorely missed by many.

He was a true family man and there is no doubt that he could not have achieved all that he did without Gail, his wife of 62 years (they

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<sup>19</sup> This film was made with Keith in 2018 to honour HRH the Prince of Wales' 70th birthday. It is available to download from the Temenos website: <https://www.temenosacademy.org/professor-keith-critchlow-2018/>. Maria Overy, daughter of Stephen and Genevieve Overy of the Temenos Academy, sang it beautifully.

met at Summerhill School in the 1950s), truly his 'strength and stay,' and with whom he had four children, twelve grandchildren and six great-grand-children.

*'All things are given by God and all things are taken back into God.'* (Keith Critchlow speaking in the film about Chartres Cathedral)