



# ART, SPIRIT & CONSCIOUSNESS

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This essay explores the interactions between spirit, consciousness and art according to the following definitions – with an eye toward what those interactions mean for any part of the artistic process. One aspect of “spirit” is a fundamental undercurrent in all existence that unifies that existence and continually urges it to evolve; a primal essence and cosmic glue, if you will. Another aspect of spirit is akin to what Carl Jung described as collective unconscious, a psychic system or structure shared by everyone that gives rise to mental content that is not consciously learned, but is nevertheless known. However we describe or understand spirit, it is these transpersonal elements that differentiate it from other components of being. “Consciousness,” on the other hand, is more individuated. It is the realm of ideation and imagination of one being as that being relates to everything around it. Consciousness may change in focus, scope, intensity and complexity, but in all but the most exceptional peak experiences it is bound by self-awareness and self-concept. And finally “art” is the act of skillful and aesthetic communication; a synthesis of form out of ideas, emotions and intuitions; an expression of individual insight and being.

One of my favorite quotes regarding the relationship between art, spirit and consciousness is from Plato, who in his *Apology* quotes Socrates as saying:

“I brought them some of the most elaborate passages in their own writings and asked about the meaning, thinking they would teach me something. Would you believe me? I am pained to confess the truth, but I must say that almost anyone could have discussed their poetry with more insight than they did themselves. Then I realized that poets do not write poetry by wisdom, but by a sort of genius and inspiration; they are like diviners or soothsayers who also say many fine things, but don’t understand the meaning of them.”

Although Socrates goes on to criticize poets for thinking themselves wiser than he thought they were, I do not view this account as an indictment of poets. On the contrary, I think it reveals the spiritual nature of the creative act and the communicative power of an artistic muse. For the purposes of discussion, I will be grouping all such creative acts into the same bailiwick: music, creative writing, visual art, performance and so forth. Although each discipline has its unique differences, they all share moments of creative inspiration. But what is the nature of those moments as a specific flavor of consciousness ?

For the last several years, I’ve had the pleasure of attending art discussion groups organized by my partner, Mollie Kellogg, who is herself a superb visual artist. Whenever the topic of inspiration or the source of creative ideas is raised in these discussions, there have always been interesting opinions and insights from artists who express themselves through different media. However, when even the most confident and successful artist is pressed for a concise description of what is happening during moments of inspiration – that is, how inspiration percolates up into ideation and execution of their art – they are usually at a loss for words. The creative impulse *just is*, they say. Ideas *just happen*, sometimes

in the context of associations or observations, sometimes as a vivid image in the mind's eye, sometimes as a felt emotion that demands expression, sometimes as a random blip that is only recognized as a creative thought after it occurs. Although the execution of art may sometimes be carefully calculated and involve years of discipline, study and refinement, the moment of inspiration either occurs...or doesn't. So even for artists, the artistic muse is a mystery. Stephen King, in his book *On Writing* (the best book on the craft of writing I've ever read), puts it this way: "Let's get one thing clear right now, shall we? There is no Idea Dump, no Story Central, no Island of the Buried Bestsellers; good story ideas seem to come quite literally from nowhere, sailing at you right out of the empty sky...Your job isn't to find these ideas but to recognize them when they show up."

Even though the creative process is mysterious, I have frequently encountered observations about the conditions most conducive to inspiration. Setting aside a physical space where creativity is prioritized and honored in a regular way is a common theme. As is reserving regular time for creative activity and committing emotional space for it. In other words, dedicating time, space and energy specifically for creativity so that artistic *ahas* have a supportive place to arise. At the same time, most artists agree that their muse cannot be forced, and instead requires relaxation of mental attention and sometimes even deliberate distraction to manifest itself. As a cognitive mechanism, this sort of mental spaciousness is well-known as a necessary step in complex problem solving, or recalling a forgotten memory, or grasping a familiar word that is "on the tip of our tongue," or learning a new concept that is complex. By relaxing or distracting our attention after it has been focused on a given problem or new concept, other cognitive processes engage that encourage missing pieces to rise to the surface and become unexpected synergies. Creative insight may arrive in a moment where we are gazing into the distance and just spacing out, or in a dream, or in the shower, or while we are doodling aimlessly...that is, when our attention is unfocused and roaming free. As a writer, photographer and musician I have experienced this many times. And although I can affirm that engaging in regular disciplines – practicing, refining and learning new techniques, routinely exposing myself to new art and the insights and ideas of others, maintaining a rich emotional life, challenging my assumptions about my own limitations, etc. – are all critical to my artistic process, the single most productive practice is letting go of all of these things and creating a sense of spacious openness so that my muse can surface unencumbered.

But here is what I find so fascinating: that all of these conditions and descriptions pertaining to artistic inspiration apply equally well to mystic activation – that is, to moments of spiritual intuition and awareness. I would propose that the artistic process is not just similar to soothsayers and diviners, but precisely the same; in terms of a state of consciousness, creative inspiration is a form of spiritual communication, and perhaps even what some traditions call "divine inspiration." Years ago, in my book *The Vital Mystic*, I wrote that "true artists are priests and priestesses of the mystic impulse, and their finest work connects us with ourselves and a shared understanding of the Universe in ancient and continually reinvented ways." As communicators, artists are able to transmit the ineffable substance of spirit despite the interference of logical thought, emotional turmoil, a lack of education about art, and even impaired perception. Art can penetrate us to the core of our being, bridging all differences and distances to uncover a profound common ground. Although people may experience the impact of some works of art differently – for one person it is mainly aesthetic, for another intellectual, for another emotional, for another spiritual – the intensity of the impact, especially in the finest works of great artists, can be universal to those who are open to it.

As one example, consider Michelangelo's *David* in Florence, Italy. It has long been observed that this towering statue has a powerful effect on the mental and emotional states of those who view it. Some people burst into tears. Others become agitated or angry. Others become so dizzy and disoriented they seek medical attention afterwards. The effect is so strong on some that they cannot remain in the presence of the statue for very long. Anyone who is sufficiently sensitive and open will experience similar reactions to any great work of art – that is what in part defines such greatness. Consider when people shout and jump to their feet after a superb musical performance. Or when someone becomes so completely captivated by a novel and its characters that it changes how they view themselves and the world around them. Or that encountering certain films, plays, paintings, photographs, poetry, sculpture or other forms of art has resulted in life-changing insights and convictions for countless individuals. When I saw Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* for the first time, I was completely riveted. All sound and movement around me disappeared and my consciousness seemed to merge with the painting. It wasn't until someone started tugging at my arm that I awoke from my trance, but I still could not take my eyes off the painting. At the time, I wanted to explain what I was experiencing, but I couldn't. I remained mute, possessed, spellbound. Since that time – some thirty years ago – the themes in that painting have stuck with me, and have informed my thinking in subtle ways.

So I would posit there is *a certain something* offered by creative genius that penetrates our senses to the very core of our being, and shapes our personal evolution in unexpected ways. In *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Wassily Kandinsky offers a specific term for this impact. He calls it "Stimmung," the power of art to capture the essence of something, which in turn evokes a strong response in those who encounter the art. Kandinsky explains that when art has Stimmung, it offers "the artistic divination" of the subject's inner spirit. Her further suggests that, when people are open to it, Stimmung can have transformative effects – stimulating beauty, harmonizing emotions, feeding the spirit and elevating the soul. I suspect this is why the call to artistic expression, that "inner need" that compels artists to create, is so strongly felt. It is our soul communicating the intuited essence of something with other souls, a fundamental drive to connect our innermost Self with the Universe and with other motes of consciousness, a yearning for unity and transcendence.

Integral thinkers who have attempted to map artistic expression to consciousness and spirituality – or articulate the relationship between them in some way – have come to some interesting conclusions. Sri Aurobindo frequently alluded to art in his writings as a revelation and expression of the soul and the essence of things, and as a means through which humanity can encourage its own spiritual evolution. As he writes in *The National Value of Art*: "Between them music, art and poetry are a perfect education for the soul; they make and keep its movements purified, self-controlled, deep and harmonious. These, therefore, are agents which cannot be profitably neglected by humanity on its onward march...." And later in the same, "A little of this immortal nectar poured into a man's heart transfigures life and action. The whole flood of it pouring in would lift mankind to God. This too Art can seize on and suggest to the human soul, aiding it in its stormy and toilsome pilgrimage." For Aurobindo, who himself wrote poetry, creative expression had a critical role in both seeking and understanding the spiritual truths within, and in shaping our spiritual evolution.

Jean Gebser also saw art as revealing the secret, spiritual structure of things. He observed in *The Ever Present Origin* how artists of his era were breaking out of cages of dualistic, rationalistic thought and

introducing a more unitive sense of being into their work, in particular by freeing themselves from linear concepts of time. For Gebser, this freedom from rigid constructs, this “breaking of the at-once” into artistic expression, demonstrated an emerging integral consciousness; it confirmed that a latent spiritual reality was working in and through human consciousness to help us transcend self-limiting perspectives. In this way, Gebser asserted that art can render our soul, our spiritual origin, increasingly transparent to us. As Gebser writes regarding Cézanne in *The Invisible Origin (Journal of Conscious Evolution)*: “This participation in the infinite that contains and irradiates everything like the origin – if not identical with it – is genuine nearness to the origin: the harmony of human and universe, the overcoming of the dualism of the creator, the painter, and the created, the picture.”

Ken Wilber has often expressed the opinion (in *The Eye of Spirit*, and a recent video of his conversation with Alex Grey) that art can communicate and influence states and stages of being. However, he also insists that artists are restricted to conveying their particular stage of development, their worldview and the cultural context in which they are operating – and that anyone appreciating works of art is similarly confined. That is, the state or structure operating in the artist can only resonate with the state or structure readily available to the person appreciating the artistic effort. According to Wilber, developmentally asymmetrical connections that transcend the artist’s stage of evolution are not available, and he repeatedly advocates that art cannot be transformative unless a transformation has occurred in the artist. But I do not think this is the case. Great art – and to some degree all art – is fundamentally transcendent of all contexts, worldviews, states and structures; that is, as a raw experience of inspiration, art is *contextless*. Yes, art may be expressed, experienced or interpreted within various worldviews, enculturations, states and structures (along with their corresponding limitations), but that does not speak to the essential nature of art or the artistic muse, nor does it limit the transcendent impact of art on the psyche. Art can transport us both beyond what we have experienced and beyond what the artist has experienced whenever it taps into a transpersonal ground of being.

Once again all of these insights parallel encounters with the mystical. We might interpret a spiritual peak experience achieved through mystical practice as this or that, but it is really neither this nor that...*it is itself*. We may interpret spiritual information through the filter of our worldview, our level of development, our cultural context...but the spiritual information transcends those boundaries. This is why mystics so often describe the content of their spiritual perception-cognition as ineffable and beyond what the intellect can grasp – and why mystical experiences have an enduring influence on us whether we are conscious of it or not. In the same way, artists of particular skill and experience may be able to convey the suchness of a given artistic *aha* more convincingly or richly, but that suchness is there whether the artist can adequately express it or not – and whether the viewer can consciously perceive it or not. Like mystical *ahas*, an artist’s peak experience of inspiration is a special form of consciousness. In this way artistic inspiration is more akin to spiritual knowing, to *gnosis*, than anything else. So while art does provide conscious communication, emotional communication, subliminal communication and so forth, it also contains spiritual communication that is experienced separately from these other modes of connection – and thus art may have a more holistically transformative effect. In this way, artistic and mystical experiences can offer the same kinds of consequences, even when encountered by those who don’t understand or appreciate what they are experiencing; they can generate ripple effects that linger within us, nudging us to change and evolve over time.

With this said, I'll offer one more observation regarding the influence of art on states and stages of consciousness. Artistic disciplines can, with the right intention, become a kind of spiritual practice, encouraging us to let go of normal consciousness and explore the realm of spirit. This applies to any medium, from casting pottery to singing in a choir. Introspectively meditating on art or regularly infusing our lives with the creative efforts of others also imbues our existence with a spiritual dimension. To varying degrees, however we interact with art will introduce new dimensions of consciousness and plant the seeds for growth. I myself have had peak experiences both during the creative act and while appreciating great works of art, and have always found myself to be more awake and alive as a result of these encounters. And once we are introduced to more advanced developmental structures of consciousness, artistic expression and appreciation can also help maintain those structures over time; they can reinforce our growth and transformation. In this light, it is particularly devastating that U.S. culture has relegated art to a mass produced commodity, with artistic commercialism alienating more intimate encounters with our own muse and the diverse expressions of others.

Circling back on Plato's thoughts, does this mean that artists are wiser or more spiritual than other people? Not at all. And, speaking from first-hand experience, it doesn't mean that mystics are always wiser or more spiritual than others, either. Encountering our spiritual ground, the essence of Self, the Absolute, the Divine, etc. as either artistic *aha* or mystical *aha* does not in itself transform our mode of being. It is merely a facet of newfound insight and experience – an intuitive form of perception-cognition – that can influence and inform our transformation, but does not guarantee it. Egotism can afflict both artists and mystics, as can paranoia, obsession, avarice, recalcitrance, narcissism, reflexive hostility and a host of other maladies prevailing in those who aren't maturing their humanity and spiritual understanding. In order for either encounter to have a transformative effect, additional supportive structures are required. To be successful, other elements of integral practice must be part of the picture, including a guiding intentionality grounded in compassion.

In Integral Lifework, a central goal is to nourish all dimensions of self equally and in a balanced way. This is specifically to support healing, growth and transformation in all areas at once. If any one area of our being is neglected, it will interfere with nourishment in other dimensions of self, and thus with our wholeness, equanimity, character and energy. Thus we cannot merely focus solely on our own particular talents and strengths and expect to evolve. We cannot fixate on being a great artist, or athlete, or scientist, or on new horizons of mystical insight, and expect to heal from emotional trauma, or strengthen our immune system, or have mutually enriching relationships. Artistic and mystical practices may contribute to other efforts of self-care as part of an additive synthesis of integral effort, but our artistic muse and spiritual awareness cannot become substitutions for our well-being in other arenas. Likewise, to whatever degree we energize every aspect of our being, we will also energize our artistic and spiritual communication and connection. So by giving equal attention to what in Integral Lifework are called "the twelve dimensions of self," a synergy of the whole becomes greater than its parts.

Regarding the impacts of art transcending the creator's level of development, is there any empirical evidence to support this proposition? I believe the inherent, transpersonal, contextless and potentially transformative functions of art are evidenced in many ways. For one, by comparing the personalities,

attitudes and life choices of various artists to their work, we can begin to see a stark contrast in many instances. For example, we might conclude that the emotionally and spiritually evocative depths of Amadeus Mozart's music far exceeds the personal development evidenced elsewhere in his life through his own correspondence and the accounts of his contemporaries. Or that the piercing humanity of Ernest Hemingway's prose transcends the egotistical and self-destructive personal habits reported by those who knew him well. Or that Salvador Dali's apparent disdain for other human beings did not resonate with his artistic genius or the inspirational effect his paintings have had on others. Or that where the sublime seems so evident in the poetry of Charles Bukowski, it did not seem particularly evident in his life. And even though Elizabeth Taylor's sensitive and insightful acting moved millions, some of her most inspiring performances, such as in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, seem to have been informed more by suffering and failure than her personal transformation. These are only the briefest sketches of one avenue of verification, but I think they are potent.

Then there are developmentally disabled artistic savants who can evoke emotional subtleties and aesthetic heights through their art that do not correlate with their own emotional and psychological states and stages of development. To appreciate the fluid and life-like sculptures of Alonzo Clemons, or be deeply moved by Leslie Lemke as he sings a pop song, or lose oneself in the soft light of Richard Wawro's crayon drawings is, I think, to catch a glimpse of the truly transcendent in human beings. Along the same lines, there have been artistically gifted children (Pablo Picasso, Barbara Newhall Follett, Frédéric Chopin and others) who likewise offered us fresh and profound aesthetic and artistic insights that reached far beyond the developmental level of the artist. Although not all such examples are spiritually transformative ones, they illustrate the principle that creative expression can exceed the emotional maturity and psychological sophistication of its creator – in artistry, insight and impact.

In *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, G.I.Gurdjieff makes an interesting observation about spiritual teachers. To paraphrase, he says that someone's understanding and integration of any spiritual teaching is dependent on the teacher's maturity and development – it is the teacher's mastery of spiritually being that transmits the most important content, not their words. I think this applies equally to art, in that the impact in both a spiritual and aesthetic sense is influenced by the skill and spiritual depth of the artist, and a more profound resonance can be achieved when the artist is particularly gifted and allows the artistic muse to possess them completely. Even so, this does not mean that the artists themselves must of necessity be spiritually evolved...just potent vessels of transmission. In fact it seems quite rare to find someone who is both spiritually and artistically advanced. Perhaps we can find hints of this in the music of Hildegard of Bingen, the poetry of Hafiz, the paintings of Fugai Ekun and the works of a handful of others. And at the other end of the spectrum, there are certainly spiritually evolved folks who have little artistic skill or interest. So, on the whole, there seems little correlation between personal spiritual evolution and artistic genius, which again reinforces the idea that great works of art that resonate with the depths of our soul – and even inspire us to grow and change – do not of necessity issue from spiritual masters. Consider a work of art that inculcates a more compassionate worldview and challenges us to change – a book like Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, for example. Or art that evokes a sense of awe and wonder about the Universe and its many possible forms of consciousness, such as Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Or art that sends our heart soaring with intimate longing, such as Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*. Were Barber, Kubrick and Lee especially evolved or enlightened human beings? Perhaps in some respects they were, but if they are really like diviners and soothsayers, *they didn't need to be*. They

were simply channeling something that was both an essential spark of their humanity and a universal spiritual truth.

Among the many who have speculated on the intersection of art, spirit and consciousness, a few come to mind who offer some helpful opinions. Hegel expounded frequently on the topic, and from his lectures in Jena we have these insights:

“Art, in its truth, is closer to religion – the elevation of the world of art into the unity of the Absolute Spirit. In the world of art each individual entity gains a free life of its own through beauty. Yet the truth of individual spirits is in their being one element in the movement of the whole. Absolute spirit knowing itself as absolute spirit: this absolute spirit is itself the content of art, which is only the self-production of itself, as self-conscious life reflected in itself. In art, this individual self, this one, is only a particular self, the artist – but the enjoyment on the part of others is the selfless universal intuition (*Anschauung*) of beauty.”

In Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Idea* (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* as translated by R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp), he has much to say on the topic as well:

“Genius, then, consists, according to our explanation, in the capacity for knowing, independently of the principle of sufficient reason, not individual things, which have their existence only in their relations, but the Ideas of such things, and of being oneself the correlative of the Idea, and thus no longer an individual, but the pure subject of knowledge. Yet this faculty must exist in all men in a smaller and different degree; for if not, they would be just as incapable of enjoying works of art as of producing them; they would have no susceptibility for the beautiful or the sublime; indeed, these words could have no meaning for them. We must therefore assume that there exists in all men this power of knowing the Ideas in things, and consequently of transcending their personality for the moment, unless indeed there are some men who are capable of no aesthetic pleasure at all. The man of genius excels ordinary men only by possessing this kind of knowledge in a far higher degree and more continuously. Thus, while under its influence he retains the presence of mind which is necessary to enable him to repeat in a voluntary and intentional work what he has learned in this manner; and this repetition is the work of art. Through this he communicates to others the Idea he has grasped. This Idea remains unchanged and the same, so that aesthetic pleasure is one and the same whether it is called forth by a work of art or directly by the contemplation of nature and life. The work of art is only a means of facilitating the knowledge in which this pleasure consists. That the Idea comes to us more easily from the work of art than directly from nature and the real world, arises from the fact that the artist, who knew only the Idea, no longer the actual, has reproduced in his work the pure Idea, has abstracted it from the actual, omitting all disturbing accidents. The artist lets us see the world through his eyes. That he has these eyes, that he knows the inner nature of things apart from all their relations, is the gift of genius, is inborn; but that he is able to lend us this gift, to let us see with his eyes, is acquired, and is the technical side of art.”

Who else might we include? Too many to quote, really. But here are a few more, including some well-known artists and thinkers:

“Art is not an end in itself. It introduces the soul into a higher spiritual order, which it expresses and in some sense explains.” – Thomas Merton, from *No Man is an Island*

“Every man who steep himself in the spiritual possibilities of his art is a valuable helper in the building of the spiritual pyramid which will some day reach to heaven.” – Wassily Kandinsky, from *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*

“I don't know whether I believe in God or not. I think, really, I'm some sort of Buddhist. But the essential thing is to put oneself in a frame of mind which is close to that of prayer.” – Henri Matisse

“It's not about what it is made of nor how it is made, it's about inspiration of function that renders and touches the soul, which makes craft ‘art’. Craft is based on functionality, and spirituality is the basis of art.” – Jacques Vesery, from his artist statement.

“We believe that the *teyotl* or wave of life is at the core of imagination and the creative impulse, the driving force in nature and human evolution, the seed of eternal transformation.” – Juan Javier Pescador & Gabrielle Pescador, from their artist statement.

To conclude, then, I believe it is possible to subjectively confirm artistic inspiration as spiritual in nature, just as many artists, mystics and philosophers report it to be. We can also say that from this ineffable spiritual font – whether via artistic muse or mystical peak experience – many diverse and wonderful expressions have manifested spirit as created reality. And when we encounter such art, these emanations evoke a connection between emotion and intellect, between a felt sense of intuition and conceptual insight, and between soul and mind. Within these communications, different states and stages of perception-cognition flow into and out of existence, inviting art to participate in consciousness, and consciousness to participate in art. So from one perspective spirit energizes art, which then energizes consciousness. And from another perspective consciousness energizes spirit, which then energizes art. And so on in countless entanglements. And when we approach the artistic process in this way, we begin to touch upon concepts of spiritual evolution found in Plato, Plotinus, Aurobindo, Teilhard de Chardin, Arthur M. Young and others, concepts which help us define all of existence as a spiritual work-of-art in progress. Within this milieu, what I have proposed would make artists important and perhaps essential agents in the evolution of humanity and the Universe itself. So, not only priests and priestesses of the mystic impulse as I once described them to be, but keepers of an eternal flame that draws us ever-onward through continuous transformations of being. Perhaps this is a hefty burden to place upon artists, but it can also be embraced as a sacred privilege.

I'll leave you with some verses from Friedrich von Schiller's *Ode to Joy (An Der Freude)*, portions of which were famously put to music in Ludwig van Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony. If you have the opportunity to do so, I would encourage you to listen to that symphony as a persuasive argument in favor of the transformative potential of great art.

*Joy, beautiful spark of the Gods  
Daughter of Elysium  
We enter drunk with fire  
Your heavenly sanctuary.  
Your magic binds again  
What custom's sword divides  
Beggars become Princes' brothers  
Where your gentle wing abides.*

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*Joy is the strong mainspring  
In eternal nature.  
Joy, joy drives the wheels  
In the earth's great clock.  
She entices flowers from their buds,  
Suns out of the firmament,  
Rolling spheres through space  
That telescopes can't know.*

.....

*Endure courageously, millions!  
Endure for a better world!  
Above the starry canopy  
A great God will reward.  
One can't repay Gods  
But it's lovely to be like Them.*

