

"The greatest enemy of art is the collective mind"

## SPIRITUALITY AND MODERN ART: BEYOND THE LITERAL IN SEARCH OF THE SUBLIME

By Linda Jones Gibbs

AS AN ART historian I am often faced with the sometimes tiresome task of having to defend modern art; tiresome because people really don't want to appreciate it—they want to dare or defiantly challenge me to supply them with some explanation that fits their frame of reference. When I do respond, my defense might include such reasons for its development as twentieth-century advances in psychology, particularly Freud's study of the subconscious which helped legitimize the artist's search for a reality drawn from the deep recesses of the mind.

Representational art was also a casualty of the World Wars. The abstraction of art reflected, to some degree, the desire of artists, many of whom came from war-torn Europe, to escape from the horrible realities of that first global war. They sought to create a new reality that bore no resemblance to the threatening world in which they were forced to live. Reality in the twen-

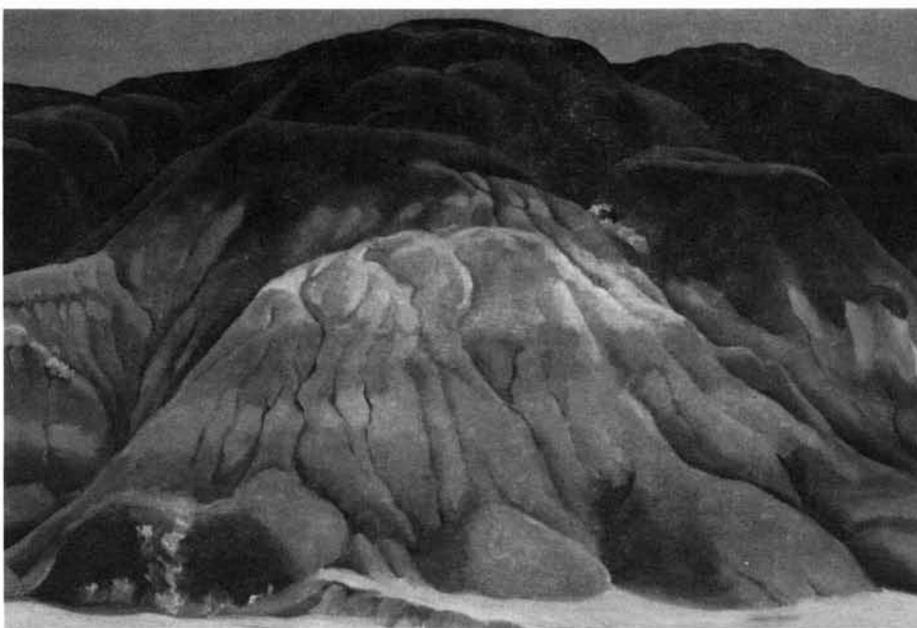


FIGURE 1  
Georgia O'Keeffe, "The Grey Hills."

tieth century was also rapidly changing, becoming increasingly elusive and complex with the onset of technology. Mass production, as the antithesis of the creative individualist, alienated the artistic sensibility.

While these and other social and philosophical influences are valid and interesting explanations for the development of modern art, they really don't help one to appreciate its aesthetic value. We

are awed by a sunset not because we understand the scientific principles that produced it but because of the harmony of tone and unearthly light it brings. It seems to me there are more profound and subtle reasons for validating modern art, reasons which are difficult to verbalize as they involve the abstract or intangible nature of the human spirit and my belief in its innate but rarely cultivated ability to respond to the abstract in the visual arts.

As I have visited museums throughout the years—especially those collections large enough to chronicle the history of western art—I have become aware of what happens to me as I go from room to room, from early Christian art through the Renaissance, Medieval, Baroque, Rococo, and on to the Impressionists, the Post Impressionists, and finally Modernism. While I can enjoy

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and appreciate most periods of art, it seems that my spirit lifts and I can feel my mind opening as the weight of the centuries and their didactic political and religious claims on art dissipate. I am not always responding to their aesthetics (I do not claim to love all modern art) but to a sense of the freeing of the creative spirit.

It is interesting to note that in the twentieth century there was an evolution of artistic sensibilities or consciousness that encouraged this new freedom, not only in the visual arts but also in music, dance, literature, and drama. This correlation among the arts can be traced, of course, throughout history. As the French poet and critic Charles Baudelaire explained: "Things have always found their expression through a system of reciprocal analogy ever since the day God uttered the world like a complex and indivisible statement."<sup>1</sup>

FOR the purposes of this paper I will define spirituality as a concern with that which is non-material, incorporeal, and unearthly, but not necessarily things sacred. In addition, I will define modern art as art that does not attempt to imitate three-dimensional reality. This could include either art which has its origin in some natural form and art with no basis in the "real world." I am also limiting my remarks to pictorial art of the western world. Our culture has a distinctive longstanding tradition of realism. (Abstraction in art is, of course, not alien to most other cultures.)

The spiritual potential in modern non-representational art lies initially in its very avoidance of pictorial illusion and deception—an acknowledgement that works of art on canvas are not an objective mirror of the physical world. Modern art can be a search for the essence of things, stripped of the superfluous. It is often a search for a deeper reality behind corporeal forms. Sometimes the modern painter begins with a feeling, then searches for the correct form to embody it. Objects are no longer copied; rather "sensations realized," as explained by Ambroise Vollard, a nineteenth-century Parisian art dealer of the avant-garde.

The very process of painting is a revelatory one. Even the creation of the most representational artwork is difficult to

describe. The great modernist Wassily Kandinsky attempted to explain this process: "Construction on a purely abstract basis is a slow business, and at first seemingly blind and aimless. The artist must not only train his eye but also his soul, so that he can test colors for themselves and not only by external expressions."<sup>2</sup>

All art is, in fact, an abstraction. Georgia O'Keeffe encouraged the viewer to even see the true abstract essence in realistic forms (Figure 1). She explains:

It is surprising to me to see how many people separate the objective from the abstract. Objective painting is not good painting unless it is good in the abstract sense. A hill or tree cannot make a good painting just because it is a hill or a tree. It is lines and colors put together so that they say something.<sup>3</sup>

Art historian William Gerds also reminds us that what we think of as "realism" isn't real at all. He describes the paradox of traditional art serving as both preserver and deceptor:

Much art is made to embody permanence, timelessness: portraiture records an individual for ages, landscape inures the memory of a place, and historical pictures memorialize great and valorous deeds. Yet these very works, established as icons, embody their opposites, for the portrait stops time as time cannot be

stopped, and later appearances give lie to the durability of the image.<sup>4</sup>

This irony is reiterated in a story about a man who came to view a portrait of his wife in Picasso's studio. "What do you think of it?" Picasso asked. "Well," replied the husband, "it doesn't look much like her." "How does she really look?" asked Picasso. The husband took a photograph of her from his wallet and said, "like this." Picasso studied the photograph, then handed it back saying, "Small, isn't she?"<sup>5</sup>

For many modern artists, reality is beyond the screen of the conventional world as we directly experience it. The modern artist is the lone inventor seeking the singularly unique, seek-



FIGURE 2

Marc Chagall, "The Birthday."

ing a more profound reality. This search does not depend upon some general public agreement about reality but on the artist's own inner instincts and insight, a personal vision that reconstructs reality through private experience. In writings of the abstract expressionists, Maurice Tuchman, for example, wrote that they demonstrated "a concern for the quality of the inner life, an interest in spiritual development and wholeness, and a mistrust of material values and appearances."<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Borofshy, a current modernist, explains: "I don't feel like I'm trying to escape the world, as much as trying to get above it for an overview of the larger issues—to try to see it as a whole—the tensions and the beauty, the touch of God."<sup>7</sup>

Many artists have painted sunflowers but it took Van Gogh to paint them metaphysically, not botanically. Likewise, Robert Henri counseled his students that "reality does not exist in material things. Rather paint the flying spirit of the bird than its feathers."<sup>8</sup>

This search for a deep inner reality, which is usually a private activity, is perhaps what alienates many Mormons who, according to Arnold Friberg, are often wrapped up in the "Beehive Syndrome"—the concept of working as a unit rather than as individuals, the need for group sanction of an idea or activity, the obsession with correlation. Herbert Reid in his book *Art and Alienation* wrote that "the greatest enemy of art is the collective mind [which] is like water that always seeks the lowest level of

gravity; the artist struggles out of this morass to seek a higher level of individual sensibility and perception."<sup>9</sup>

There is an inherent danger in trying too hard to defend abstract art. To explain too much might destroy its finer subtleties. One can better understand the spiritual intent of many modern artists simply by reading their own elucidations on the subject. The remainder of my paper will deal with the philosophies of several well known twentieth-century modern artists and of several contemporary Latter-day Saint artists who I feel have sought truths beyond the literal and attained a spirituality in their art.

SEVERAL years ago I traveled to the east coast to see a large retrospective of Marc Chagall. People of all backgrounds

respond to the intense spirit of his work, yet few realize the courage it took for him to stretch his abilities, to move beyond merely imitating others. When first in Paris studying the contemporary and historical art in the city's museums and galleries, Chagall wrote: "I had the impression that we were still wandering over the surface of the paint, that we were afraid to plunge . . . and overturn the customary surface under our feet."<sup>10</sup> He accomplished this through developing a way of seeing the world with what he called his "third eye." This willingness to be distinctive seems to be a prerequisite for the truly creative. Certainly to acknowledge one's own uniqueness is a divine attribute.

"Art seems to me above all a state of the soul," Chagall stated.<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to overlook that conviction in such works as "The Birthday," a celebration of the joy of being in love (Figure 2). In this picture of Chagall bringing flowers to his fiancée Bella, his ecstasy and aliveness cause not only his soul but his entire body to levitate above her. He wrote:

The psyche should get into the paint. You must work the painting with the thought that something of your soul penetrates it and gives it substance. A picture should be born and bloom like a living thing. It should seize . . . the profound meaning of whatever interests you.<sup>12</sup>

Even in his many biblical depictions Chagall strove for a deeper interpretation behind the narrative. He

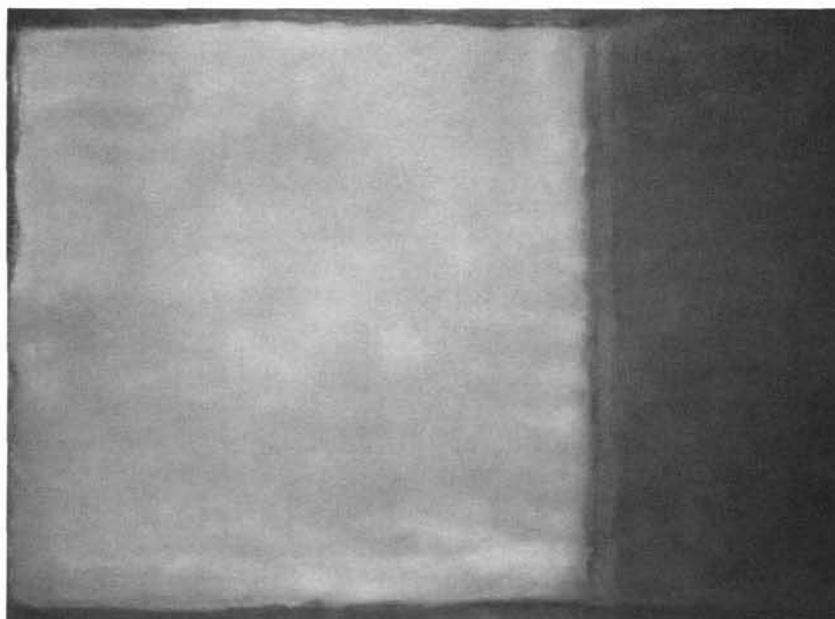


FIGURE 3  
Mark Rothko, "Ochre and Red on Red."

explained:

A truly great work is penetrated by its spirit and harmony. Since in my inner life the spirit and world of the Bible occupy a large place, I have tried to express it. It is essential to show the elements of the world that are not visible and not to reproduce nature in all its aspects.<sup>13</sup>

Chagall's paintings contain recognizable subject matter presented in a surreal manner. But the real challenge for many is to respond to non-objective painting. One of the earliest modern artists to try and explain the spiritual basis of his non-objective art was Wassily Kandinsky in his treatise *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. In it he frequently refers to the artist's search to express the "inner life."

Kandinsky contended that although reason and purpose were

an important part of his work, he wanted none of the calculation to appear, only the feeling. It is this soul search, Kandinsky claims, that breathes meaningful content into even the most abstract art. "It is very important," he wrote, "for the artist . . . to search deeply into his own soul, develop and tend it, so that his art has something to clothe, and does not remain a glove without a hand."<sup>14</sup>

Kandinsky further elaborates on the spiritual value of painting:

"Good drawing" is drawing that cannot be altered without destruction of this inner value, quite irrespective of its correctness as anatomy, botany, or any other science. Similarly colors are used not because they are true to nature, but because they are necessary.<sup>15</sup>

Too often, he adds, academically trained artists do not hear what he calls the "inner resonance." The result, he feels, is correct drawings which are "dead."

This reminds me not only of Van Gogh and the intrinsic animation bursting from his sunflowers and his creative use of color but also of Cezanne. Although he ignored traditional perspective, he could make a living thing out of the most inanimate object, be it a table top or teacup. Many of these modern artists held the somewhat radical notion that all things have spirit.

Kandinsky also made some profound analogies between the creating of art to the living of one's life. He wrote:

If an artist conforms to the basic principles of composition, color, etc., the possibilities are endless. So are our possibilities for life experiences if we live the basic truths. "There is no must in art, because art is free."<sup>16</sup>

I HAVE long been drawn to the color field paintings of Mark Rothko. They project a compelling space that appears both empty and rich with meaning simultaneously. Rothko, indeed, explained that he favored the "simple expression of the complex thought." He not only wanted to avoid illusion but hoped that his works would cease to be concrete, that the images would

appear to transcend their boundaries. Rothko, like many other modernists including Kandinsky, Chagall, and O'Keeffe, painted large. Rothko explained that he did so in order "to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience. . . . However you paint the larger picture, you are in it."<sup>17</sup>

Rothko's biographer Diane Waldman wrote that his art is "not earthbound." She stated:

He achieved a harmony, an equilibrium, a wholeness . . . that enabled him to . . . fuse the conscious and the unconscious, the finite and the infinite, the equivocal and the unequivocal, the sensuous and the spiritual. He had left behind all that spoke of the carnate, the concrete. He had reached the farther shore of art.<sup>18</sup>

Rothko was very much a colorist, but he wanted the viewer to go beyond the surface delight of his paintings. Color to him was a vehicle to express basic human emotions. "The people

who weep before my pictures," he wrote, "are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you are moved only by their color relationships, then you miss the point."<sup>19</sup>

A prime example of Rothko's search for spiritual depth through color can be seen in a series of paintings done for a chapel at St. Thomas University in Houston. The "Triptych" depicts the Passion of Christ through his typical use of red and black, which in this case are intended to evoke his belief in the passion of life, the finality of death, and the reality of the spirit. His black,

however, is one of the richest colors in his palette. His hues often seem to go beyond mere physical color to become symbols of deep thought processes. The paintings were designed to harmonize with the architecture and the changing light of the chapel interior, thus attempting a total aesthetic and spiritual environment. (The painting discussed here does not reproduce well in black and white; another example of his work, "Ochre and Red on Red," is shown in Figure 3.)

A MOST important artist/teacher of the twentieth century, Robert Henri, has perhaps been remembered more for

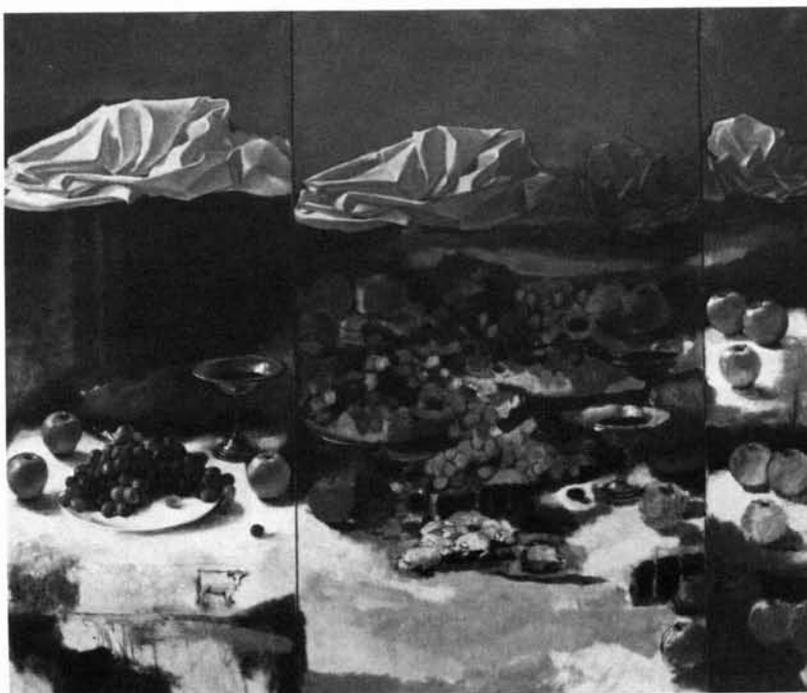


FIGURE 4

Bruce Smith, "Go Ye Therefore into my Father's House."

his writings than his art. In reality he was not a true modernist. Henri began as an impressionist and developed into a rugged realist, a leader of the so-called Ashcan School. Yet his advice to his students is applicable to the artistic freedom which modern artists have sought.

The frontispiece to *The Art of Spirit*, a compilation of his writings, begins with one of his most famous dictums. He declared:

There are moments in our lives, there are moments in a day, when we seem to see beyond the usual. Such are the moments of our greatest happiness. Such are the moments of our greatest wisdom. If one could but recall his vision by some sort of sign. It was in this hope that the arts were invented. Sign posts on the way to what may be. Sign posts toward greater knowledge.<sup>20</sup>

Henri believed that art should not be an end in itself but a springboard for deeper awarenesses. He felt that few artists reached what he called the "undercurrent," or real life. He wrote:

On the surface there is the battle of institutions, the illustration of events, the strife between people. On the surface there is propaganda and the effort to force opinions. The deeper current carries no propaganda.<sup>21</sup>

Just as life should be a progression rather than a repetition, he hoped that in art "the vision and expressing of one day will not do for the next."<sup>22</sup> Along this line he suggested new treatments of old themes:

If you must paint a "Good Samaritan" do not paint the old story, in the old form, but let your subject be the recurrence of the spirit of the good Samaritan as it presents itself to you in your own environment. These great moments didn't happen just once—they continue to happen.<sup>23</sup>

AS if taking Henri's advice, Latter-day Saint artist Bruce Smith converts the biblical story of the Prodigal Son into a series of uniquely personal visual images (Figure 4). His painting, "Go Ye Therefore Unto Thy Father's House," contains very little in

the way of literal connections to the biblical narrative. The remainder of the parable is told through still life images which Smith, in his other works, frequently uses to convey subtle meaning.

In the first panel on the left can be seen an arrangement of apples. Some painted with clarity while others appear to be dissolving, losing their substance. These represent the prodigal son at the outset of the parable as he is searching for his identity. This search, which leads him to riotous living followed by destitution, is represented in the central panel. Here the forms are at their most abstract. Nothing is rendered with clear vision. It is here that one of the two literal clues to the story appear in the swine herd huddled below the cluster of grapes.

The right panel shows the happy ending of the parable. The sharply focused still life symbolizes broadly the son's return to his home and more specifically of the feast which his father prepared in his honor. Again, Smith slips in another literal

reference—that of the fatted calf. Over the entire drama floats disjointed pieces of drapery. The artist describes these as symbolic of the mantle of the Lord or his influence hovering over our lives.

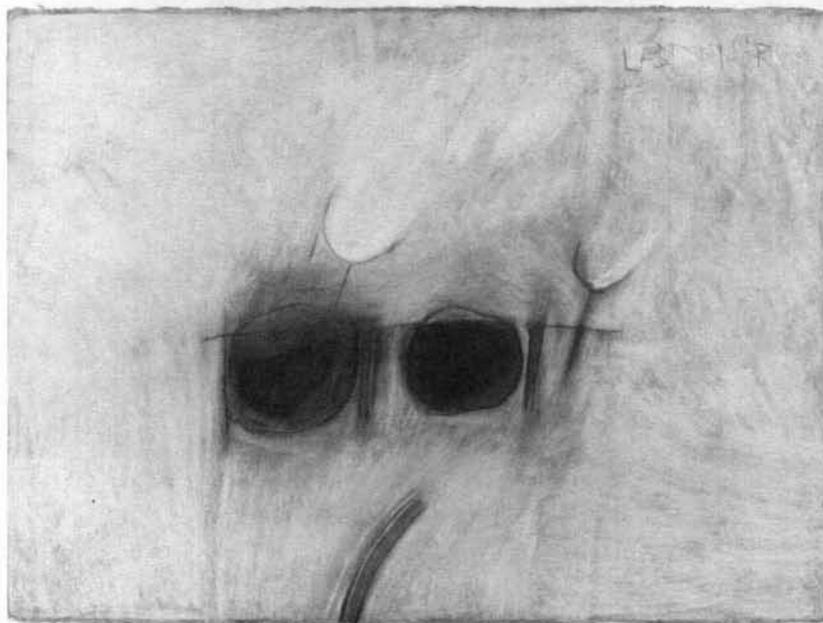


FIGURE 5  
Beth Anne Anderson, "The Last Supper."

ANOTHER Latter-day Saint artist, Beth Anne Anderson, converts the well known biblical episode of the Last Supper into the simplest of images—a single place setting of dinnerware (Figure 5). Utilizing the diaphanous nature of her medium, pastel, she creates a sense of ethereality

about the concrete everyday plate and utensils, making one feel that they might dissolve at any moment. Here lies perhaps a suggestion of the fleeting temporality of worldly existence.

Anderson's reduction of a subject that has historically been painted with visual complexity and detail to a simple image of what is presumably Christ's place at the sacramental table, subtly suggests the loneliness he must have felt as he prepared to confront his betrayer. By abstracting her theme and simplifying the form, the artist offers the viewer multiple levels on which to experience the poignancy of this critical event in Christian history.

Wulf Barsch is a Latter-day Saint artist well known for his search for spiritual realms within his paintings. "The Mirror Image or Treasures of the World" (Figure 6), is characteristic

of his paintings in that it contains recognizable imagery imbued with symbolism. This painting, for example, relates a far deeper vision than poplar trees lining a horizon and what seems to be their reflection in the lower picture plane. Through the use of a mirror image of natural forms, the work illustrates Barsch's belief that Babylon and Zion closely resemble one another on the surface and that the former can easily deceive one into believing it is the latter. To be able to discern truth from falsehood requires powers beyond purely optical observance.

By the very nature of abstraction, modern art discourages us from making strong temporal connections. We, as Latter-day Saints, claim to want to be not of this world but we seem uncomfortable when the visual arts invite us to do so. While it is true that some modern artists are indifferent or opposed to the notion of spiritual aspects in their art, many of them have attempted to get at the spirit rather than the letter of the artistic law. "Your drawing should be an expression of your spiritual sight," wrote Henri. "You should draw not a line," he added, "but an inspired line."<sup>24</sup> Utah sculptor Mahonri Young made a similar statement when he counseled artists to "first learn to place a mark where you mean it to be. Then learn to make it mean what you want it to mean."<sup>25</sup>

I DO not wish to imply that people who dislike modern art do not possess a spiritual nature. They are simply ignoring an opportunity to receive spiritual sensations not unlike those to be found at the symphony or ballet. It is ironic that people who can be uplifted by the beauty and harmony of well constructed notes and the flowing expressive movement of the human figure may still demand didacticism from the pictorial arts. They close their ears to the melody in color and their eyes to the dance in line and rhythm in form.

True art appreciation is more than a pleasurable pastime.

It requires energy, the willingness to be contemplative, to set aside one's egotism and judgments. Modern art requires that we no longer cherish our ignorance but have a desire to reach out to commune on a soulful level with the feelings of a fellow human being, to face the reality of another without feeling threatened, to regard with respect the artist's intent. We must try, as Henri states, to get on the inside of art and press out. Again Kandinsky has a relevant comment:

The spectator is too ready to look for a meaning in

a picture—i.e. some outward connection between its various parts. Our materialistic age has produced a type of spectator or "connoisseur," who is not content to put himself opposite a picture and let it say its own message. Instead of allowing the inner value of the picture to work, he worries himself in looking for "closeness to nature," or "temperament," or "handling," or "tonality," or "perspective," or what not.<sup>26</sup>

When we demand that art always be literal, we are asking it to become our own imaginations, to fill every crevice of our own capacities for creativity. As contemporary art critic Theodore Wolfe explains, modern art requires an act of faith. It often involves taking a trusting leap into the unknown with a belief that there exists something of substance and meaning.

In the eleventh passage of the Chinese Tao Te Ching it is written:

Thirty spokes converge at one hub;  
What is not there makes the wheel useful.  
Clay is shaped to form a vessel;  
What is not there makes the vessel useful.  
Doors and windows are cut to form a room;  
What is not there makes the room useful.  
Therefore, take advantage of what is there,  
By making use of what is not.<sup>27</sup>

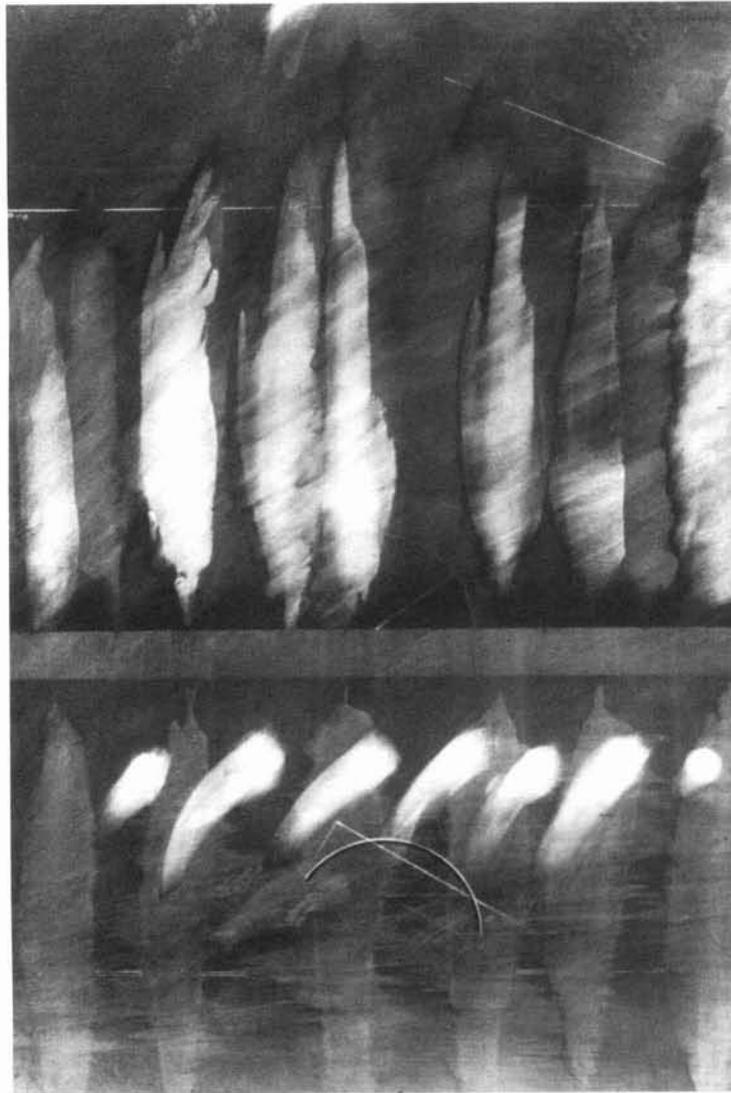


FIGURE 6

Wulf Barsch, "The Mirror Image or Treasures of the World."

In other words, the material connotes utility, the immaterial, essence. To be spiritually sensitive and perceptive requires that we listen for knowledge in silence and train ourselves to see and feel what is not literally before our eyes. Modern art can be seen as an ally rather an enemy to the spiritual self, an exercise in fine tuning our visual sense, refining it as a tool of perception and reception of truth and knowledge. ☐

## NOTES

1. Maurice Tuchman, "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 32.
2. Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1977), 46-47.
3. Georgia O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), Figure 88.
4. William H. Gerdts, *American Impressionism*, (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 25.
5. Sydney J. Harris, "Of the Fine and Vulgar Arts," *Clearing the Ground*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1986), 193.
6. Tuckman, 19.
7. This quotation was recorded by the author from a label in the exhibit held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art from November 1968 until March 1987 entitled "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985."
8. Robert Henri, *The Art Spirit*, (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1923), 265.
9. Herbert Reid, *Art and Alienation*,
10. *Chagall by Chagall*, edited by Charles Sorlier, (New York: Harrison House, 1979), 92.
11. Reid, 107.
12. Reid, 54.
13. Reid, 193.
14. Kandinsky, 54.
15. Kandinsky, 53.
16. Kandinsky, 32.
17. Diane Waldman, *Mark Rothko, 1903-1970, A Retrospective*, (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1978) 6.
18. Waldman, 69.
19. Waldman, 58.
20. Henri, 13.

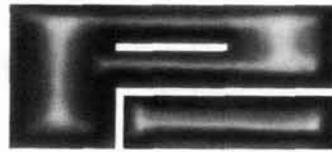
21. Henri, 94.
22. Henri, 115.
23. Henri, 218.
24. Henri, 242.
25. Artist files, Museum of Church History and Art, Salt Lake City, Utah.
26. Kandinsky, 49.
27. R.L. Wing, *The Tao of Power, A Translation of the Tao Te Ching by Lao Tzu*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1986).

## FIGURES

1. Georgia O'Keeffe, "The Grey Hills," 1942, oil on canvas, 24" x 36", Indianapolis Museum of Art, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James W. Fesler.
2. Marc Chagall, "The Birthday," 1915, oil on cardboard, 31¼" x 39¼", Museum of Modern Art.
3. Mark Rothko, "Ochre and Red on Red," oil on canvas, 92½" x 64¼", The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.
4. Bruce Smith, "Go Ye Therefore Unto Thy Father's House," 1984, oil on canvas, 51" x 59", Museum of Church History and Art.
5. Beth Anne Anderson, "The Last Supper," 1982, pastel, 22" x 30", Museum of Church History and Art.
6. Wulf Barsch, "The Mirror Image or Treasures of the World," 1983, oil on paper, 36" x 25½", Collection of Michael and Linda Jones-Gibbs.

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