

Art and Spirit: The Navajo Concept of *Hozho* and Kandinsky's "Inner Necessity"

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**ART AND SPIRIT: BRAIN, THE NAVAJO
CONCEPT OF HOZHO AND KANDINSKY'S "INNER NECESSITY"**

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Abstract: Most traditional art forms are an expression of the spiritual dimension of a culture's cosmology. Religious art and iconography often reveal the hidden aspects of spirit as glimpsed through the filter of cultural significance. Moreover, traditional art, although highly abstract, may actually describe sensory experiences derived in alternative phases of consciousness. The often fuzzy concepts of "art" and "spirit" are analyzed and then operationalized in a way that makes them applicable to cross-cultural research. The fact of the universally abstract nature of traditional art is analyzed and used as a clue to the function of art in expressing and penetrating to the spiritual domain. A "continuum of representational-associational abstraction" is described. These concepts are then applied to the author's experiences with Navajo art and the relation between art and the important Navajo philosophical concept of hozho ("beauty," "harmony,"). A neurocognitive model is developed that essentially supports Wassily Kandinsky's contention that abstract art is the expression of an "inner necessity" of spirit.

INTRODUCTION

In this presentation, I want to reflect upon the claim made by the great abstract painter, Wassily Kandinsky, that abstract art is the expression of an “inner necessity” of spirit. In the longer version of this paper I have supported my arguments with various sources of evidence, and have built a coherent account of art and spirit based upon the theory of biogenetic structuralism. But right now, time only allows me to suggest some relations between neurological, ethnographic and transpersonal considerations pertinent to the anthropology of art.

LINKING ART AND SPIRIT VIA THE BRAIN

Ethnographers have long known that most traditions of art on the planet are expressions of the particular society’s cosmology. A society’s art and iconography often reveal the hidden aspects of spirit as glimpsed through the filter of cultural significance. Moreover, traditional art may describe aspects of experiences encountered in alternative states of consciousness. Any attempt to understand the inner meaning of traditional art is usually futile without some grasp of the cosmology and perhaps even the direct mystical experiences expressed in the art’s iconic form. Traditions of art are, in fact, systems of symbols that are part of a much greater cultural and experiential context — a context that must at least partially be entered by the ethnologist if he or she is going to be able to critique the art from anything like an authoritative stance.

However, because all forms of traditional art derive from the operations of the human brain in its dynamic interaction with the world, there exist universal properties of art and artistic activity that may be traced, not only among most human cultures, but in the artistic activity of captive animals such as chimpanzees, monkeys and elephants who share many neurocognitive structures with humans. Thus we may expect to find among various peoples art products that may be simultaneously appreciated as “art” by us as outsiders and yet express meanings that are obscure or downright invisible to us without some understanding of the cultural context within which the “art” is embedded.

There are two important tips to the nature of the underlying neuropsychological operations that link art and spirit. One tip comes from realizing that the term “art” is extremely

ethnocentric. It is one of those words we lift from common English and try to apply in a scientific way to other cultures. One may search in vain in most of the world's traditional cultures for a term that glosses "art" in our modern sense, if by that term we refer to objects or activities set apart in special places for the sole appreciation of their aesthetic and monetary value. What art ethnologists are really interested in studying are cultural materials that involve expression or communication by way of imagery that combines both aesthetics and significance. A culture may or may not recognize a special social status similar to our "artist," and may or may not conceive of artistry as distinct from significance, but the material intersection of these two qualities -- beauty and symbol: (1) have been demonstrated in research with captive primates and other animals, (2) crop-up naturally in children's art cross-culturally, (3) are universal to human cultures, and (4) have been so since Paleolithic times. The brain cognizes and produces beauty. It also cognizes and produces significance. When the two processes intersect in material objects or in cultural activities, we from Euroamerican culture will tend to recognize "art."

The other tip to the neural processes underlying art and spirit is the universal tendency for spiritual art to be abstract in form — or more properly appear as "abstract" from our Euroamerican point of view. Ethnologists of art have long recognized that virtually all traditional art is abstract. In order to clarify this clue, however, we must appreciate that abstraction is to some extent involved in all art -- that is, involved in all beautiful and culturally significant imagery. We have to drop the Lockean¹ notion that abstract ideas derive solely from comparing the similarities and differences among the objects we encounter in our environment. The commonsense meaning of abstraction in Euroamerican culture involves a movement from the concrete particularity of sensed reality toward thought which becomes separated from the demands of representation. The notion that some abstract ideas may initially derive from internal structures of the brain and that these structures develop as they are instantiated in experience was quite foreign to Locke, as it is to many theorists to this very day. Even the great ethnographer, Robert Redfield, noted the quote "distortion of reality" that traditional art holds in

common with modern art -- reflecting of course the unconscious assumption that abstract art may be a realistic depiction of inner, spiritual processes.

As I have argued elsewhere,² all art is to one extent or another the product of mental abstraction. Perhaps a more scientifically useful model of abstraction in art would be to see that art products may be placed along a continuum from representative abstraction at one pole to associative abstraction at the other pole. I am not defining ideal types here, but rather suggesting polar tendencies along a continuum of artistic intention, expression and interpretation. All art products are abstract, but what determines their place on the continuum is their principal focus within the abstractive process -- realizing of course that the abstractive process is a reciprocal one, sometimes initiated from the inside and working its way out, sometimes beginning with an external perception which penetrates from the outside inward to the deep structures of the psyche.

SPIRIT

Operationalizing the term “spirit” is, if anything, more difficult than either “art” or “abstraction”, due primarily to the phenomenologically aberrant cultural loading on the term. The term is frequently conflated with notions such as “occult,” “sacred,” “numinous,” “religious,” “soul” and the like. It is especially difficult to define in an ethnologically meaningful way in the current climate of New Age thinking in which spirit is seen to be in opposition to anything having to do with established institutional religion. What ethnologists find in traditional cultures is a profound appreciation of the sacred in what we Westerners conceive of as merely “matter.” Moreover, there is a universal recognition among peoples that there is a hidden dimension to nature, a dimension that hosts the animated and powerful, but normally unseen forces that shape events in the perceptual world.

Even if we take a strictly psychodynamic view of spirit — that is, that spirit is the projection of our own inner selves upon nature — the loss of the sense of the sacred and spiritual in modern society has been accompanied by an interruption of an essential process in spiritual discovery and expression. This makes it doubly difficult for we western scientists to understand

the inextricable link between art and spirit in the minds of traditional peoples. But as those who work with their personal spiritual lives will know, dialog with the depths is generally carried out by way of imagery found in dreams, in rituals and meditation techniques, as well as in various apperception methods such as the esoteric tarot. What has been lost in modern society is the easy association of imagery with culturally rich spiritual meanings. In my opinion, the more astute critiques of modern art, or at least certain schools of modern art such as abstract expressionism, correctly interpret the artistic process as a re-discovery of the spiritual dimension of imagery.

This essential process of dialog between the conscious self and the inner spiritual realm remains intact for many traditional peoples. That means that the core symbolism within their cultural heritage remains pregnant with spiritual significance within their daily lives. And much of this symbolically pregnant imagery is what constitutes traditional art in the eyes of Westerners. I find it useful then to retain the use of the terms “spirit” and “spiritual” for the recognition by peoples everywhere of what Eliade called “cosmic religiosity” — that being the recognition of an occult dimension behind the everyday world of appearances. In this sense, therefore, spiritual art may be defined as the confluence of beauty, significance and spiritual association in the same imagery, regardless of the culture within which the imagery is found.

ART AND SPIRIT IN NAVAJO

Let me give you an example of the linkage between art and spirit among a people who have not yet lost track of their traditional roots. In Navajo philosophy, the world of appearances masks an essential and hidden domain of spirit called nilch'i or Holy Wind.³ Physical reality -- indeed, all events in the phenomenal world -- are manifestations of this one, vast cosmic Wind that flows in and out of all things and that underlies the normally hidden totality of the universe. Holy Wind is a metaphor for the essential, living and unitary truth of nature, from the contemplation of which the People attain their intuitions about the purpose of existence. It is an ideal in Navajo aesthetics to live as closely in accord with the inner nature of the Holy Wind as possible. Aspects of the Holy Wind which permeate various phenomena like mountains, water,

corn, lightning and so on are conceived to be the Holy People, a vast number of deities associated through myth and story.

The closest one can come in the Navajo language to “art” is na’ashch’aah which refers to the act of decorating, painting or designing something that is beautiful. Beauty (or hozho) for the Navajo is an internal mental state, not an objective quality of things quote “out there.” Beauty is a way of living, and objects can be made with such skill that they enhance the beauty one experiences while walking through life. Beauty is what one projects onto the world from within, and this projection is in accord with the essential nature of the Holy Wind.

Like so many peoples, most everybody in Navajo once produced art to some extent and this art is still found in the form of everyday objects like jewelry, pottery, utensils, fabrics, etc. And much of the symbolism incorporated into these everyday objects has profound cosmological significance when experienced by those people who are still able to relate the symbolism to the ancient stories about the adventures of the Holy People. A case in point is the recent exhibit of Navajo weaving at the Museum of Indian Arts and Culture in Santa Fe. Researchers at the Laboratory of Anthropology of the Museum invited a number of elder Navajo weavers in to examine and comment upon some of the finer examples of weaving in the museum collections. Many of us who work in Navajo have naively assumed that whereas such media as ritual sandpainting held great spiritual and cosmological significance, the weaving was more a craft embellished by beautiful scenes and geometric patterns of less spiritual significance. This view could not be further from the truth. It turns out that Navajo weaving operates as a mnemonic device and may be read by those who can match the symbolic code to the historical and cosmological stories they depict, and the stories they read in the tapestries is as moving as it is profound.⁴

CONCLUSION

In this presentation I have only had the time to briefly suggest some of the theoretical connections we are beginning to make between abstract art, spiritual experience and interpretation, and what we are now discovering about how the brain works. The anthropology

of art may prove to be an excellent forum in which to establish these interdisciplinary relations, and develop the requisite theory to account for both the universal aspects of abstract art and the very personal and often local significance such art has for peoples everywhere. We have a long way to go before we can pin down all of the neuropsychological processes involved in the linkage of art and spirit. However, it is my opinion on the basis of my research so far, both as a neuroanthropologist and as a practicing artist, that Wassily Kandinsky was essentially right when he insisted that abstract art, whether that art be traditional or modern, is the product of an “inner necessity” of spirit to express itself. It has also been said that “in humanity the universe becomes aware of itself.” If this be so, then I suspect that spiritual art is one of the main modes by which the universe expresses itself through us — and for us.

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¹ See John Locke’s 1690 volume, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

² See Laughlin, Charles D. and John McManus (1997) “Abstraction and Spirit: A Neurocognitive Account of Religious Symbolism in Traditional and Modern Art.” paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, D.C., November, 1997.

³ See James Kale McNeley (1981) *Holy Wind in Navajo Philosophy*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.

⁴ See Willink, Roseann S. and Paul G. Zolbrod (1996) *Weaving a World: Textiles and the Navajo Way of Seeing*. Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press.