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18. An Artistic Dimension

> Man lives by Truth and Beauty; Schuon writes books and paints pic-tures. His books express the metaphysical doctrine in which all the religious systems and all the spiritual methods have their origin; he thus takes his stand in the perspective of the *philosophia perennis*. In his paintings, Schuon's intention is to express inward truths, and he does this in a manner that is quite simple, spontaneous, and natural, and without any affectation of didac tic symbolism. Fundamentally, what he portrays are higher realities as lived though the medium of his own soul. . . .[1]

As a child Schuon took pleasure in drawing and painting, but he never received any formal training in the arts. Prior to 1949 he produced several sketches and simple canvases, but it was only shortly after his marriage that he began to realize his mature style and thematic focus. Schuon considered this to be the beginning of his authentic period of painting. "Soon after my marriage I began to paint; it is true I had done so before, when I was working as a textile designer in Mulhouse and later in Thann, but in my opinion the pictures that came into being at that time—most of them with an Oriental influence—had not as yet anything essential in them."

The subject of Schuon's art is, broadly speaking, "on the one hand the Plains Indian world and on the other hand the mystery of cosmic and human femininity—Goethe's 'Eternal Feminine' (*das Ewig-Weibliche*) or the Hindu *Shakti*." While there is no strict line of demarcation between the two, the first subject "has its roots in his affinity with the fascinating world of Red Indian heroism and mysticism", while the second "has its roots in metaphysics and cosmology . . . [and], in a more relative sense, in Schuon's affinity with Hinduism."[2] Between 1950 and 1965 Schuon's artistic vision was focused on the world of the Plains Indians.

> My first painting portrayed two Red Indian women, one clothed and the other naked; since then I have more than once repeated this theme, as it signifies the antithesis between sacred form and sacred content, or between the veiling and the unveiling of the holy. Besides purely narra-tive Indian pictures I often painted the sage—or the masculine nature of wisdom—in the form of an old Indian chief; I often represented him as the center of a council. My paintings of women represented the complement to this, namely beauty, with all the virtues that go with it; my starting point here—in these as in other pictures—was not a deliberate symbolism, but simply a reality that flowed forth from my nature; the meaning was prefigured in my inward being, and did not lie in my conscious intention.[3]

During this period, Schuon also created many painted leather hides depicting the sacred image of the Indian Feathered Sun.

> The [Feathered] Sun is composed of concentric circles formed of stylized eagle feathers; the resulting impression is particularly evocative in that the symbol simultaneously suggests center, radiation, power, and majesty. This symbiosis between the sun and the eagle, which is to be found again in the celebrated headdress of feathers formerly worn by chiefs and great warriors, brings us back to the symbolism of the Sun Dance: here man is spiritually transformed into an eagle soaring towards Heaven and becoming identified with the rays of the Divine Sun.[4]

The Feathered Sun, Schuon writes in a letter, "has become a symbol of our spiritual message, without my having had this deliberate intention".[5]

Leather hide painted with the Feathered Sun, c. 1970

As a painter, Schuon's affinity with the message of femininity is evident from his earliest canvases. One is reminded that many spiritual traditions throughout the ages have considered woman not only as the highest expression of terrestrial beauty but also as a symbol of divine wisdom, love, goodness, and mercy. Following his spiritual encounter with the Holy Virgin in 1965, the majority of Schuon's paintings represented the Virgin-Mother and the Eternal Feminine. For some time after that experience, he acknowledges that in fact he "could scarcely paint anything other than the Holy Virgin".

"If I were asked why I paint images of the Holy Virgin", Schuon writes, "I should answer: to transmit, thus to make accessible to others, an inward vision, and to make possible a participation in this vision."[6] He depicted her, according to Barbara Perry, "not in the style of Christian icons, but in the form of the Biblical Shulamite or the Hindu *Shakti*."[7] His representations "are not intended to be Christian icons; they universalize the celestial Virgin in a manner which makes one think of Hindu and possibly Mahayanic art."[8]

"I painted her, not as she is portrayed in Christian religious art, but as I had inwardly experienced her, that is as virginal Mother or as motherly Virgin and beyond all theological forms; as the embodiment of the Divine Mercy and at the same time of the *Religio Perennis*, somehow uniting in her person Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism, in conformity with my own nature. . .". A point which he makes again in one of his poems:

> When I painted the Virgin, I never thought
> That my paintings should merely reflect Mary's features;
> I thought of femininity as such,
> Not of Jesus' Mother alone.
> And likewise the Child: thou see'st him pray inwardly —
> It is the devotion of all the world's Prophets.[9]

There has been only one public display of Schuon's original artwork, due, on the one hand, to his insistence that his message is to be found primarily in his published writings and, on the other hand, to his lack of interest in public acclaim. In 1981, however, shortly after his move to America, his paintings were the subject of an exhibition entitled, "Scenes of Plains Indian Life" at the Taylor Museum in the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center.[10] Barbara Perry explains in her catalogue notes that "As a writer, Schuon is recognized as a master of thought. As a painter, he makes no claims for his art, and he does not even desire to be publicly known. Springing as they do from his rich and unique personality, Schuon's paintings nonetheless have a rare value, not only as regards artistic merit but above all because of their gift for manifesting the human soul at its noblest and most beautiful—hence, as a vehicle for Truth—and it is for this reason that we wish to present them to the public."[11] In 1990, reproductions of many of the canvases exhibited were included as illustrations to *The Feathered Sun*, a collection of his various writings on the Indians of North America.

Two years later, a book containing reproductions of his paintings was published under the title *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*.[12] "When the question was broached of publishing Schuon's paintings", the work's editor, Michael Pollack, explains, "he at first was rather reluctant because he was concerned that such an art book might detract from the image of his intellectual and spiritual identity; for, let us repeat, the main accent of his message is spiritual and not artistic. However, because Schuon's art also contains in its way a spiritual message—since his doctrinal message finds a spiritually transparent expression in his art—he has granted permission for this publication."[13]

Pollack offers this further insight into Schuon's artistic message and style:

Maharaja, c. 1928

Samurai, c. 1928

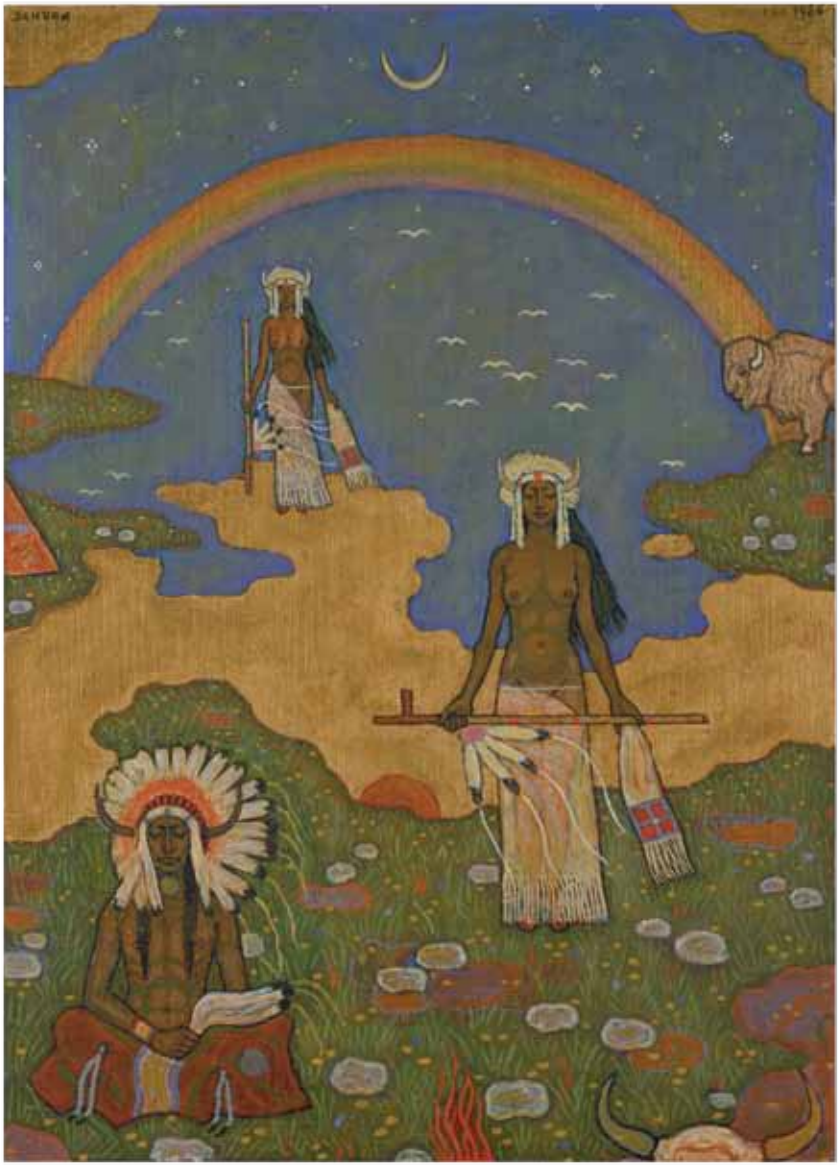
Murid, 1934

Mandarin, 1935

Published in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty* (clockwise, from top left), 198, 201, 200, 185

American Indian sketch
Published in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*, 163

Pow Wow, 1953



The Descent of the Sacred Pipe, 1986
Published in *The Feathered Sun*, 131

"A typical personification of the *Shakti* is the White Buffalo Cow Woman who brought the Calumet to the tribe of the Lakota Indians. In her celestial substance, she is the goddess Wohpé, who is the equivalent of Lakshmī." (*Roots of the Human Condition*, "*Mahāshakti*", 43)

> It is essential to understand that Schuon as a painter is not interested in originality and innovation; he is fascinated by the subject matter alone, its origin being what he observed among the Indians or an inner vision of spiritual realities. As for style, Schuon applies the general rules of traditional pictorial art, the first principle being that a painting must take into account the flatness and immobility of the surface; it should not represent three-dimensional space nor a too accidental and hence fragmentary movement. Schuon has an affinity with Hindu art and Christian icons, and also, in a more secondary way, he accepts—at least partially—the techniques of a Van Gogh, a Gauguin, a Hodler, or a Covarrubias. We should also mention that Schuon likes to repeat his subjects, which fact derives from his interest or fascination with them; it would be superficial and pedantic to reproach the painter for this kind of monotony, all the more so in that traditional art always has the tendency to repeat the same motifs, thus to unfold their potentialities.[14]

Schuon's natural talent for painting is interconnected with his extraordinary aesthetic intuition. "It suffices for him to see—in a museum, for example—an object from a traditional civilization, to be able to perceive, through a sort of 'chain reaction', a whole ensemble of intellectual, spiritual, and psychological principles which operate in that world."[15] His lifelong friend, Titus Burckhardt, commented similarly that at the moment of sanctity a saint is given a special gift and that "In the case of Schuon, this gift was the discernment of forms." Schuon has the ability, Burckhardt noted, "to look at a piece of clothing or an artifact from a culture and know everything about that culture. He sees the archetypes inherent in all things and immediately understands the essence of the form and the entire culture from which it came."[16]

Schuon's paintings of the sacred White Buffalo Calf Woman (Pté San Win), the celestial messenger who brought to the Lakota people their original Sacred Pipe, provide a striking example of his discernment of forms. During the 1960s and 1970s he painted several canvases of the Buffalo Calf Woman bringing the Sacred Pipe; in some she is clothed in white robes and in some she is naked.[17] Until 1980, every published account of the story of the bringing of the Buffalo Calf Pipe described the Pté San Win as wearing a white buckskin dress. In 1980 a book appeared containing English translations of the recordings James R. Walker collected from Lakota holy men during the last years of the nineteenth century.[18] Two of these accounts describe the Buffalo Calf Woman as completely naked. When the metaphysician and artist was asked how he had known to paint the Pté San Win in this manner, he responded that the Pté San Win is a goddess of the Lakota and that the celestial messenger of this primordial religion had to have been naked when she brought the revelation of the Sacred Pipe.[19] He went on to compare her with other manifestations of celestial femininity in Hinduism,

Buddhism, and Shintōism, who are often traditionally depicted in a primordial state without clothing. He noted also that the hostile attitude of the early Christian missionaries toward nudity explains why the Lakota would change their original account—in order not to give offense or draw censure.[20]

In her catalogue notes for the 1981 exhibition of Frithjof Schuon's paintings, Barbara Perry explains the presence of nudity in many of his paintings:

> A remark is necessary here regarding the symbolism of nudity. It is common knowledge that in Hinduism, as in most other ancient religions—and notably also with the American Indians—nudity has a sacred connotation. It manifests both the primordial and the universal, and it is not without reason that one speaks of the "paradisal innocence" which was before the Fall. Again, there is in hieratic nudity a moral meaning as well as an intellectual one: under the first aspect, nudity—of the Hindu goddesses, in particular—expresses the generosity that welcomes and provides, likewise exemplified in the mystical *lactatio* of the Blessed Virgin; and under the second aspect, nudity indicates the esoteric "unveilings", and it is in this sense that one speaks of the "naked truth". And lastly, let us remember that, according to St. Paul: "Unto the pure, all things are pure."[21]

While remaining foremost a metaphysician and philosopher, Schuon also manifested his philosophy through his art. As Michael Pollack declares, "[H]is fundamental vocation is the *philosophia perennis* as it is expressed in his written works, whereas his art appears rather as an expression of the aesthetic, psychological, or moral dimension of this primordial and universal philosophy. In other words, Schuon is interested not only in metaphysical principles, but also in their cosmic and human radiation. . .". Schuon's own description of his fundamental intention as an artist is quoted in the Introduction to his *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*: "What I seek to express in my paintings—and indeed I cannot express anything other—is the Sacred combined with Beauty; thus, spiritual attitudes and virtues of soul. And the vibration that emanates from the paintings must lead inward."[22]

Notes

[1] Barbara Perry, "Foreword: Frithjof Schuon: Metaphysician and Artist", in *The Feathered Sun*, xix.

[2] Michael Pollack, "Editor's Introduction", in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*, 1-2.

[3] Frithjof Schuon, quoted in Michael Pollack, "Editor's Introduction", in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*, 3-4. For a more complete description of Schuon's views on the Eternal Feminine see *Roots of the Human Condition*, "*Mahāshakti*" and *Esoterism as Principle and as Way*, "The Problem of Sexuality".

[4] *The Feathered Sun*, "The Sun Dance", 100.

[5] Letter to Leo Schaya, October 10, 1981.

[6] Letter to Leo Schaya, December 27, 1982, quoted in *Frithjof Schuon: Life and Teachings*, 42. "The painted images", Schuon explains, "should not be the object of worship; their function consists uniquely in suggesting existentially our connection with the Sovereign Good." (personal paper, 1993) Renaud Fabbri observes: "These paintings do not directly concern his *tarīqah* and Schuon explicitly forbade that they become a support of concentration or devotion." ("The Milk of the Virgin", 259)

[7] Barbara Perry, "Foreword: Frithjof Schuon: Metaphysician and Artist", in *The Feathered Sun*, xix. "The divine imprint in supra-formal or luminous manifestation also comprises, by cosmic repercussion, a psychic imprint . . . and it is this psychic imprint that is 'Mary' in her human form. This is why the universal Prototypes, when they manifest themselves in that portion of humanity for which Mary lived on earth, do so by way of the psychic, hence individual and human, form of the Virgin." Schuon draws analogies to similar manifestations in other spiritual traditions: "In other sectors of humanity, the same Prototype—at once divine and angelic—takes the form appropriate to the respective ambiences; it appears most often in the form of a beautiful woman, as is the case in the apparitions of the *Shekhīnah* in Judaism, of Durgā, 'the Mother', in Hinduism, or of Kwan Yin or Tārā in the Far East; similarly, in the Sioux Indian tradition, the Calumet—the pre-eminent sacred instrument—was brought from Heaven by Pté San Win, a marvelously beautiful celestial maiden. . . ." (*Treasures of Buddhism*, "*Nirvāna*", 92, 92n)

[8] Michael Pollack, "Editor's Introduction", in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*, 2. In a letter, Schuon writes of the connection between his paintings and Mahayanic art: "The meaning of these images is the actualization of the Presence of the Sacred, then it is holy immobility, silence and inwardness; thus the remembrance of God. Hence in my pictures of Mary there is something of the golden, earth-remote *barakah* of the Buddhist spiritual message; it is as though something of that world of the Spirit had also to be present in our spiritual way. This kinship I observe *a posteriori*, for my paintings flow forth from the depths of my heart, and imitation of any kind is foreign to me; nonetheless, I must

mention that the image of the Buddha was for me a kind of revelation even in my childhood and that something of it lies in my very nature. Moreover, there is in my pictures something too of the Tārā of Brahmanism and the *Mahāyāna* and—beyond that—something of the 'Eternal Feminine', of the Primordial Feminine: of the Divine Femininity. Or again: something of the merciful, liberating *Māyā*." (letter to Leo Schaya, August 28, 1985)

[9] *World Wheel*, Fifth Collection, CXXVII, 84.

[10] The exhibit ran from January 24, 1981 through March 8, 1981. Barbara Perry's article, "Frithjof Schuon: Metaphysician and Artist", was first written to appear in the catalog for this exhibition. It was later revised to appear as the Foreword to *The Feathered Sun* and then subsequently revised as the Introduction to *Art from the Sacred to the Profane: East and West.*

[11] Barbara Perry, "Frithjof Schuon: Metaphysician and Artist".

[12] None of the nineteen American Indian paintings reproduced in *The Feathered Sun* are included amongst the more than one hundred and twenty paintings reproduced in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*. During his lifetime, Schuon created over 200 oil paintings; however, many were sold or given as gifts without ever being photographed, making it impossible to quantify or compile a complete catalogue of his works.

[13] Michael Pollack, "Editor's Introduction", in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*, 3.

[14] Michael Pollack, "Editor's Introduction", in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*, 2. The following statement from the beginning of this same book clarifies Pollack's comment about Schuon's partial acceptance of the work of various modern artists: "In the case of 'post-Impressionist' painters such as Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Hodler, one may sense the lack of an interesting choice of subjects, but one cannot deny the fascinating message of their styles. Conversely, one may reject the naturalistic style of the 'academic' artists from Michelangelo to Ingres, but one must nevertheless accept those works whose content shows nobility and grandeur. . . . In these cases the aesthetic, psychological, and moral qualities of the subject excuse or even neutralize the errors of a totally naturalistic style". (Sharlyn Romaine, "Intention and Style", in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*, 6) Romaine is the first among several later painters whom Schuon instructed and who thereafter adopted his style of painting. Thus there are paintings that appear at first glance to be by Schuon, but which are by one or another of his students. In the parlance of art historians, one would speak of works that are of "the school of Schuon".

[15] Barbara Perry, "Introduction", in *Art from the Sacred to the Profane*, xiii.

[16] Notes from a private interview with Titus Burckhardt, 1979.

[17] See the painting *The White Buffalo Woman*, 1965, in *The Feathered Sun*, 137, and the painting of the Pté San Win in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*, 125, which was created in 1978.

[18] See James R. Walker, *Lakota Belief and Ritual*, edited by Raymond DeMallie and Elaine A. Jahner, 109-112, 148-49.

[19] Personal interview, 1990.

[20] Since the DeMallie-Jahner edition of Walker's work there have been other accounts published that corroborate the nakedness of the Buffalo Calf Woman. Several scholars have joined Schuon in opining that when the first Christian missionaries heard this account they were horrified because they considered nudity sinful, with the result that Lakota elders subsequently described the Pté San Win as clothed in white buckskin robes, which is the most often preserved account. (See Marla Powers, *Oglala Women: Myth, Ritual and Reality*, 43, for further details.) Some of the same Lakota elders who recorded the history of the naked Pté San Win bringing the Sacred Pipe to the chief also mentioned that she was clothed in white robes during the time she subsequently spent in the camp instructing the tribe about the performance of sacred rites. Schuon wrote to his close friend, Leo Schaya, of a dream in which a celestial woman appeared to him clothed in a white robe: "The inward experience which you relate in your letter reminds me of a sacred dream I had . . . about two years ago. I saw", he recounts, "a beautiful young American Indian woman standing in a white robe; she came towards me, and when she stood very close in front of me, she ascended gently, and I ascended with her." (letter dated November 14, 1984)

[21] Barbara Perry, "Frithjof Schuon: Metaphysician and Artist". See also "The Basis of Religion and Metaphysics: An Interview with Frithjof Schuon", Appendix II, 146-151.

[22] Frithjof Schuon, quoted in Michael Pollack, "Editor's Introduction", in *Images of Primordial and Mystic Beauty*, 4.

"An Artistic Dimension"
From

Frithjof Schuon: Messenger of the Perennial Philosophy
by Michael Oren Fitzgerald
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Note from the Preface:
"In the text, all of Schuon's words, whether written or spoken, are displayed in colored lettering; my wish is to emphasize the value of listening to Schuon himself when considering his life's story and its meaning."