

ART AND MYSTICISM

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The visual language is a universal language. Where words fail due to barriers of geography and history, color and form are able to share a vision and express emotion. Art is a powerful tool for the mystic and mysticism a powerful force for the artist. I am concerned here with the mystical aspects of Paul Klee's and Mark Rothko's work: the spiritual dimension as noted by mystics and art historians; the process of self-realization as evidenced by Klee's self-interpretation and diaries; Rothko's denial of mystical attributes; and the paintings themselves, which deal directly with life, death, being and reality. Also, with what role symbols, contemplation, feelings of celebration and ecstasy, inspiration from nature and experiences of oneness play in the endeavors of these artists. Rollo May speaks of "true artistic representation" as that which deals with the unknown questions and discovers new reality. Paul Klee and Mark Rothko do just that.

Spanning centuries and cultures art and the spiritual are referred to as analogous if not overlapping time and time again. In the Taoist texts we find:

When we are struck by the utter tranquillity of landscapes by Mi-Fei and Ni Tsan, or moved by T'ao Ch'ien, we come close to experiencing aesthetically what the Taoist hopes to experience spiritually. There is something inherent in these works that leads us to the inexpressible ultimate that man shares with the universe. There is in them a dynamic process that interfuses with a higher grade of reality. They draw us into a spontaneous and even unintentional unity which, as the Taoist sees it, refers back to Tao itself, the primordial source of creativity.

The Zen outlook on art as a mystical experience as found in the words of Kakuzo state:

Nothing is more hallowing than the union of kindered spirits in art. At the moment of meeting, the art lover transcends himself. At once he is and is not. He catches a glimpse of Infinity, but words cannot voice his delight, for the eye has no tongue. Freed from the fetters of matter, his spirit moves in the rhythm of things. It is there that art becomes akin to religion and ennobles mankind. It is this² which makes a masterpiece something sacred.

From the Christian perspective we receive:

This intuition of the Real lying at the root of the visible world and sustaining its life, is present in a modified form in the arts: perhaps it were better to say, must be present if these arts are to justify themselves as heightened forms of experience. It is this which gives to them that peculiar vitality, that strange power of communicating a poignant emotion, half torment and half joy, which baffle their more rational interpreters. We know that the picture which is "like a photograph," the building which is at once handsome and commodious, the novel which is a perfect transcript of life, fail to satisfy us. It is difficult to say why this should be so, unless it were because these things have neglected their business; which was not to reproduce the illusions of ordinary men but to catch and translate for

us something of that "secret plan," that reality which the artistic consciousness is able in a measure, to perceive. "Painting as well as music and poetry exists and exults in immortal thoughts," says Blake. That "life enhancing power" which has been recognized as the supreme quality of good painting, has its origin in this contact of the artistic mind with the archetypal - or, if you like, the transcendental world: the underlying verity of things.³

Paul Klee himself:

It is the artists' mission to penetrate as far as may be toward that secret place where primal power nurtures all evolution... In the womb of nature is the primal ground of creation where⁴ the secret key to all things lies hidden.

And from Mark Rothko:

The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them.⁵

Art is an intuitive reflection of the world. Mystical symbols give us glimpses of the secrets of our world. Kandinsky in Concerning the Spiritual in Art, discusses the symbolic language of color and form and it's power to vibrate the human soul. Symbol and imagery are key elements in portraying the mystical experience.

The greater the suggestive quality of the symbol used, the more answering emotion it evokes in those to whom it is addressed, the more truth it will convey. A good symbolism, therefore, will be more than mere diagram or mere allegory: it will use to the utmost the resources of beauty and of passion, will bring with it hints of mystery and wonder, bewitch with dreamy periods the mind to which it is addressed. Its appeal will not be to the clever brain, but to the desirous heart, the intuitive sense, of man.⁶

Artistic symbols are tools to enlighten. "Symbols are to express ideas. When ideas have been understood, symbols should be forgotten."⁷ Klee metaphorically employs personal symbolism, which reveals universal truths. His large oeuvre contains repeated references to a center, unity, transformation, growth, time, and journeys. Rothko's is a symbolism of color and illumination, light and dark, clairvoyance and confusion.

Intuition is essential, tapping into an unconscious potential which is available to all, searching ones inner self in the attempt to reveal reality. The process of honest interaction between materials and inner being has powerful potentialities.

There is an intimate link between creativity and contemplation, although the current tendency is to oppose them. Contemplation must not be understood as a state of sheer passivity or receptiveness: it comprises a distinctly active and creative element. Thus the aesthetic contemplation of natural beauty is more than a state: it is an act, a breaking through to another world. Beauty is indeed that other world revealing itself in our own. And in cotemplating beauty man goes out to meet its call. A poet who is possessed by his vision of beauty is not engaged in passive observation but in an activity whereby he creates for himself and re-creates in his imagination the image of beauty. Contemplation does admittedly, preclude the experience of struggle, conflict and opposition. But, it supplies that background against which struggle,⁸ conflict and opposition acquire significance.

Only through contemplation can one begin to see, to experience their own spiritual potential and by doing

so be open and receptive to the mystical. For the artist, contemplation can occur at any or all of three stages: before, during or after the creative act. To produce art without contemplating its origin, process or result is an irresponsible act. Artistic tools (color, form, line, texture...) are symbolically powerful and must be used with honesty, integrity, "right intentions".

"Certain processes, of which contemplation has been taken as a type, can so alter the state of consciousness as to permit the emergence of this deeper self; which according as it enters more or less into the conscious life, makes man more or less a mystic."⁹

Contemplation provides the openness necessary to experience Reality. Of this the contemplative artist can express, share a glimpse of that Reality.

Portraying Klee's creative process, Haftmann describes: "Bent over his drawing-board, Klee listens, or sits and meditates. It is a dark moment. Then suddenly something within him seeks to communicate itself. So he begins. He tries to catch the distant voice which is calling, the communication of this dark moment, the hieroglyphic which offers itself."¹⁰

"Rothko paints large surfaces which prompt us to contemplate."¹¹ These paintings are born of contemplation. Expanses of silence, they whisper to receptive viewers, inviting them into their silence. "...we are meant to enter it, to sink into its atmosphere of mist

and light or to draw it around us..."¹² Selz attributes mirror-like qualities to these painted surfaces, "reflecting what the viewer brings with him."¹³ They not only inform and enlighten, but question and challenge.

Throughout art history and mystical studies we see the subject and concept of nature as fundamental. Artists and mystics alike use nature as a retreat, and as an object of contemplation. Underhill repeatedly refers to "the Divine in Nature". Thomas Merton spoke of seeing God in the rocks, the trees, nature. Heightened perception of the natural world "is the simplest and commonest form of illumination."¹⁴ In truly "seeing" one can find "the secrets of the world" in all natural things. Klee spoke of an unidentifiable force flowing into him from the "elemental realm of nature", going through him and manifesting in the form of images on the canvas.¹⁵

Human nature was Rothko's obsession. Striving to portray "...his vision of the entire human drama, of the single idea that would represent all the ideas of human feeling."¹⁶ Hubert Crehan, spoke of "Rothko's intuitions of the essential oneness of things--a kind of visual metaphor of the unity and integrity of life, consciousness and the universe."¹⁷

Through the act of creating one reaches a state of "oneness" and "...is supported by all the powers inherent in multiplicities and changes, and his work will be far beyond what his ego-form self could accomplish."¹⁸

Nicolas Berdyaev states, "The creative act signifies as ek-stasis, a breaking through to eternity...Only in the white heat of creative ecstasy, when none of the divisions and differentiations into subject and object had yet arisen, did I experience moments of fulfillment and joy."¹⁹

Underhill views ecstasy as the "last term of contemplation" and describes it as a trance. This would account for the artists loss of space and time consciousness and non-awareness of manipulating materials. In his diaries Klee notes, "My hand is entirely the tool of a distant will."²⁰ This loss of ones ego-self produces a blissful state, ecstasy, the contentment that comes through awareness. Ashton claims that what Rothko "sought for himself in his painting was precisely ex-stasis."²¹

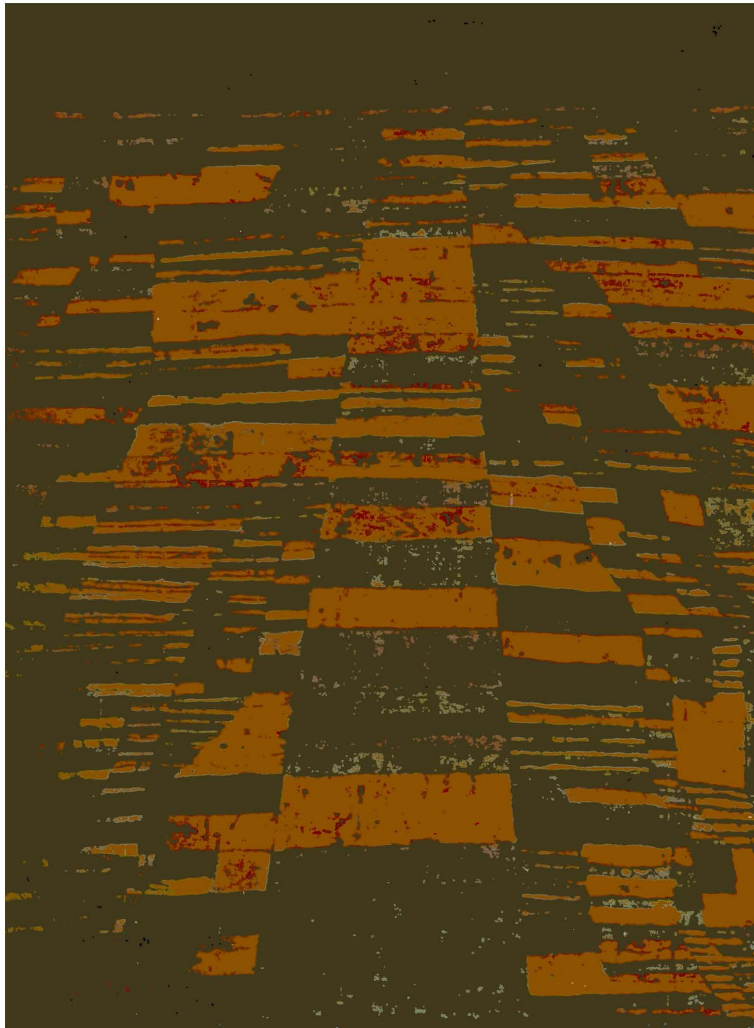
In the creative process one comes face to face with the self, for art by nature is inherently autobiographical. Initially one deals with all the illusions of self, but eventually reaches a core and must confront the reality of self. Ones' art reveals many truths about the self, both painful and joyful. The mystic and artist are on a journey that leads into the depths of self-realization and beyond.

The process of creating art is self-exploration and realization, therefore it is a path to enlightenment. "He who knows others is wise; He who knows himself is enlightened."²²

Haftmann, referring to Klee's own creative process states, "It is a communication--a self-revelation also. Klee the dreamer looked, so to speak, over the shoulder of Klee the painter while he was working and arranging, and both suddenly exclaimed to Klee the conscious human being: "Look, that's what it was like"..."²³

Mysticism is the powerful force behind Paul Klee's work. As he discovers and shares with the viewer a glimpse of his Reality, we come to understand his creative process as a mystical quest. As we've seen, contemplation, nature, symbols, feelings of ecstasy, self-realization and experiences of oneness are a fundamental part of his journey. The following visual examples go beyond representation into these realms of questioning and essence. These are honest, pure works which reveal the contemplative spirit of the artist. Awed by life, Klee's work is a celebration of existence. It is passionate, enthusiastic, inspired by the mystery of the natural world. He reveals to us universal truths with pure intentions through his seemingly simple, child-like, primitivistic style.

In Highways and Byways, from 1929, the seeming simplicity of horizontal strips of color belies the complexities one discovers through time and contemplation of this painting. The pure, earthy colors make an obvious reference to the landscape. The wrinkled, marred surface texturing give it a worn, natural, comfortable feeling,



Paul Klee

Highways and Byways

1929

(illustration 1)

like an old well-used map or the surface of the land itself. Space is vast and open, the viewpoint seems aerial, giving the viewer a feeling of lightness, as if floating. The central vertical thrust, near center, offers feelings of growth, transcendence and an obvious path, while the less pronounced arteries, "byways", offer maze-like opportunities to reach the same destination. Much like life, there is a beginning, an end, and many choices to be made in between, a journey. It seems too, Klee is addressing mans' cravings to wander. His vision is optimistic, celebratory, yet somewhere between reality and Reality. He shares his journey with us, he has not arrived and looking back, rather, he looks forward into unknown vastness. "...he described his own artistic realm as one located at what he called an "in-between" world. This existed "between the worlds our senses can perceive and I absorb it inwardly to the extent that I can project it outwardly in symbolic correspondences."²⁴

Siblings, from 1930, uses a similar palette to Highways and Byways, but toned down a bit. One doesn't experience the lightness associated with vast open space. Rather, we feel the stability of the figures, outlined in black and secure on the sketchily indicated plane. The figures are in motion, referring to time, change, growth. They maintain the individuality of limbs and wide, open, wondering eyes, yet share a heart, a common core, center. They are fragmented, yet whole, planes



Paul Klee

Siblings

1930

(illustration 2)

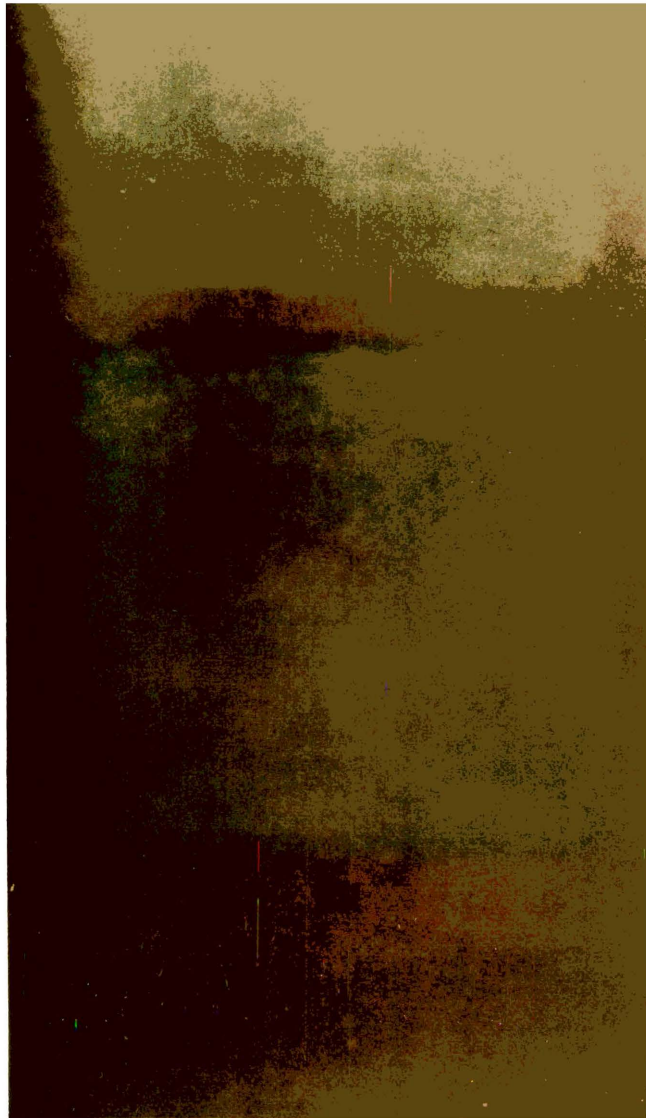
intersect and overlap harmoniously, co-mingle, transform and are inseparable.

A self proclaimed Existentialist and materialist, Rothko denied all mystical assertions.

Others in experiencing awe or transport before his paintings, attributed them to a mystic. This was a repugnant idea to Rothko since it was this world he aspired to characterize. Yet it is obvious that he was ambivalent, and that there was another, more alluring world to which he was always drawn. He was like a mystic in that he had an over-weening private hunger for illumination, for personal enlightenment, for some direct experience--or at least the quality of that experience--with the transcendent. He was a mystic in the way Nietzsche described "a mystic soul...almost undecided whether it should communicate or conceal itself."²⁵

Rothko's luminous use of colors that dissolve and fade, rectangles that hover and seem to expand and contract as if breathing offer an ambiguous space of mystery and sublimity. His struggle toward enlightenment is at times silent, at others violent and tragic. On his canvases he bares his soul in an attempt to confront the viewer with that which is ineffable. The work of a mystic or not, the following visual examples are poignant.

In Dark Grey Tone on Maroon, from 1963, the darkness is sobering. Rothko provides the viewer the space and time to confront human tragedy. However, the richness of the green, gray and maroon tones offer a comfortable stability. While the rectangles advance and recede they draw the viewer in closer and closer. The large scale



Mark Rothko

Dark Grey Tone on Maroon

1963

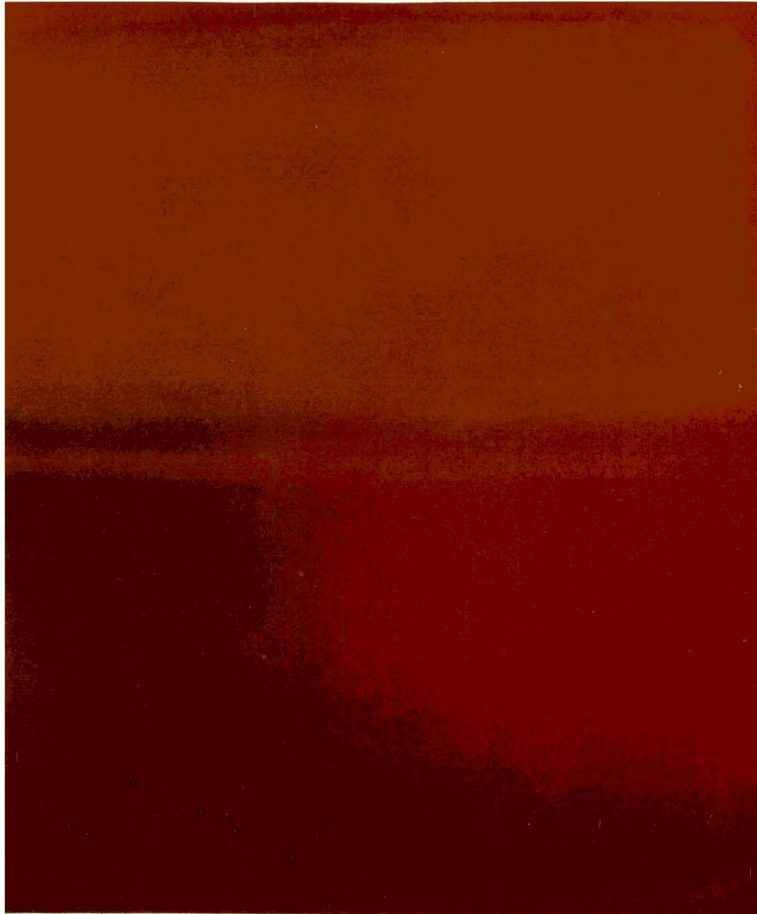
(illustration 3)

(134 x 72"), all encompassing, forces ones focus between painting and self, creating an intense emotional experience, otherworldly yet human, spiritual. The vertical format and high placement of the two rectangles adds a loftiness or transcendent quality to the painting. It is absorbing and disorienting, yet somehow familiar. Complexities are expressed through simplicity. It is silent and silencing.

Nietzsche wrote in The Birth of Tragedy an essay Rothko had read with great admiration when he was a young man: "There is a need for a whole world of torment in order for the individual to produce the redemptive vision and to sit quietly in his rocking row-boat in mid-sea, absorbed in contemplation."²⁵

Perhaps what Rothko proposes in Dark Grey Tone on Maroon is that we "sit quietly", "absorbed in contemplation".

In contrast to Dark Grey Tone on Maroon, the untitled painting in illustration four, from 1967, uses brilliant, luminous colors. They are colors of passion and ecstasy. There is an urgency in their intensity. Comfort is found in the balance and symmetry of the two rectangles, while their unsettled hovering remains disorienting. There is an anxiousness as shape and light slip away into darkness or fade behind another hue. Again, complex emotions are expressed through simple universal symbols of color and light. Stripped of distracting elements, Rothko injects and evokes the essence of human emotion.



Mark Rothko

Untitled

1967

(illustration 4)

Referring to Mark Rothko, Selz states: "His paintings can be likened to annunciations...His paintings disturb and satisfy partly by the magnitude of his renunciation... Rothko has given us the first, not the sixth day of creation."²⁶

Jung in reference to Paul Klee states, "In his work the spirit of nature and the spirit of the unconscious become inseparable. They have drawn him and draw us, the onlooker, into their magic circle."²⁷

Chung-yuan sums up the mystical aspects of the visual arts well when he says:

When the artist enters the invisible realm of creativity he uncovers the potentialities that are hidden in the spiritual court. To reach the state of no-thought, according to the Taoist, means to reach the realm of creativity. When the Chinese artist says that he enters the spiritual court he speaks of the ontological experience, the state of no-thought. This experience leads inevitably to the interfusion of subjective and objective reality. This interfusion initiates the process of creativity, which in turn establishes unity in multiplicity, the changeless in the ever-changing. The artist who has reached the state of oneness is supported by all the powers inherent in multiplicities and changes, and his work will be far beyond what his ego-form self could accomplish. Such a reflection of strength from the center of his being, however powerful it is, is completely nonintentional and effortless. Robert Henri (1865-1929), speaking of modern art, expresses somewhat the same idea: "The object, which is back of every true work of art, is the attainment of a state of being, a state of high functioning, a more than ordinary moment of existence. In such moments activity is inevitable, and whether this activity is with brush, pen, chisel, or tongue, its result is but a by-product of this state, a trace, the footprint of the state."²⁸

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Chang Chung-yuan. Creativity and Taoism. The Julian Press, New York, N.Y., 1963, p.55.
- ² Okakura Kakuzo. The Book of Tea. Charles E. Tuttle Company, Tokyo, 1956, p.81.
- ³ Evelyn Underhill. Mysticism. Meridian Books, New York, N.Y., 1955, p.74.
- ⁴ Paul Klee. On Modern Art. Faber and Faber Limited, 1948, p. 51.
- ⁵ Lee Seldes. The Legacy of Mark Rothko. Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York, N.Y., 1974, p.38.
- ⁶ Underhill. p. 126.
- ⁷ Chung-yuan p. 43.
- ⁸ Nicolas Berdyaev. Dream and Reality. Geoffrey Bles, London, 1950, p. 220-221.
- ⁹ Underhill p. 67.
- ¹⁰ Werner Haftmann. The Mind and Work of Paul Klee. Frederick A. Praeger Inc., New York, N.Y., 1954, p. 196.
- ¹¹ Peter Selz. Mark Rothko. Museum of Modern Art, New York, N.Y., 1961, p.9.
- ¹² Ibid. p.10.
- ¹³ Ibid. p. 10.
- ¹⁴ Underhill. p. 234.
- ¹⁵ Haftmann. p. 129.
- ¹⁶ Dore Ashton. About Rothko. Oxford University Press, New York, N.Y., 1983, p. 143.
- ¹⁷ Ibid. p. 162.
- ¹⁸ Chung-yuan. p. 207.

- ¹⁹Beryaev. p. 209,220.
- ²⁰Felix Klee. The Diaries of Paul Klee. University of California Press, Berkeley, California, 1964, p. 215.
- ²¹Ashton. p. 124.
- ²²Chan Wing-Tsit. The Way of Lao Tzu. Macmillan Publishing Company, New York, N.Y., 1963, p. 159.
- ²³Haftmann. p. 149.
- ²⁴David Burnett. A Tribute To Paul Klee. The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, 1979, p. 11.
- ²⁵Selz. p. 14.
- ²⁶Selz. p. 9,11,12.
- ²⁷Carl G. Jung. Man and His Symbols. Dell Publishing Co., Inc., New York, N.Y., 1964, p. 307-308.
- ²⁸Chung-yuan. p. 207-208.

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