Art and Transcendence: Reflections on a Rouault Painting

By John A. Kohan

The scene in the Salles des Etats at the Louvre brought to mind pilgrim crowds, gathered at Poland's Jasna Gora Monastery for the morning "unveiling" of the Black Madonna of Czestochowa. There was no hymn-singing or trumpet fanfare to be heard in the Paris museum, but the lone portrait displayed on the specially built wall was separated from eager spectators by a curved wooden table and barrier, oddly resembling a church altar and communion railing. Like the Polish icon with its antique metal covering, which opens and closes, this painting was lovingly protected in a state-of-the art, climate-controlled, shatter-proof glass casing. In place of candles, jostling tourists, held up digital cameras with illuminated monitors, aimed at the famous image. This was also an act of veneration—art lovers, come to admire the *Mona Lisa*.

A second Parisian temple of art is a short walk away in the Tuileries gardens. After a major renovation effort costing \$36 million, the Musee de l'Orangerie is open to the public once more, displaying Claude Monet's cycle of eight enormous water-lily canvases in the way the French Impressionist intended. Visitors process through a dark, imageless anteroom, as if leaving the outer world behind for the sacred precinct of art. One overly exuberant group of Japanese tourists entering the inner sanctum was promptly silenced by a magisterial "shush" from a security guard. A report in the *International Herald Tribune* said it all: "The Orangerie is once again a shrine to Monet and his beloved water lilies. Anyone lucky enough to be alone with the nympheas is invited to meditate, perchance to dream."

A belief in the transcendent power of art has been with us since the first cave-dwellers painted their walls with animal images. Modern Art was supposed to put an end to all that. With an ideological fervor not unlike Byzantine-era iconoclasts or the image-wreckers of the Reformation, propagandists of pure abstraction insisted that an art work should refer to nothing but itself as a made object. It was always a hard line to sell. Even Vasili Kandinsky, the Russian-born pioneer of non-representational art, wrote a manifesto *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1910), describing the artist as a "valuable helper in the building of the spiritual pyramid, which will one day reach to heaven." For all the philosophical contradictions of this new era of post-modernism, art lovers need not feel embarrassed anymore about going to museums in search of sublime feelings. Transcendence has come back—in a big way.

American Conceptual Artist Jeff Koons, whose over-sized chrome hearts and balloon dogs carry price tags to match, talks constantly about his belief in "having transcendence in your life." In 2005, the Art Gallery of Western Australia mounted the exhibition, "Seeking Transcendence," featuring four paintings by American Abstract Artist Mark Rothko, himself, subject of a new study, *Mark Rothko: The Art of Transcendence*. Houston's Museum of Contemporary Art staged "The Inward Eye: Transcendence in Contemporary Art" in 2001-2002 to help audiences, as one press statement put it, "discover the range of

ways in which contemporary art can bring us into closer contact with life's intangibles." Post-modernist art criticism can even sound embarrassingly religious at times. Analyzing the work of contemporary German Symbolist Anselm Kiefer, Critic Michael Auping writes: "In his desperate attempt to communicate beyond the halls of philosophy, church and state, an artist invariably finds himself in a kind of purgatory."

Indulgences may not be on offer, but a popular cult of the Fine Arts has developed among museum-goers, having its own saints (with compellingly lurid hagiographies!), relics, and pilgrimage sites. Vincent van Gogh has long been venerated as a martyr for art. Admirers can now visit a recreation of his cell at the asylum at Saint-Remy-de-Provence, where he battled mental illness to create canvases, touching the visual limits of the material world. Mexican Surrealist Frida Kahlo is a newcomer to the increasingly inclusive pantheon, much esteemed for her harrowing self-portraits, depicting surgery and vivisection. Then, there is Leonardo da Vinci, viewed by some art historians as the greatest genius of them all. The Renaissance master is enjoying a new surge in popularity, thanks to Novelist Dan Brown's naughty, gnostic pot-boiler, The *Da Vinci Code*, which has brought visitors back to museums in droves to examine classic Leonardo paintings in the light of their own conspiracy theories.

Little of this has anything to do with organized religion. If spiritually-minded aesthetes enter a church nowadays, it is not for the Divine Liturgy at the high altar but the Renaissance altarpiece in the side chapel, recommended in their guide books. Art has served Christianity well over two millennia in spreading its message of transcendence. Images once meant to illustrate the central teachings of the faith for illiterate worshippers have enriched Western civilization. As focal points for prayer, they have helped untold millions to move beyond earthly limits in their quest for God. A popular phrase describing the special role of icons in the Eastern Orthodox tradition puts it well. Sacred images are veritable "windows to heaven." Unfortunately, these divine portals remain closed for secular art-lovers who prefer the medium to the message. They know they are stepping on holy ground but don't know enough to take off their shoes.

I was admiring a *Penitent Magdalene* in an El Greco show at New York's Metropolitan Museum a few years back, when I happened to overhear a conversation between two twenty-somethings. They both agreed it was possible to appreciate religious art without having any interest whatsoever in the church or its teachings and went on to discuss various pop-culture theories about Mary Magdalene as the Holy Grail. Now, I would be the first to claim there is no "approved" way to interpret a work of art. I often find sacred meanings in pieces by avowedly atheistic artists. But to look at a traditional religious image of this kind, painted by great masters like El Greco, Titian, Georges de la Tour, and Caravaggio, which so clearly touches on questions of remorse, repentance, human mortality (and in unclothed versions, eroticism and spirituality), and find only echoes of Dan Brown is bit like going to a three-Michelin-star restaurant and ordering a hamburger with fries!

Now, imagine our secular art-lovers asking an average church-goer from Christianity's

three major traditions about the story and symbols, say, in a 15th century altarpiece by Netherlandish Painter Rogier van der Weyden. A Roman Catholic would, probably, give a fairly coherent explanation of the life of Jesus and the Virgin Mary, be less certain about the saints, confused about the signs and symbols, and know nothing about Van der Weyden. An Eastern Orthodox would dismiss the altarpiece, explaining how the sacred images in *her* church are not art at all but true representations of their heavenly counterparts. She might not know much about the symbol system of this Roman Catholic work but would have no trouble identifying who is who on an icon. A conservative Protestant would look pained at the very mention of the word "altarpiece" and, no doubt, shift the conversation away from art to talk about personal salvation. Our art-lovers would walk away more confused than ever.

Maybe, I'm being unfair to Evangelicals and Fundamentalists, but this is the tradition I know best. I grew up in a church where you kept your eyes closed during communal prayer, so you could hear the words without visual distraction. Even if you did squint, there was nothing to see in the imageless hall, except for the American flag, a national icon whose presence in the church sanctuary was never questioned. Religious art did have a place in my private life as a textual accessory. I took home a Sunday school paper each week with a brightly colored Bible story illustration on the front page. For my skill in memorizing scripture texts, I was even awarded a small, framed reproduction of Warner Sallman's painting, *The Lord Is My Shepherd*. It may be Christian kitsch to some, but thanks to Sallman's brand of romantic realism, I developed a passion for religious art that would ultimately lead to Rembrandt, Russian icons, and Van der Weyden.

I now live among the Eastern Orthodox. They could never understand why anyone in church would want to pray with closed-eyes, when the holy images on the walls and iconscreen unite the saints in heaven with the church on earth in a timeless act of worship. Seeing the role sacred imagery plays in the Orthodox Church gives you a whole new sense of what it means to worship God "in the beauty of holiness." But I soon get lost in a labyrinth of Byzantine reasoning, when I try to understand why magnificent works of "religious art" like Piero della Francesca's *Baptism of Christ*, Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, El Greco's *Resurrection*, or Caravaggio's *Calling of St. Matthew* have no place in Orthodox devotional practice, while a mass-produced icon with an authentication certificate from a church-run gift shop can serve the purpose.

My travels through Christendom have taught me ministry works with both ear and eye. When the Eternal Word took on flesh and dwelt among us, the material world was forever blessed. Objects we touch, taste, smell, and see, like bread and wine, were made holy. In preaching the Good News, Jesus showed himself to be an artist in words, painting with a verbal palette rich with the colors of salt, leaven, sown seed, wheat and tares, fig trees, mustard plants, lilies of the field, birds of the air, wine-presses, fishing nets, lost coins, lost sheep, empty oil lamps, lights under bushels, towers left unfinished, houses built on sand, and even camels, trying to squeeze through needle eyes! In an age when visual communication is fast overtaking the written text, we need to respond to questions about our faith, as Philip did to his doubting friend, Nathanael, in the opening chapter of *John*:

"Come and see."

The place to begin is by learning, ourselves, to appreciate Christianity's rich legacy of sacred art. It is our treasure hidden too long in a field, our pearl of great price, awaiting a buyer, and we should value it, like the householder, mentioned in yet another parable in *Matthew* 13, who "bringeth forth out of his treasure, things old and new." Lovers of Fine Art have much to teach us about the choices an artist makes in the creative process, so, we, too, can share their sense of exhilaration in contemplating a beautifully-crafted work of art. But there are still deeper levels of appreciation we can open up for them, especially in art, Christian in content. We should be able to explain what these works mean—and what they mean for *us*—speaking with the confidence of those who know from personal experience that when you truly seek God, you will surely find God, even in paint, smeared on canvas.

To put this notion into practice, let's spend time, now, contemplating a work of art,



approaching our subject, as if we were exploring a house, moving from communal areas to increasingly private spaces. Starting on the ground floor, we will look at the artist and the work in their historical context, then, climb to the second floor to analyze formal aspects of the piece, such as style, composition and color, before proceeding to the third floor and a consideration of the image's meaning. You could use any work you like whether a Monet water lily study or a Rothko abstract

for this exercise in art appreciation, but I find great pieces of religious-themed art offer a more complete tour of the house, especially, the top floor. My choice is Georges Rouault's *Christ and the Pharisee* from 1937, painted in oil on paper, mounted on canvas.

Entering the ground floor, we discover one very interesting fact. The life-span of the French artist (1871-1958) encompasses a remarkable period in the history of Western art. Rouault was born three years before the term "impressionist" was first used in the Paris press in scathing reference to a group of outdoor painters who would forever change the way we perceive the visible world. He outlived experimental abstract-expressionist Jackson Pollock by two years, long enough to see non-representational art become the aesthetic norm. Yet, Rouault was an outsider to all the artistic "isms," which quickly came and went during this epoch of revolutionary cultural change. Unlike most of his artistic contemporaries, who were indifferent, if not hostile, to organized religion, he was a devout Christian.

Rouault was never tempted by pure abstraction. He remained a figurative artist until the day he died, painting portraits, landscapes and still-lifes, more true than real in their motifs. A recurring cast of characters inhabits his teeming visual world, reaching from hell to heaven—dissipated prostitutes, oafish judges, the self-satisfied bourgeoisie, melancholy clowns, aging acrobats, burdened refugees, biblical patriarchs, Byzantine saints and, of course, Christ. Rouault never tired of making images of the Holy Countenance of Christ, Christ on the Cross, Christ with his Disciples, Christ with the Doctors of the Law. *Christ*

and the Pharisee belongs to this series of sacred subjects, completed in the same year as the *Old King*, Rouault's best known work, when the artist was turning his attention once more to painting, after a long period with black and white prints.

We're now ready to climb to the second floor and study the image as a work of art. What immediately catches our attention is Rouault's limited palette of colors—reds, blues, and flesh tones, with white and black highlighting. Red and blue resonate through sacred art. Red is the color of blood, associated with human life and passions; blue, of the sky and the spiritual realm. Icon writers often garb Jesus in blue and red to reveal his divinity and his humanity. Red is the color worn by judges in Rouault's numerous studies of law courts, suggesting earthly authority. But Rouault has muted any harsh contrast between these two primary colors with glazings of blue and red mixed with secondary colors, bringing out rich tints of aquamarine and carmine.

The composition seems, at first, to be simple—two figures in an almost perfect square. Rouault energizes this static arrangement with a black vertical line, just off-center. This encloses the light blue elongated figure on the right in a narrow zone of dark blue, setting it apart from the hulking red form on the left. Our eyes don't linger long on this confining vertical axis. Rouault suddenly breaches it with a strong horizontal line at the bottom of the canvas, formed by the extended arm of the figure on the right. Just as the blue form leans forward, the red form leans backward, seeming to be off-balance. The red figure's shoulder line arcs downward from right to left; the left arm cropped off by the black vertical. A good deal is going on in this juxtaposition of opposing forms, visually united by the out-stretched arm.

This is clearly not a realistic portrait of Christ or a Pharisee. Rouault does not want us to waste timing speculating about how Jesus *really* looked. He only gives us the outlines of the two figures in expansive black brush strokes, recalling the lead around images in medieval church windows—not surprising, when we realize the artist worked as an apprentice stain-glass maker in his youth. Body proportions are exaggerated. The "intellectual" Pharisee has a head too big for his body, while Jesus has an elongated neck with pronounced vocal chords, similar to icons, symbolizing Christ as Word of God. Not unlike iconography, Rouault's expressionistic style distills these figures down to their essential, visual components. But there is no aura of eternal stillness here as you would sense in an icon. Our eyes fix on that huge, splayed hand, blurred like an image caught in motion by a camera. This is a moment in real time, pulsing with revelation.

We have already seen enough glimmerings of meaning to go up the stairs to the third floor. Rouault has made our work easier with his title. Jesus is meeting a Pharisee, those doctors of Jewish law, opposed to his radical teachings. This explains the tension vibrating through the scene. Jesus has the look of a spiritual ascetic, lean and pale, who wanders the roads of Galilee with nowhere to lay his head, while his learned counterpart is all too familiar with the banqueting table, wrapped up in the fine red robes of earthly religious authority. With slightly bowed head, Jesus appears solemn, contemplative, and humble, while the expression of the worldly-wise Pharisee seems skeptical, guarded, yet curious.

There is no eye-contact. We can't help but wonder if any kind of dialogue is possible between these two contrasting types, uneasily grouped together in an indefinite space.

This appears to be the scene, recorded in *John* 3, when Nicodemus comes to see Jesus by night. The odd posture of the Pharisee, who looks as if he is peeking through a doorway, suggests just such a clandestine encounter. He is clearly, the one listening, struggling to understand the meaning of Jesus' famous discourse in this biblical passage about the need for humanity's second birth, the strange ways of the wind of the Spirit, and the story of Moses lifting up a bronze serpent in the wilderness, so the Hebrew people might look upon it and be healed. Jesus is totally concentrated on his message, his eyes downcast, the set of his face, serious and determined, knowing when he talks of God's "only begotten Son" come to save the world, he is speaking of his own death. But also, of a love, expressed by that all important arm, moving to touch, embrace, and enfold.

We have uncovered some profound truths in this Rouault painting, close to the heart of the Christian faith. This is the moment when the group tour ends, and you are encouraged to wander off on your own, perhaps onto the third-floor balcony, into a closet, or up onto the roof top of our house of art to spend some private moments contemplating this marvelously evocative image. As you consider its meaning, make it your own. Let the message meld with the medium. Perhaps, you may even experience what it means, in hymn-writer Charles Wesley's eloquent phrase, mixing music and word, to be "lost in wonder, love, and praise." Rouault would definitely approve. As he once said: "My only ambition is to be able some day to paint a Christ so moving that those who see him will be converted." Art *does* have the power to take us outside ourselves and closer to God. So, spread the word—and image.