The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art
Other Books by Charlene Spretnak

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Missing Mary: The ReEmergence of the Virgin Mary in the Modern Church
Lost Goddesses of Early Greece: A Collection of Pre-Hellenic Myths
The Politics of Women's Spirituality (editor)
THE SPIRITUAL DYNAMIC IN MODERN ART
Art History Reconsidered, 1800 to the Present

Charlene Spretnak
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INTRODUCTION

THE GREAT UNDERGROUND RIVER THAT FLOWS THROUGH MODERN ART

While I was working on this book, I attended the opening of an art exhibition at a New York gallery with a friend of mine. She introduced me to the gallery’s senior staff person, an elegant woman in her 50s who was predictably dressed in black, and mentioned that I was writing a book on art. The woman inquired about the specific subject, and when I told her that I was researching the spiritual dynamic in modern art, the muscles in her face tightened, and her eyes hardened into a penetrating stare focused on a perspectival point somewhere on the wall behind my head. Slowly and firmly she corrected me in modulated tones of unassailable authority—”You mean the psychological dynamic in modern art”—then turned abruptly and walked away. I smiled for it was hardly the first time I had encountered disdain at my raising an unwelcome “nonsubject” concerning modern art.

In a similar vein, the art historian James Elkins observed in On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art (2004), “Straightforward talk about religion is rare in art departments and art schools, and wholly absent from art journals unless the art in question is transgressive.” He added, “For people in my profession of art history, the very fact that I have written this book may be enough to cast me into a dubious category of fallen and marginal historians who somehow don’t get modernism or postmodernism.” Although attitudes are beginning to change in a few quarters, the situation Elkins describes still prevails in the professional art world overall.

But why is it that these disdainful attitudes are common in the art world? Why is it that the millions of people in this country who have taken art history courses or attended museum exhibitions or collected books on a few favorite artists have most likely never encountered such basic information as the following? Mondrian’s hard-edged grid paintings, considered by many to be the epitome of tough-minded modern art, were created to be modern visual expressions of the esoteric spiritual teachings of Theosophy. The reason Renoir loved to paint women, especially women in gardens, was that he considered the female face and body, along with nature, to be God’s finest creation. Brancusi’s sleekly modern sculptures of birds, eggs, and other natural forms were expressions of his admiration for the Romanian peasant culture’s
ancient, semi-pagan spiritual practices and symbols. In these examples and hundreds more, the artist’s spiritual sensibilities were central, in concert with other factors, to the creation of celebrated works of modern art.

People outside of the art world have often said to me, “Yes, but all art is spiritual.” Is it? Surely not. Many modern and contemporary artists who create visually engaging works have not the slightest interest in the spiritual dimension of life. Those who do, though—and the number is far greater than most art world professionals would suppose—are drawn to the common ground between the unlimited possibilities of art and the unbounded nature of the spiritual.

When I began the research for this book, I thought that the number of spiritually oriented prominent modern and contemporary artists might be modest, but persistent sleuthing has yielded over time an abundance of discoveries of spiritual influences on the making of modern art. Often the little-known statements by the artists themselves about their spiritual engagement and its expression in their art were deeply moving. As my files of substantive evidence continued to grow, I came to realize that one cannot fully grasp the complexity and depth of modern and contemporary art if the spiritual dimension is ignored, denied, downplayed, or dismissed.

“WE JUST WEREN’T TAUGHT THAT WAY”

Near the beginning of my research, a surprising experience in a major art museum demonstrated how intense the denial of spiritual influence on modern art really is. I was in London in July 1997 and went to the Tate Gallery to see an exhibition entitled *Mondrian: From Nature to Abstraction*. Since I was aware of the strong evidence that Mondrian was a committed Theosophist throughout his life and expressed the principles of Theosophy via his grid paintings, I was particularly keen to see this exhibition and learn more from the curators’ commentary. Once inside the exhibition, I began to read the curators’ gallery guide, a brochure offering a room-by-room orientation to the selected art. I soon came to an authoritative statement so shockingly contrary to the historical evidence that my solar plexus tightened, and I froze for a moment where I was standing. The curators allowed that “it seems clear” that Theosophy “played a significant role in his early development,” as demonstrated in Mondrian’s early figurative paintings, such as the large triptych titled *Evolution* (1910–1911), but then they added, “It is equally clear that he rapidly left it behind.”

The irrefutable proof of this shift, they asserted, is that Mondrian then began moving toward the creation of his highly rational and disciplined abstract paintings, the grids. Yet only a few yards from the exhibition, in the museum’s bookstore, was a display of many copies of the English translation of *Mondrian* (1994), written by the distinguished Dutch art historian Carel Blotkamp, which is a definitive, copiously documented study of Mondrian, including his lifelong commitment to Theosophy. As the artist had stated both formally and informally for decades, his grid paintings were a direct engagement with the metaphysical and spiritual teachings of Theosophy, particularly the meaning of the vertical and the horizontal as explicated by Madame Blavatsky. I was at a loss to understand how extensive, credible documentation could be declared impossible and nonexistent. Wasn’t this an instance of compromised historiography?
The following year, while I was on the first of many trips to the Getty Research Institute’s library to conduct research for this book, I stopped in at the office of John Walsh, who was then director of the Getty Museum and whom I knew socially. I asked why he thought so flagrant a contradiction could occur between the Tate curators’ emphatic disallowal and Mondrian’s own Theosophical statements long after his early period. I cited a few other, though less dramatic, examples as well of art historians asserting secular interpretations that seemed unable to absorb testimony by the artists themselves about compelling spiritual interests. Walsh considered the question for a moment and then replied, “We just weren’t taught that way.” By way of explanation, he recalled for me that art historians and curators were—and largely still are—schooled in the notion of the great divide between the modern project and traditional culture. Specifically, they are taught that modern art began in earnest when the Impressionists’ first exhibition, in 1874, signaled a grand leap into modernity, leaving behind tradition, religion, community, and bourgeois values. It is held, therefore, that one would not find significant spiritual content in modern art because modern art is about the escape from religion. This trajectory was not unfamiliar to me because I had written two books in the 1990s that explore the cultural history of modernity (States of Grace and The Resurgence of the Real). Also, I was aware of experiments in psychology demonstrating that once someone is educated in a particular frame of reference during his or her formative years, subsequent events and information that do not fit within that framework often do not register.

A few months later, I met Peter Selz—another distinguished art historian, a former chief curator at the Museum of Modern Art, and a former art museum director—to whom I posed the very same question. He thought about it for a while and then replied, remarkably, with exactly the same six words John Walsh had used, albeit with a German accent: We just weren’t taught that way.

That same year, the Museum of Modern Art mounted an exhibition entitled Jackson Pollock. Reviewing it for The Times of London, W. Januszczak observed,

Signs of Pollock’s longtime intoxication with occult gibberish are omnipresent in the great exhibition itself, yet the catalogue to the MOMA show ignores them determinedly. Is this because noting that this triumphant memorial show is groaning with occult references would result in some sort of perceived diminution of Pollock’s achievement?

Most likely that was, indeed, the thinking behind that consistent omission by the curators and art historians contributing essays to the exhibition catalogue. However, it is unlikely that Pollock’s interest in Jungian explorations of symbols and mysticism in the 1940s would cause the public to feel less drawn to his art. It is as if the near-consensus among art world professionals that modern art must be kept free of spirituality so that it can maintain its high level of seriousness is a defensive action solely to preserve the preferences of the art world itself. Do the famous modern artists really need that sort of protective censorship?

In spite of my cordial conversations with John Walsh and Peter Selz, various museum curators’ published denials of spiritual content in modern art, and several raised-eyebrow encounters I had with other art world professionals, I was not prepared for what “we just weren’t taught that way” would actually mean in two crucial
areas related to my research: the way books on modern artists are catalogued in the electronic databases (including the electronic catalogues in libraries) and the way the indexes in those books are compiled. Imagine my surprise when I first sat down at a terminal of the electronic catalogue in the extensive art history library of the Getty Research Institute in 1998 (my starting point and “home base” among several art history libraries): whether I entered into the search box spirituality, spiritual, religion, religious, or something similar and linked it with a broad or more narrowly focused topic in modern art or the name of a modern artist (I tried several whom I knew to be good bets), the response was always “0 Matches.” I kept at it for a long while, until I finally conceded that the accepted boundary between bona fide subjects and nonsubjects in the history of modern art was such that my subject did not show up at all in the categorizing system of relevant books. I sat, stunned, staring over the computer screen to the wall of windows and beyond. Would it be at all possible to research what I suspected to be a vast and complex subject without benefit of the electronic catalogues of library books?

Eventually it occurred to me that in open-stack libraries (the Getty Research Library is partially open-stack) it might be possible to conduct a hands-on search through books on those modern artists I knew to have significant spiritual influences in their art. It would entail pulling every book from the shelves that looked promising regarding an artist and then consulting the table of contents and the index in order to find the pages bearing relevant information, preferably direct quotations from the artist on the spiritual dimension of his or her art. This, then, was Plan B—but it did not go well. In several lengthy monographs on each of the “sure bet” artists I had chosen as a starting point, I found that neither the table of contents nor the index contained mention of any spiritual interests, beyond sometimes noting the religion of the artist’s family of origin. It was not so surprising that this subject did not show up in chapter titles in the table of contents, but that it was entirely missing from the index in book after book was, again, shocking.

An intriguing trompe d’oeil sculpture by Andy Goldsworthy had been installed in an open area not far from where I sat at a table on a partially subterranean level of the building. The work consisted of an artful arrangement of flat rocks, forming irregular layers in concentric circles around what seemed to be a hole in the polished floor, as if nature had erupted into the research library. In my near-catatonic state, this mysterious insistence by nature to be remembered, even at the core of a building, was oddly comforting and engaging. I moved toward the sculptural arrangement and saw that it did not, in fact, include a rupture of the floor but was an homage to the materials and patterns of the natural world. The presence of this alluring artwork gently drew me out of my stunned condition. Eventually a thought arose in my mind: it might be the case that the books I had just consulted did, in fact, contain direct quotations by the artists about spiritual concerns related to their art—but that both the author and the indexer “just weren’t taught that way” so any seemingly anomalous statements by the artist received little attention from the author and did not register at all with the indexer. Consequently, there would be no mention of any such material in the table of contents or even in the index—even though the quotation from the artist appears plainly in the text. This might be the situation. If it were, it would be possible, after all, to research and write the book I had in mind. It would simply be a
matter of “going fishing” through page after page in the sections of all those hundreds of books that I suspected might contain relevant statements.

I returned to the stacks, pulled down armloads of books on a particular artist, and settled in at a nearby table. Most of them yielded nothing for my quest, and some scholars argued, oddly, that absence of church attendance by the artist proves a lack of interest in the spiritual. Several books, however, presented direct statements by the artist about art-related spiritual matters in pronouncements that were clear, unambiguous, and sometimes even expansive. This process took on the air of a treasure hunt, even if painstaking. In this way, I slowly accumulated files of photocopied testimonial material on more than 150 prominent historical modern artists and more than 100 prominent contemporary artists whose work has a spiritual dimension. In addition, I have assembled more than 50 files on relevant groups, or schools, of modern artists. I have also collected scores of relevant books, including exhibition catalogues from several exhibitions in recent years on the spiritual in modern and contemporary art that were held at small, medium-sized, and even a few major art museums (in Europe).

My quest to ascertain probable artists to investigate was aided by the networks of friendship that many leading, spiritually oriented artists developed with like-minded colleagues, often in other countries. They tended to correspond with artists who were *simpatico* and understood what their art was about. Moreover, not all of the statements by prominent artists about spiritual influences on their art were invisible to book indexers. In addition, the search was downright simple in a few cases in which the artists thoughtfully (from my perspective) left a paper trail of public writings and lectures on the spiritual in art.

**The Big Denial**

Up to the 1920s the spiritual dynamic in modern art was common knowledge, especially in the major cities of Europe. The fascination of Expressionist and abstract artists with the immaterial realm was discussed, admired, and theorized about in hundreds of essays, articles, books, and other declarations made by art critics and by the avant-garde artists themselves. Removed from the prewar avant-garde culture by 20 years and the Atlantic Ocean, however, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., the first director of the Museum of Modern Art, curated an exhibition in 1936, *Cubism and Abstract Art*, in which he presented an entirely formalist interpretative framework of the new art. (In this, he drew from Heinrich Wölflin’s formal principles of “scientific art criticism” and his trips to Europe in the 1930s.) Barr asserted, remarkably, that cubistic and abstracted art arose because the artists had grown bored with painting facts, that is, naturalistic forms. Although his exhibition displayed numerous paintings by artists who had published clear statements about the metaphysical meaning of their art, those were not referred to in his essay in the catalogue. The spiritual dimension was simply removed from serious discussion of the art. Not only was this exhibition influential in New York but it then traveled to six cities.

By the 1950s the entire history of modern art was framed with the premises of formalism. In this narrative, the Impressionist painters are appreciated as stalwart explorers who had loosened the style of their brush strokes, initially scandalizing
Parisian art critics and the viewing public in 1874. Cézanne then emphasized geometric forms as pictorial elements, and the Cubists subsequently blew apart figurative expectations as never before. Next, Kupka, Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Malevich each broke through the remaining formal boundaries of figurative subject matter to achieve non-objective (abstract) art. Only in the late 1940s and the 1950s was the final aesthetic assault made and victory achieved with the emergence of pure Abstract Expressionist painting. In this exclusively formalist narrative, the subject matter of the paintings, whether it may have been spiritual or otherwise, is entirely beside the point.

Formalism was eventually challenged, beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when a Marxian and sociological “social art history” began to emerge. Social art historians explore “the question of how art functions socially and politically,” as the art historian Howard Risatti put it, and “the conditions of representation—the technical and social conditions—of its historical moment,” as T. J. Clark put it. In that supposedly radical challenge, the social art historians were firmly united with their formalist opponents on one point: that historical evidence about spiritual content in modern art was not to be mentioned on the grounds that it was unbearably backward, clearly irrelevant, and frankly distasteful to both of the contesting sensibilities.

For more than 70 years, then, the spiritual dynamic in modern art was all but invisible within the professional art world because it did not fit within the contours of the historicism of modern art. The foundational assumptions about the bold, secular achievements of modern art held that it was a vanguard force advancing and energizing, as well as reflecting, the development of modernity itself. In cases where religion was obviously involved—say, in works by Rouault—its presence was acknowledged but regarded as merely tangential to the bold art itself. Even when a prominent artist working in the decidedly secular zeitgeist following World War I painted a religious picture, such as Max Beckmann’s interpretation of the Crucifixion, the primacy of the accepted narrative of the history of modern art absorbed such anachronistic blips without undue attention.

In fairness, it should be noted that the field of art history was hardly alone during the decades following World War II in embracing a strictly secular frame of reference to determine what constitutes serious scholarship and sophisticated knowledge about the significant historical events and developments of the modern era. Moreover, from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s, in particular, the entire culture experienced a muscular burst of modernity and expediency, which was informed by a displacement of all things sentimental or nostalgic by new ways of doing things that were seen to be tough-minded, powerfully efficient, and supremely rational. Although most Americans were still members of a religious congregation then, the perception was widespread in intellectual circles that religion was essentially vestigial, a view that informed much of the “smart” commentary on postwar life, as well as the academic disciplines of history and the social sciences. This attitude was reinforced by the prominence of existentialism and Freudian theory in the postwar period.

The intensification of modernity following World War II was part of a long process that had begun much earlier with the emergence of the modern worldview. This massive cultural shift spanned the fifteenth through eighteenth centuries by
incorporating the results of four sequential movements. The first was Renaissance humanism, an effort to escape the lock on power held jointly by the church and the king. To carve out new space in the culture, the Renaissance humanists revived classical learning and declared the unlimited potential of the (male) human: Man Is the Measure of All Things. The second foundational movement was the Reformation, in the sixteenth century, which not only challenged papal corruption but also eschewed the communities of priests, friars, monks, and nuns, as well as the Communion of Saints. Instead, Luther taught, the only thing that matters is the relationship between the individual and God. This new emphasis on the individual subsequently spawned a secular version, which eventually developed into the Enlightenment concept of the supposedly totally Autonomous (male) Individual. The third foundational movement was the Scientific Revolution, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which expanded knowledge of the physical world seen through the lens of the mechanistic worldview, the notion that the physical world, including the human body, functions mechanically like a clockworks. With the final and synthesizing foundational movement—the Enlightenment, in the eighteenth century—the modern worldview was fully framed, as the “new mechanical philosophy” in science was adopted and applied to all social institutions. This redesign of institutions extended even to religion: in France and Britain, Deism, a version of Christianity, posited a distant God who flicked the mechanistic universe into action but otherwise does not interfere with the thoroughly Autonomous Individual or the naturally rational workings of the political economy. Moreover, the French Revolution had demonstrated, in a particularly violent fashion (by killing hundreds of priests), that religion in a modern, secular, democratic republic is essentially a problem to be managed, through force, laws, or persuasion.

Like all successful ideologies, modernity seemed to illuminate the obvious truth. As such, it was largely experienced as being liberating rather than restrictive. In fact, the modern perspective felt so powerfully incisive, especially during the post–World War II period, that no one seemed to question the premise that certain questions were never to be raised, certain areas never researched. For instance, the extensive body of commentary by art critics and statements by artists from 1886 to 1920 concerning spiritual influences on the art of the day was largely ignored after the mid-1930s, as if it did not exist. (The one major exception was the republication by the Guggenheim Foundation in 1946 of Kandinsky’s book *On the Spiritual in Art* [1911].) Thousands of art books written from the 1930s to the present day about the artists and architects in this book, most of them claiming to be comprehensive and penetrating studies, avoid any mention whatsoever of the artists’ self-proclaimed interest in spiritual matters and its presence in their work. No conspiracy was necessary to effect these omissions, merely the extension to art theory of the informing values and preferences of the secular modern worldview.

In addition, as information accrued following World War II about the occult interests of several of the founding political theorists of Nazism, many art historians and other intellectuals accepted the explanatory theory that occult spirituality had been a cause of the Third Reich, rather than an instrument of its strategists. Consequently, those art historians, curators, and critics felt disinclined to write about the spiritual as a factor in the emergence of modern art. In their view, championing the
secular—even to the extent of ignoring the extensive documentation of the spiritual in modern art—is a moral virtue.

Moreover, a major factor in the training of curators and art historians for several decades after World War II was the dominance of the formalist explanatory theory of art. This approach entailed a highly disciplined focus solely on formal qualities (compositional elements such as line, form, color, texture, and depth) in works of art. The influential critic Clement Greenberg played a central role in establishing formalist analysis as the only sophisticated way to consider art. Formalism banished attention to content in general, but even after that mode of analysis lost its hegemonic status, by the late 1980s, disapproval remained in place toward attention to any spiritual content in particular. However, as was pointed out in 1995 by Victoria Combalia, a curator in Barcelona, this attitude is primarily one of the Anglo-American art world. She wondered in a catalogue essay, "Why does there exist in North America or Anglo-Saxon culture this aversion to speaking of a spiritual dimension, and why is any attempt at transcendence equated to 'vaporous and insubstantial' means to something less pictorial?"

In 2010 an art historian confirmed to me that the collective attitude toward this subject is nearly as it was in the 1950s, noting that “spirituality is something of a dirty word in art history and art criticism.” She added that this situation has lately begun to change . . . but slowly. She might have added that the change usually takes place only in limited circles and is often temporary. The Abstract Expressionists, for instance, made quite a few statements about spiritual influences in their art, but once they had died, their paintings were usually taught and discussed solely in formalist terms. This pattern of resilient denial by most art world professionals has continued, with a few exceptions. Still, the publication in 1966 of a rebellious article by the art historian Sixten Ringbom challenged the Big Denial by citing extensive esoteric influences on Kandinsky’s work (contra Barr’s formalist exclusions). That article seemed to open a small space for discussions of cultural history, including spiritual interests of modern artists. This subject was explored by Robert Rosenblum in his Lethaby Lectures at the Royal College of Art in London in 1970 and in his Slade Lectures at the University of Oxford in 1972, as well as his earlier article, “The Abstract Sublime.” Since then a narrow but unending stream of books, articles, and exhibitions have tried to break though the denial. I list these works, most of which were largely ignored, in the Appendix. Clearly, this rich subject has yet to be fully recognized, in its scope, its depth, and its centrality.

Since the largest, most impressive exhibition on the spiritual in modern art ever held in this country to date was The Spiritual in Modern Art: Abstract Painting, 1890–1985 (which was mounted at the Los Angeles County Museum of Modern Art in 1986 and then traveled to Chicago and then to The Hague), I was curious to know what the effect had been in the art world. When I phoned the head curator, Maurice Tuchman, in August 1998 and asked him that, he replied in a tone of resignation, “None whatsoever.” This was a hyperbolic response, granted, since the exhibition catalogue has remained one of the best collections of essays on the subject, has been used in numerous college courses, and has influenced at least some curators in recent years. Tuchman meant, however, that his groundbreaking exhibition had had no effect in his world of high-level curators and museum directors.
at major art museums. No one exclaimed that he had changed art history. No one mounted additional “idea shows” at other major museums, he noted, that would have explored particular areas of this vast territory. Instead, the response from his fellow art world professionals was largely one of cognitive dissonance and silence. We just weren’t taught that way.

The Current Situation

The general attitude among art critics toward the possibility of a spiritual dimension in modern and contemporary art has wobbled in recent years and is certainly less severe than it was previously. Interestingly, the turning of the millennium sparked a temporary uptick in spiritual allusions in the media and in the culture in general. This millenarian current was evident in several contemporary works of art, as well, and in open-minded assessments of that art by several critics. For example, “the s word” appeared quite frequently, and often admiringly, in reviews in the New York Times of art exhibitions during the few years before and after the year 2000. More than merely mentioned, the spiritual dimension was often discussed by the Times critics for a while as an inherent element of the art under review. (This still occurs but less frequently and is dependent on the art being exhibited for review.)

The millennial fluorescence of the spiritual in conversation, in culture, and in many art reviews faded away, however, after a few years. With regard to the art world, perhaps too many eyebrows were raised in response. In any event, the status quo was restored by mid-decade, a situation at least one art critic sees as pointlessly restrictive: writing in 2005 in the New York Times, Ken Johnson observed somewhat plaintively, “Academic art historians and critics still tend to discourage talking seriously about the spiritual in art. But considering how many artists continue to be motivated by spiritual urges, however the word spiritual is defined—this is something worth discussing.”

Discussing behind closed doors, perhaps. Many of the younger artists I have met who are trying to become established told me that they speak about the spiritual dimension of their work only with other artists. If the critics, curators, or gallerists were to get wind of this interest, they assured me, the artist would be written off as “not serious” and having “collapsed into sentimentality.”

Some art world professionals who for decades adamantly resisted and denied the evidence for the spiritual dimension of the history of modern art have now shifted to a posture of bored disdain: “Oh, that? We’ve always known that.” They will then usually name Kandinsky, Mondrian, and perhaps one or two others, revealing that they are under the impression that this category includes only a few oddballs among the greats of modern art. Conversely, they may be aware that the extensive exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in 2008, Traces du Sacré, presented 450 celebrated works of modern art with spiritual influences and that a subsequent exhibition, Beyond Belief, cosponsored by the Jewish Contemporary Museum and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2013, featured 60 spiritually engaged works by 50 prominent artists—but the gatekeepers of the old order are quick to point out that the quantity of evidence does not matter. The entire stream of books, articles, and exhibitions on this subject in recent decades can have no more significance to the history of modern
art, it is held, than the discovery that many more prominent modern artists wore grey socks, for instance, than was assumed.

As an indicator that the situation has not changed measurably up to the time of this writing, one might consider the large exhibition presented by the Museum of Modern Art in 2013 on *Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*. Paying homage to Barr, the curator maintained the thesis that the invention of abstract painting was strictly a formalist endeavor, asserting this time that the breakthrough to abstraction was achieved when the artists “abandoned the premise of making a picture of something” and made “a break with subject matter.” That, however, is not true of the pioneers of non-objective painting in and around 1912, which the curator labels an *annus mirabilis*. While they no longer included objects in their paintings, the pioneers of abstraction most definitely had a (spiritual) subject in mind: they stated in their writings that they were painting the dynamics of the immaterial, transcendent realm. This is not mentioned at all in the Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition, except to briskly explain away any possibility of the topic in the catalogue. In fact, Kandinsky wrote in “On the Question of Form” in 1912 that it did not matter a bit if a painting was abstract or figurative as long as the artist had been able to commune with the “inner necessity” (by which forms manifest themselves in the physical realm from the spiritual, immaterial realm). That was the great breakthrough, in his view.

Coming only five years after the Centre Pompidou’s large exhibition *Traces du Sacré*, the MoMA exhibition seemed an incidence of the old guard digging in their heels, insisting that a serious discussion of the invention of abstraction simply must disallow all the (well-documented) evidence of the central role of the artists’ metaphysical frame of reference as they strove to create visual depictions of the immaterial realm. By way of explanation, the MoMA curator states, “Kandinsky’s rhetoric of spirituality, and his positioning of the artist as a prophet in the modern world, are out of mode with critical sensibilities.” But why should that make any difference to standards of scholarship? Does an art historian have to be a Theosophist or to admire it personally in order to read and take seriously Kandinsky’s abundant writings on his spiritual quest, and that of his avant-garde circles, at the heart of this pioneering art? I am reminded of the observation made, with some exasperation, by the scholar of religion Wendy Doniger during a seminar in 2007 on art and spirituality when she perceived a lack of clarity in the discussion regarding the (attempted) distancing instilled since the Enlightenment between the scholar and the subject: “The argument we’re interested in here, about whether art is religious, has nothing to do with whether religious people are right or wrong.” The sort of open-minded examination of the documentation and the historical record that she advocates is apparently undesirable for many scholars of the art discussed in this book because the content of that historical evidence is “out of mode” with contemporary “critical sensibilities.”

In an essay on Kandinsky in the *Inventing Abstraction* catalogue, the curator further proposes that one term the artist used is the linchpin in scholarly efforts to understand his work: *innere Notwendigkeit*, which she translates as “internal necessity” (although it is usually translated as “inner necessity”). She sees the explication of this term as being responsible for much errant scholarship: “...its vagaries have led many scholars to a simplistic framing of Kandinsky’s thinking as concerned
with a primarily transcendental immateriality and purity.” As we will see in Chapter 2, “simplistic” would better describe the disembedding of one term from all of Kandinsky’s numerous spiritual writings about the new art and the stripping that term of its metaphysical meaning in order to arrive at the thesis that the artist was actually interested in issues of language, cognition, and music—as opposed to a contextualizing, and nearly consuming, interest in transcendent immateriality.

In some quarters of the art world, the censorial attitudes have become somewhat destabilized, allowing a measure of openness in the conversation and perhaps new possibilities. For instance, the Guggenheim Museum hosted an online forum on *The Spiritual (Re)Turn* in October 2009, which used “the spiritual sensibility” of Kandinsky as the point of departure for a series of discussions. Also in New York, the School of Visual Arts has sponsored two events exploring aspects of this subject: a conference on *The Arts and the Spiritual* in October 2001 at which the art critic Donald Kuspit gave the keynote address, “On Reconsidering the Spiritual in Art,” and an online symposium (a moderated invitational conference) in April 2011 on *Beyond Kandinsky: Revisiting the Spiritual in Art*. In London, the Tate Britain art museum held a one-day conference in November 2013 on *Modernism and Spirituality*, featuring Linda Nochlin and Sarah O’Brien Twohig. As a participant in the School of Visual Arts’ online symposium on *Beyond Kandinsky*, I found the postings to be substantive, knowledgeable, and thoughtful. Yet I was not surprised when the convener, Taney Roniger, later conveyed to me that many artist friends told her that they had read all the postings every day of the week-long symposium with interest but had refrained from posting in the space for public comments because it still felt very unsafe to be associated with this subject. It is as if they were reading fascinating contraband with a flashlight under the covers… 100 years after Kandinsky’s book!

The conferences and symposia cited above as exceptions were focused on only a small part of the larger story, usually the first three decades of the twentieth century. In fact, a vast underground river flows through the entire history of modern art but has been covered over by a cement culvert installed by the received narrative of art history. The lifelong spiritual interests of some 250 prominent modern artists informed what they painted and the ways in which they painted, or sculpted—or designed, in the case of several esteemed modern architects. That is, in many of the most celebrated and original works in the canon of modern art form follows spirit—if one employs the broader meaning of “form” as an umbrella term for the formal qualities of the visual arts. (I don't think Louis Sullivan would mind my tweaking his famous slogan, as he was clear about the spiritual aspects of organic architecture.) Although many of the masterpieces of modern art are spiritually infused, their creators often discussed this subject only in the last decade or two or their lives—often in little-known journal entries, letters, and recorded conversations, once their reputations were firmly established. Still, abundant historical evidence exists, including the fact that several of the towering figures in the history of modern art were quite forthcoming in print about the spiritual dimension of their oeuvre.

Although the attempted discussion of this subject has thus far met largely with disdain, silence, or marginalization, I believe the stalemate could be dislodged if the following conditions were achieved. It would be helpful (1) if the lingering
misconceptions would be swept away; (2) if a large amount of new and significant historical evidence would be put onto the table, in the form of a comprehensive and chronological overview; (3) if a better grasp of the cultural history and the relevant religious traditions would be added; and (4) if an open-minded reading would be facilitated by the gathering of statements by scores of the artists themselves—both historical modern artists and prominent contemporary artists—about the centrality of the spiritual dimension of their acclaimed art. The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art seeks to make these contributions.

The Plan of the Book

To organize a survey of the spiritual dynamic in the history of modern art according to formal genres, as earlier books have done, is a habit of mind instilled by the formalist approach, which missing the lived experience of the artists. I first considered organizing this book according to the spiritual orientations and religions involved, as there is value in the immersion in each of those orientations while reading about the artists who were drawn to it. Ultimately, I chose a chronological structure for relating this extensive story because that is a familiar approach for readers. I was then delighted to realize that telling the story chronologically would still allow for immersion into each of the various spiritual traditions because in each historical period within the modern era certain concerns and various compelling approaches to those concerns were “in the air.” Specifically, one main spiritual orientation generally dominated the zeitgeist in most of the periods, especially among artists and writers. While previous books on this subject have either addressed only one portion of the total, or have focused on a few spiritual orientations without the chronological story, or have presented a wide array of topics (as did the curators of the Traces du Sacré exhibition, which was organized into 22 categories), this book presents the chronological story of the movements in modern art with a contextualizing discussion of the cultural history and spiritual orientation(s) that had maximal influence on the artists during each time period.

Each chapter in this book begins with the historical and cultural context of the period and then presents the chronological flow of developments, with an emphasis on the major groups and individuals. This historical stream widens in spots where I present a brief spiritual profile of a prominent artist, incorporating his or her own statements. As will be seen, spiritual influences helped to shape the professional life and innovative work of numerous major figures in the history of modern art. In addition, several art movements that are generally assumed to have had no spiritual content will be shown to have had quite a bit. Similarly, it is often overlooked that several formal breakthroughs in modern art originated within movements that had an overt spiritual orientation.

I rely on the words of the artists themselves in determining whether an interest in spirituality, or religion, was important to them and their art. I do not pass judgment on the formal qualities of any painting or sculpture as a determination of whether it is informed by spirituality or not. In the case of contemporary artists, I cite direct statements they have made, either in print or in taped interviews I conducted with them. In addition, by writing a book about modern and contemporary artists whose
work had, or has, a spiritual dimension, I am definitely not implying that all other art is less worthy of admiration.

A few caveats are in order. The mapping of an extensive territory necessarily requires some boundaries, at least loosely drawn. In order to arrive at a book length that publishers consider reasonable, my scope is mainly limited to prominent historical and contemporary modern artists in France, Germany, England, and the United States from 1800 to 2014, as well as developments in Russia from 1880 to 1920. A few artists are also included from Italy, Spain, Sweden, Central Europe, Canada, Mexico, Cuba, Brazil, Kenya, Iran, India, Pakistan, Japan, and elsewhere. In addition, any organizational scheme that seeks to incorporate the relevant art and artists, the periods within the modern era, and the spiritual orientations in play will need to be flexible, especially since several artists were influenced by two different spiritual orientations. The reader’s tolerance for soft boundaries and for the fact that some artists’ spiritual interests could place them in either of two chapters will be rewarded with a multivalent overview of this extensive subject. A final caveat is that my method of focusing on the testimonies of the artists themselves (or, in a few cases, testimonies of reliable witnesses to things they said or did) means that there is an inevitable unevenness in the quantity of coverage: some artists were quite forthcoming with relevant information, while others made a few clear statements about spiritual interests playing out in their art but never cared to say more. The latter are included here but more briefly.

A large number of the great works of modern art arose from within networks of talented artists dedicated to creating strikingly new art that was courageous not only visually but also spiritually. That is, those prominent modern artists whose work has a spiritual dimension usually cultivated professional friendships with like-minded artists, through correspondence or in person. All branches within the field of history have lately begun to focus attention on the networks of relationships that figured significantly in historical developments, and a fuller range of study of artists’ professional relationships would illuminate the networks of spiritual friendships that were important in the development of modern art.

As for my own spiritual orientation, I was raised in a loving Catholic family in the Midwest during the post–World War II period. For several decades I have also practiced Buddhist mindfulness meditation (vipassana). I have studied and written about Native American spirituality and also studied Taoism. Moreover, in my years as a professor in the graduate program in religion and philosophy at the California Institute of Integral Studies, I taught cultural history (including spiritual dimensions of modern art) and comparative religion.

**Spiritual/Religious—Some Definitions**

The hundreds of prominent modern artists whose work was significantly influenced by their spiritual interests were indeed both serious and spiritual. Religion and the issues it addresses are not trivial. What is needed in order to grasp the substantive nature of the artists’ spiritual engagement is a sufficient level of knowledge about the religion or spiritual orientation involved. Because higher education is so compartmentalized, academic knowledge of religion is usually somewhat thin among even
those art historians who have sought to make the case for recognizing the spiritual
dynamic in modern art. Since I come from the other side of the chasm, being a
professor emerita in religion, philosophy, and cultural history, I hope to convey not
only information about the various spiritual orientations but also a sense of the spir-
itual depth that attracted these extraordinary artists. I have written this book for art
lovers of all kinds who are interested in a richer understanding of what went into the
creation of much of modern art than is customarily known.

In the modern world, the place of religion has remained unsettled. In our own
society, the term spirituality has taken on numerous connotations both within and
apart from organized religion. Some people feel that spirituality is the more encom-
passing concept while religion is a subset; others feel that religion is the overarching
term with spirituality being a subset. Some feel that the term spirituality has been
so stretched out and bounced around by pop culture and the media that it has lost
any substantive meaning. Still others feel that spirituality simply exceeds any defini-
tion. Given the vague, and sometimes trivializing, uses of the term in recent decades,
I appreciate the artist Richard Tuttle’s comment to me on this matter: “What I want
more than anything is a definition of spirituality that is trustworthy.” Indeed—and
to be so it must necessarily extend beyond a focus on the self to a sense of our embed-
dedness in the larger context: the exquisitely dynamic interrelatedness of existence,
the vibratory flux of the subtle realms of the material world, and the ultimate creativ-
ity of the universe. The cosmos is infused with an unfolding dynamic of becoming
and a unitive dimension of being. Spirituality is the awareness of and engagement
with that unity and those dynamics.

Adding to this inclusive and cosmologically grounded orientation, I appreciate the
following definition of religion by Dr. Mary Evelyn Tucker, a historian of religion at
Yale University, which is sufficiently wise about the spiritual core of all religions while
still honoring the spiritual dynamics beyond religion to embrace the range of spiritual
diversity expressed by the artists cited in this book:

Religion is more than simply a belief in a transcendent deity or a means to an afterlife.
It is, rather, an orientation to the cosmos and our role in it. We understand religion in its
broadest sense as a means whereby humans, recognizing the limitations of phenomenal
reality, undertake specific practices to effect self-transformation and community cohe-
sion within a cosmological context. Religion thus refers to those cosmological stories,
symbol systems, ritual practices, ethical norms, historical processes, and institutional
structures that transmit a view of the human as embedded in a world of meaning and
responsibility, transformation and celebration. Religion connects human with a divine
or numinous presence, with the human community, and with the broader earth com-
munity. It links humans to the larger matrix of mystery in which life arises, unfolds,
and flourishes.21

“Daylighting” the Underground River

Working with this overarching sense of religion, the premise of The Spiritual Dynamic
in Modern Art is that numerous celebrated artists in nearly every chronological period
of the history of modern art were not merely inventing formal solutions to formal
problems of line, form, and color—not were they engaging solely with a combination
of formal concerns plus the social issues of their day, as well as the socioeconomic “forces and relations of production” of artworks, as social art historians put it. The artists were also expressing spiritual perceptions and explorations.

The continual push-back between the secular and the spiritual in the modern era was a cultural phenomenon experienced by many of the modern artists in their own lives—in both directions, not simply as a secular push against the sacred. The artists embraced the new freedoms available in modern society, and most did not attend church as adults, but a great many of them held on, either privately or publicly, to a connection with the spiritual dimension of life and engaged with it in ways that directly influenced their art.

The time has come to recognize that spirituality, far from being inconsequential in the terrain of modernity, was generative—particularly in the area of new art forms. That is, it was a driving force for more than two centuries in the creation of thousands of acclaimed works of modern art. Spiritual engagement was, and is, often on the minds of many of the artists with regard to their art. In fact, once the evidence is truly acknowledged, the history of modern art looks quite different from the proscribed narrative. It is less a linear account than a richly varied landscape, made verdant in numerous places by the great underground river of the spiritual in modern art. Hence the aim of this book is rather like the process in ecological restoration known as “daylighting” underground streams by removing the cement culverts that enclose them and allowing them to be seen in their natural habitats.

In this effort, I am extremely grateful that the prominent living artists who agreed to be interviewed shared their stories with me about formative spiritual experiences that have influenced their art. Having those deep conversations with such creative people about the vital stream that flows through their celebrated art was a gift. Each of them trusted our exchange and furthered the goals of this book.
The initiating event of modern art is generally considered to be the first exhibition of the Impressionists in Paris in 1874. It is more accurate, though, to say that modern art began with modernity itself. By 1800 all the elements of the modern worldview were in place, having emerged gradually over the previous 375 years through the cumulative effects of four foundational movements: Renaissance humanism, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment. The key element emerging from this progression that was considered unbearable by the pioneers of modern art was the “new mechanical philosophy,” or mechanistic worldview. The perception that all physical reality (including humans) functions mechanistically was established in Newtonian science and Cartesian philosophy, but its influence spread throughout society in the eighteenth century. Eventually, mechanistic, rationalist thought was adopted as the foundational premise of all social institutions and systems of knowledge in Britain and France.

The supreme confidence imbued by the mechanistic worldview—in which the sectors of science, commerce, and governance were conceptualized as wheels whose cogs smoothly engage to create the larger society-as-machine—was shattered in 1789 by the extended violence of the French Revolution and its later stage, the Terror. All across Europe young people had been deeply enthusiastic about the potential of the French Revolution, investing it with their hopes for a new age of liberty and possibility. After 1794, however, they struggled to assimilate the meaning of hope’s descent into the Terror. Yet, even in the face of widespread unease, the larger mechanisms of the emergent modern condition continued to reshape human experience. Shifting economic patterns displaced rural families, who migrated to the industrializing cities, while Adam Smith’s rationalist apologia for the cruelties of the new market economy was the wisdom of the day. By the late eighteenth century, education, culture, and
the arts were all brought into alignment with the rigid and regimented preferences of the mechanistic worldview.

In Britain at this point, a young artist and two young poets independently mounted a profound rejection of that worldview, which they regarded as pernicious and utterly false. Between 1788 and 1820, William Blake conducted his aesthetic revolt against both secular humanism and institutional Christianity through his poems and his highly original tinted engravings. In 1798 William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge published *Lyrical Ballads*, a collection of startlingly new types of poetry that rejected the neoclassical literary forms embraced by sophisticates of the Enlightenment. It is not true, however, though often asserted, that nineteenth-century modern art was simply a formalist reaction against the neoclassical forms of the eighteenth century. Granted, Wordsworth and Coleridge despised the rigid form of Augustan rhymed couplets, just as Blake despised the aesthetic doctrines of Joshua Reynolds, but their respective formal rejections were embedded in a larger rebellion against mechanistic thinking and culture. They saw clearly that the tightly constrained art forms resulted from the tightly constrained mechanistic worldview.

As we will see from the following spiritual profiles of leading modern artists in the nineteenth century, they were pleased to be modern citizens yet were sensitive to what had been lost spiritually. The process of secularization, like the crushing reductionism of rationalist and mechanistic thought, was not neutral toward religion. Moreover, the mechanistic worldview was tone-deaf to organic sensibilities and participatory consciousness, a failure that sparked the intense and artful rebuttals by the Romantic poets. Many visual artists, too, broke from the dominant culture to invent formal modes by which spiritual and aesthetic freedom might be expressed in the new situation. Ironically, then, several types of modern art were begun in an effort to counter particular premises of the overarching modern worldview. These artists made their own modernities.

**Blake**

As a child, **William Blake (1757–1827)** reported to his parents that he saw a tree full of angels and later saw angels walking in a field. He was enrolled at age ten in a drawing school for four years, followed by a seven-year apprenticeship in the shop of the engraver to the Society of Antiquaries and to the Royal Society. During this period Blake began collecting inexpensive prints of his favorite artists, including Raphael, Michelangelo, and Dürer. At age 22, by then a professional engraver and printer, he was accepted to study painting at the Royal Academy of Arts.

The Academy's founding president was the prominent painter Sir Joshua Reynolds, who delivered a series of discourses during those years, which were published. He delineated the requirements of the aesthetic that was pleasing to Enlightenment tastes: nature is a serene, orderly backdrop for human purposes and should be depicted as such; the true artist should reduce the variety of nature to the abstract idea; singular forms should give way to ideal forms; “art must get above . . . particularities and details of every kind”; neoclassical propriety and calm must prevail in landscapes, portraits, and historical subject matter. On reading these principles in Reynolds’ third *Discourse*, Blake erupted in vehement disagreement, as
indicated by his marginalia: “A Lie . . . A Folly . . . Damn the Fool . . . Nonsense. Singular & Particular Detail is the Foundation of the Sublime . . . Every Eye sees differently. As the Eye—such the Object.” Blake felt that every singularity becomes more sublime each time it is perceived, thereby continuing to reveal its profoundly unique quality. Blake withdrew from the Royal Academy of Art after a short time and continued to develop his style in watercolors and as an engraver.

Between 1788 and 1820 Blake created many “illuminated” books in which he raged against the mechanistic, neoclassical worldview and against institutional Christianity in order to present his visionary sense of a true Christianity that joins individual freedom with a passionate embrace of the meaning of Christ. In Blake’s rejection of ecclesiastic authority in order to find authentic Christianity, he may be seen to anticipate Kierkegaard by 50 years, but the milieu in which Blake’s thinking developed was London’s energetic subculture of Nonconformist churches and prophetic groups in the late eighteenth century. Some of these groups were direct descendants of the Radical Sects active during the Civil War of the 1640s, who, inspired by the revolutionary quest for greater political freedom, declared their own versions of greater religious freedom than the Church of England allowed. In the 1790s the newly expanded political freedom won in the American and French revolutions again sparked expansive thoughts. In addition, Blake’s mother and her first husband had been members of the Moravian Church in London. Blake himself became interested for a time in the Swedenborgian New Jerusalem Church, but he soon turned against Swedenborg (a man of “mechanistic talents”) and the institutionalizing of his ideas, which he mocked in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790–1793). He was also influenced by the mystical writings of Jakob Böhme; alchemy; Gnosticism; cabala; and Norse, Irish, and Hindu mythology. Foremost, he conveyed the visions that arose in his mind.

Blake saw everywhere the pernicious damage wrought by the mechanistic worldview, which he called “Single Vision & Newton’s Sleep.” For Blake, “He who sees the infinite in all things sees God. He who sees the Ratio only sees himself only.” He did not deny Newtonian science, with its fixation on the “vegetable universe,” but situated it as a small part of the far larger transcendent and eternal realm. His phrase “the dark Satanic mills” refers to the imperial centers that impose rationalist, reductionist, objectivist thought (“Satan’s Mathematik Holiness”) as if that were all there is. How could one escape this fallen state with its “mind-forg’d manacles”? Blake assured, “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, infinite.”

To convey both his critique and his spiritual vision, Blake created an entire mythology, which he presented in his prophetic epics. For example, The Book of Urizen (1794) features a dour, hoary patriarch named Urizen (Your Reason), who personifies Single Vision and rules over the scientific culture. He is also the demiurge, the God of wrath and jealousy, Old Nobodaddy of the idolatry of science, the giver of moral laws. (Blake considered religious laws to be as stultifying as Newton’s universal laws.) Living under such conditions, “our infinite senses” have so atrophied that we can barely hear “True Harmonies” or make out “the Visions of Eternity.” Inevitably, despair results. Elsewhere Blake proposed that the way beyond the mechanistic “Mundane Shell” is through realizing that the deep powers of the imagination
and of the spiritual coalesce, as does art and true religion: the Bible is “the Great Code of Art” and “Jesus & his Apostles & Disciples were all Artists.” 3 He saw man and woman (he was a feminist, as expressed in Daughters of Albion) as forms of divine life who can return Jesus to their hearts and recover their imaginative powers of transcendent perception.

The Single Vision of Newton, Locke, and Bacon was responsible, Blake held, for art like that of Joshua Reynolds. Blake’s own art is fluid and often charged with dynamic energy. He insisted on the importance of the “bounding outline” and drew human figures with bulging musculature to indicate spiritual strength. To print his work, Blake invented a new technique called relief etching. In the final step of the process, he or his wife added a tinted wash to the printed page. He called his sumptuous illuminations portable frescoes (see Figure 1).

Blake’s new style of poetry, new forms of art, and idiosyncratic reinvention of Christianity amount to an oeuvre that is sui generis. He was not part of the Romantic movement; their ideal of participatory consciousness as a mode of deep communion with nature was repugnant to Blake. He attacked Wordsworth’s poetry on these grounds, commenting in his notes, “Natural objects always did & now do weaken, deaden & obliterate Imagination in me.” 4 Elsewhere he wrote, “Nature teaches nothing about Spiritual Life but only Natural Life.” 5 Blake was a mystic whose art inspired many artists, not least for its range of invention. As Arthur Symon noted in Blake (1907), he was “the first utterer, in modern times” of “the message of emancipation from reality through the ‘shaping spirit of imagination.’ ” 6

Three years before his death, Blake was introduced to a young painter named Samuel Palmer (1805–1881), who had exhibited works at the Royal Academy since age 14. Blake encouraged him to develop a style based on the power of his imagination, which seems to have propelled Palmer to create, for the next ten years, highly original landscapes in the west of Kent in which he equated beauty with strangeness. These works, his most memorable, include the ink drawings now known as the “Oxford sepias,” whose dark, stylized woodland scenes with cloisonné forms are seen by some critics as “the beginning of a line of exaggerated visionary landscape painting” continuing into the works of Van Gogh, Gauguin, Munch, and the Fauves, as well as Hartley and Burchfield. 7 His dreamy landscape paintings of that period anticipate by decades both Symbolist paintings and—because of the wispy brushstrokes and modulated, light-infused colors—the techniques of Impressionism. 8 Palmer founded a group of young painters called The Ancients, who embraced pre-Renaissance art for its greater spiritual presence and who wore long robes and large, floppy hats, which they felt identified them with medieval artists. They often visited Blake, individually or as a lively group, and called him The Interpreter, after the seer in The Pilgrim’s Progress. Twenty years later the Pre-Raphaelite painters sought out Palmer because of his pioneering art, his spiritual depth, and his living connection with William Blake.

**The German Romantic Painters**

The Romantic movement in both Germany and England rejected the neoclassical sense of nature as a placid, predictable background for the orderly progress made
possible by the new science and the rational capabilities of the Enlightenment man. They asserted that nature constitutes a dynamic magnificence, the organic fullness of being, and the cosmic unity of the Creation, or Weltgefühl. Moreover, it is in nature, as Wordsworth asserted, that spiritual dignity originates. In opposition to neoclassical ideals of regimented thinking, the Romantics valued permeative sensibilities and the power of Imagination, by which they meant not merely making things up (which they called “fancy”) but participatory consciousness, daring perception, and vital engagement. They embraced Goethe’s observation that Newton’s theory of light as an “atomistic restriction and isolation” banishes the feel of vision, the experience of light and vision. That is, they sought not to deny science but to expand “Newton’s Single Vision” to a multifold vision. The Romantics valued subjectivity, intuition, and expressive art. They saw the artist as a heroic figure, a uniquely experiencing being who illuminates Eigentümlichkeit (particularity). They honored the particular in their perception of the physical world, rejecting the Enlightenment concept of uniformitarianism, the world as composed of simple, uniform components. With regard to time, they again valued the particular, that is, the singular quality of one’s fleeting perceptions of life. Among German Romantics, two additional characteristics manifested themselves: a patriotic urge to celebrate the historical roots of German culture (in resistance to the Napoleonic occupation) and an idealization of death as a more perfect state than life.

German Romanticism began first in philosophy and literature before spreading to the visual arts. Prior to the Romantic movement, Kant published Observations on Our Sentiment of the Beautiful and the Sublime (1764), in which he noted that a snow-covered mountain peak rising above the clouds may have its charm and appeal, but it also inspires awe, and this dual reaction constitutes the natural sublime. In short, beauty charms but the sublime—as found in night, towering oaks, sacred woods—moves us. Subsequently, young painters were influenced by F. W. J. Schelling’s essay “On the Relation of the Fine Arts to Nature” in 1807, in which he advised that the slavish copying of nature results only in “masks” or empty coverings. What is needed is that the artist distance himself from nature just enough to understand its creative power spiritually. He should concentrate not on the products of nature but on conveying its processes. The painting will be a complete universe, hence a symbol of larger truths.

One of the young painters who absorbed these ideals was Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840), who was born in the Pomeranian region of the German Baltic coast. He was raised in a family of strict Lutheran persuasion, in which several deaths during his youth left him with a lifelong sadness that developed in his final years into severe depression. He studied art at the University of Greifswald, in his hometown, and then at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen. He subsequently settled for the rest of his life in Dresden, a hub of Romantic poets, theorists, and artists. He admired the Baroque paintings of Claude Lorrain and Jakob van Ruisdael yet felt strongly that the zeitgeist of his own time called for a very different art.

In making the case that modern art should be seen to begin with Friedrich, rather than with the Impressionists, the art historian Robert Rosenblum observed in 1972 that no traditional, pre-Romantic subject category could have contained Friedrich’s Monk by the Sea (1810); it is not at all what one expected to see in genre painting or
marine painting. Typical of Friedrich's works, that painting features a lone figure in the foreground contemplating the distant light with its suggestion of transcendence. Rarely is there any middle ground in his paintings, and there is often no light but twilight, centered on a warm glow of infinity, a spiritual warmth that holds the gaze of the figure but is very far from him. Friedrich painted from meticulous pencil drawings done in nature. He then simplified his oil compositions and often compressed the visual scope with the effect of drawing the viewer into a mythic and primal space. He ruled out the use of traditional religious images because the character of the new age was to be "at the outer boundary of all religions." The moon was to Friedrich the World-Soul (see Figure 2). In addition to paintings of the sea, he created many compositions centered on the ruins of Gothic churches, a reference for Romantics to the more spiritual medieval era—and for German Romantics, a reference to their country's unified culture before the religious split. In Friedrich's compositions the foreground figures or structures, including the Crucifix, are dwarfed by the far larger presence of nature in its majesty. He stated that in order to create, "I must know that I am alone in order to see and hear nature fully. I must be in a state of osmosis with my environment."

In Dresden, Friedrich was friends with the Romantic painter Philipp Otto Runge (1777–1810), who developed a new pictorial form and a Goethean color theory in order to renew Christian art. After declaring the end of history painting, he created landscapes, portraits, and biblical scenes. He then planned a series of four paintings entitled The Four Times of Day that would express the harmony of the universe through a symbolic and ritual arrangement of humans, nature, and ethereal realms, all illuminated by a transcendent glow. Sadly, he was able to complete only the first of this series, Dawn, before he died of tuberculosis at age 33. In the twentieth century, Runge's work was cited admiringly by the Blue Rider artists and influenced Max Ernst, as well as the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) painters.

Friedrich's first major painting The Cross in the Mountains (Tetschen Altarpiece, 1807–1808) caused an uproar for "sneaking landscape painting into the church and upon the altar," as one outraged critic put it. This reaction reflects the outcome of the debate over absolute sovereignty in the early years of the Reformation: in effect, no transcendent qualities reside in nature because all glory resides in God. In any event, Friedrich's paintings The Monk at Sea and Abbey in an Oak Forest were purchased by the Crown Prince of Prussia, and soon Friedrich was made a member of the Royal Academy of Art in Berlin.

The Dresden physician, doctor of philosophy, and Romantic painter Carl Gustav Carus (1789–1869) studied with Friedrich for three years and wrote Nine Letters on Landscape Painting on the Romantic aesthetic. The Norwegian Romantic painter J. C. Dahl (1788–1857) moved to Dresden in 1818 and also became friends with Friedrich.

In spite of the dramatic achievements of German Romantic painting, it was considered passé after the 1830s, supplanted by the next step in the modern trajectory: a new realism and naturalism. The new wave of artists and critics dismissed Friedrich and his generation as poetic dreamers whose contemplative approach to nature was the product of weak minds. His reputation lay in eclipse until it was revived by two important exhibitions: at the Nationalgalerie Berlin in 1906 and at the Hamburger
Kunsthalle in 1974. Friedrich's work has been cited as an influence by many modern artists in several genres and periods. Perhaps his advice to painters lives on as well: "A painter should paint not only what he sees in front of him but what he sees within. If he sees nothing within himself, he should desist from painting what he sees in front of him."15

The Nazarenes

The neoclassical regime of art instruction at Europe's prestigious academies was experienced by many students in the nineteenth century as unbearably restrictive. Students were expected to copy master works for several years and then, when judged ready, were to compose paintings of acceptable, secular subjects such as historical events or scenes from classical mythology. Johann Friedrich Overbeck (1789–1869), a German student at the Vienna Academy of Fine Arts, for instance, expressed his exasperation in a letter home in 1808, opining that the eclecticism of the academies "is a complete misunderstanding of art" since it expects a young artist to make every effort to compose like Raphael, use color like Titian, incorporate chiaroscuro like Correggio, and convey grandeur and power like Michelangelo—even though "it is not possible to think of those all together."16 Moreover, Overbeck and a fellow student from Germany, Franz Pforr (1788–1812), were sorely disappointed by the absence of religious themes in the subjects allowed by their professors.

The two had many discussions about the state of art and culture and were subsequently joined by four other students: Joseph Wintergerst (1783–1867), Joseph Sutter (1781–1866), Ludwig Vogel (1788–1879), and Johann Konrad Hottinger (1788–1827). These six students began to meet in 1808 for discussions and drawing sessions. The following year, they formed an association, the Lukasbund (Brotherhood of St. Luke, the patron saint of artists), taking an oath to further art of the highest values and to help return modern society to its religious roots through a new, public, religious art that would be thoroughly integrated with the community—rather than "prostituting their talents" to create art commodities for royal courts, art dealers, and wealthy individuals. In 1810 the Brothers moved the Lukasbund to the Eternal City.

They found lodging in Rome in an uninhabited Irish Franciscan monastery, the monks having been expelled by the Napoleonic occupation. The Brothers adopted an ascetic way of life for their first two years there, each man having one cell in which to paint and another, smaller cell in which to sleep. They followed a schedule of fixed times for chores and for their quiet, artistic work. They prepared simple meals in common and met in the refectory in the evening to draw together, critique each other's work, and make short presentations on issues of art and aesthetics. Occasionally they made group excursions into the countryside to draw.

As part of their effort to purify their lives as well as the fate of art in the modern age, they wore clothing reminiscent of Dürer and the High Middle Ages in Germany, and they wore their hair long and parted in the middle. Because of this hairstyle—_alla Nazarena_, as the Italian artists called it—they were labeled _Nazareni_, or the Nazarenes. The Brothers did not use that term for themselves, however. Foremost, they thought of their commune as a free republic of artists, with each individual
encouraged to follow his own lights to create art that would further their common goals. They were joined in 1811 by the German painter Peter von Cornelius (1783–1867) and by several other artists in the years that followed, including Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1794–1872). They referred to Overbeck as the Priest and Pforr as the Master. Following Pforr’s death from tuberculosis in 1812, at age 24, Cornelius filled the role of co-leader.

The Brothers’ decamping for Rome has been called the first of the Secessions in modern Germanic art history. Certainly they were breaking away from the baroque ideal of subordinating all the elements of a picture so as to achieve an overpowering illusionist effect. In addition, they considered voluptuous drapery painted in saturated, deep colors to be almost prurient and a cheap trick for attracting collectors. Their work was not intended to be exhibited in galleries or museums, for they hoped it would one day be installed in public buildings, such as churches or town halls, or in private places of prayer or remembrance if created for a religious commission. Their ideal of public, contemplative art drew them to fresco painting, in addition to their work in easel painting.

The Nazarenes drew inspiration from several sources: works of precision and serenity by such northern masters as Van Eyck and, especially, Dürer; Late Medieval works of spiritual presence by Giotto and Fra Angelico; and Early Renaissance works by Perugino and the young Raphael. Yet they created their own aesthetic, favoring a defining line that seems to make the figures in the foreground appear detached from the flat background so that they seem to be caught in a moment that is suspended in time. The Nazarenes favored soft earth tones in flat applications, with color often indicating the character of the person clothed. They intentionally violated the rules of Renaissance perspective—in their urban scenes, for instance—in order to eschew naturalistic illusion and to flatten the background, thus highlighting the spiritual moment that is depicted or the inner qualities of the subject of a portrait. These innovations gently jar the viewer’s consciousness out of the mundane mode, just as does religious music and prayer, and draw it into a state of relationship. Their compositions are harmoniously balanced with all the figures joined in a field of equal lighting and rhythmic patterns of line and color. Any drama is subsumed by the larger spiritual presence, for the purity of the suspended moment is the subject of a Nazarene painting. Each artist was to reveal the inner truth of the subject matter as perceived through his own deep communion—or, in the Romantic parlance of the day, through his Imagination.

Overbeck, whose forebears were Lutheran pastors in Lübeck, converted to Catholicism in 1813, as did several other Nazarenes in the years that followed. Cornelius was from a Catholic family in Düsseldorf. On the other hand, as the Brotherhood expanded, several young Protestant artists came from Germany to join, and a few lived as a group apart from the monastery. After 1816, the Nazarene gatherings tended to be bohemian events held at Caffè Greco.

The Nazarenes won international acclaim for the religious frescoes they jointly created for two private residences in Rome: Casa Bartholdy (the home of the Prussian consul) and Casino Massimo (the home of an Italian aristocrat). In 1819 Cornelius was commissioned by the Crown-Prince of Bavaria (later King Ludwig I) to create frescoes for the new museum of classical sculpture (Glyptothek) and then for
the Ludwigkirche (St. Louis Church). To do so, Cornelius moved to Munich. The Nazarenes continued to paint as a community with fluid membership throughout the 1820s. Although Overbeck remained in Rome for the rest of his life, by 1830 the others had returned to Germany and the surrounding countries, where many became influential professors at prestigious art academies. The Lukasbund was disbanded, but its reputation spread. In France, an artist’s open letter to Victor Hugo, for instance, hailed Overbeck and Cornelius as leaders of a new Renaissance in art. Engravings and lithographs by Overbeck sold widely for decades.17 In England, the Art Journal declared in 1839 that the Nazarenes were “assuredly the greatest artists of Europe.” They were featured regularly in British art journals throughout the Victorian period and were a major influence on the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.18

In 1911 the Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin (1864–1945) dated the beginning of modern art to Peter Cornelius’ arriving in Rome in 1811 to join the Nazarenes.19 Many art historians have rejected such a starting point because the Nazarenes usually painted scenes from biblical narratives, hardly a modern subject. In fact, however, in their search for a new language of religious art, the Brothers developed several stances that would later be central to the avant-garde: the Nazarenes rejected the dictates of academic painting and much of the legacy of Western art; they shifted from the goal of mimetic representation to a Romantic, expressive engagement with the subject matter that elicits a moment of “pure,” precognitive response in the viewer (as the entry point into a contemplative experience); they paid attention to their dreams and visions as relevant to their art; and they self-consciously reflected on the conditions of art-making as they created a new sacred art.

**The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood**

At the Royal Academy of Arts in London, a small group of students in 1848 were chafing under the Enlightenment dictates of the school’s founder, Sir Joshua Reynolds (whom they called “Sir Sloshua”), and the adulation for Raphael as the epitome of the Old Masters. Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–1882), a poet and former student at the Academy who had recently begun studying painting with Ford Madox Brown (1821–1893), sought out William Holman Hunt (1827–1910), a student at the Academy, after seeing his painting The Eve of St. Agnes (1848). They had many discussions about a pre-Raphaelite aesthetic, became roommates, and invited another art student at the Academy, John Everett Millais (1829–1896), to join them in forming a society of artists. They chose a name identifying them as rebels against the neoclassical rationalism of Renaissance art, as modern artists who sought to engage anew with the spiritual qualities of Quattrocento paintings that had been displaced by the style of Raphael and his peers and then by the Mannerists. The founders brought in four more members—the artists James Collinson (1825–1881) and Thomas Woolner (1825–1892), the art critic Frederic G. Stephens (1828–1907), and William Michael Rossetti (1829–1919), a civil servant and later a writer, who served as the group’s secretary. They formed a brotherhood, swearing allegiance to four goals, including “to study nature attentively” in order to convey “genuine ideas” and “to sympathize with what is direct and serious and heartfelt in previous art, to the exclusion of what is conventional and self-parodying and learned
by rote." They also swore to secrecy, with an eye toward the Academy. They referred to their group as the P. R. B.

The formation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was inspired by Victorian medievalism and the Gothic Revival, the writings of John Ruskin, the earlier rebellion of William Blake, and the example of the Nazarene brotherhood. Interest in the various aspects of the premodern, medieval period grew throughout the nineteenth century as the modern problems of rural displacement, industrialization, and urban poverty and exploitation increased. Artists were inspired by the Arthurian legends conveyed in Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* (1485; new editions in 1816 and 1817) and in Alfred Lord Tennyson’s cycle of poems *The Idylls of the King* (1859–1885). In architecture the call for a Gothic Revival was articulated by Augustus W. N. Pugin through his book *Contrasts* (1836). He argued robustly against the rigid, numerical dictates of classical proportions and deplored the mishmash of neoclassical buildings marring London. He championed the Gothic style, which he considered true Christian architecture, for its asymmetrical flexibility allowing design to respond to need and condition, for its elegant forms, and for allowing the free reign of craftsmen’s creativity. In *Contrasts*, he referred to the leader of the Nazarenes as “the great Overbeck, that prince of Christian painters.”

Like Overbeck, Pugin was a convert to Catholicism, however, so the Gothic Revival could not have become widely embraced in England had not the preeminent art critic, John Ruskin, asserted that the moral force of the Gothic Revival resides in the nineteenth-century Anglican concept of natural theology. In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and in the chapter entitled “The Nature of Gothic” in *The Stones of Venice* (1853), Ruskin maintained that beauty in nature is “traced by the finger of God” and that a moral aesthetic inspired by the Gothic “profound sympathy with the fullness and wealth of the material universe” was badly needed. In *Modern Painters* (1843), Ruskin had defended the then shockingly atmospheric Romantic landscape paintings of J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851) on the grounds that Turner had the courage to fulfill an artist’s chief role: expressing truth to nature.

Ruskin was initially wary of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood because he wondered, as did many people, if they were aligned with the Tractarians, the Oxford Movement of High Church Anglicans who wished to restore some medieval (English Catholic, pre-Henry VIII) hymns, prayers, and rituals. In fact, various P. R. B. paintings can be associated with each of the three Protestant sectarian orientations of the day: the Oxford Movement; the Evangelical denominations, which emphasized atonement for Original Sin and strict regulation of personal conduct; and the Broad Churches, which took an intermediate position, ministered to the working class, and emphasized the power of religion to heal social problems. Millais was High Church; Holman Hunt was an atheist until a dramatic conversion in 1851 related to a literal reading of Scripture, so he favored the Evangelical orientation; Rossetti held to a more Romantic spirituality, drawn somewhat from his Catholic father, who was a scholar of Dante, and from his Anglican mother, who taught her children Bible stories. Once Ruskin, who was Broad Church, was satisfied that the young painters were not narrowly sectarian, he launched a public defense in the 1850s of their new style of painting, which had been influenced by his ideals.
The Pre-Raphaelite paintings were initially attacked because they violated several precepts of conventional painting: instead of high contrasts between light and shadows and instead of a dominant light source coming from one side, they depicted even lighting; instead of shadowed tones, they preferred rich colors; compounded with a sharp attention to detail, in both nature and interiors, they built compositions around symbolic objects, which had a resonant connection with biblical typology, Victorian literature, or Romantic poetry. They sought to emulate in a new mode the detailed description and luminous colors of the tempera paint used by artists before Raphael to present subjects of a moral, religious, or noble nature. The P. R. B. painted on a wet white field on which they applied thin layers of oil paint, a technique devised by Millais that caused their colors to appear luminous. They often painted *en plein air* so as to be able to capture botanical detail. They exhibited several paintings in the Royal Academy and Free Exhibitions in 1849, bearing a cryptic stamp for the back of their paintings, as had the Nazarenes 40 years earlier.

Alas, the stinging rebukes by the art critics were deeply wounding to the young artists and shook their confidence. They continued to paint as a brotherhood and also published five issues of a periodical, *The Germ*, during 1850. Yet each began moving in separate directions with his artistic development. In 1854 Millais proposed that the brotherhood be disbanded as they no longer had common aims.

The seeds for a new grouping of Pre-Raphaelite painters had been planted during 1853–1855, however, when two divinity students at the University of Oxford—William Morris (1834–1896) and Edward Burne-Jones (1833–1898)—eagerly read and discussed Ruskin’s books, especially the chapter “The Nature of Gothic,” and his article “Pre-Raphaelism” defending the new art. After a walking tour of the medieval cathedrals of northern France, the two friends settled in London in 1856, where Burne-Jones sought out Rossetti. The three of them spent time together, visiting art galleries and discussing the virtues of the medieval aesthetic. After taking painting lessons from Rossetti, who considered each of them a genius, the young men abandoned their career plans for the ministry and decided to become painters. They then assisted Rossetti in a commission in the new Oxford Union. Morris, however, subsequently abandoned painting and became, instead, the finest designer of pattern in Britain since the Middle Ages; the founder of the Arts and Crafts movement; the director of Morris & Company, the preeminent firm generating a new aesthetic in home décor; the rejuvenator of the stained glass tradition in Britain; a talented writer and poet (who was offered the honor of Poet Laureate but declined); one of the most influential socialist orators in Britain in the late 1880s; and an extremely influential book and page designer at his Kelmscott Press. Burne-Jones’ drawings were central to the stained glass, tapestries, and book design that the two life-long friends created.

With the second wave of Pre-Raphaelite painters, Arthurian and other medieval themes predominated, usually incorporating one or more idealized females of their favorite type (long legs, big hair, soulfully beautiful face). The theme of an elevated, spiritual love that was blended with embodiment was a common thread. The second wave also included many additional painters, such as Frederic Leighton (1830–1896), John William Waterhouse (1849–1917), Marie Spartali Stillman (1844–1927), Simeon Solomon (1840–1905), and Evelyn De Morgan (1855–1919).
Each of these artists felt free to adapt or to set aside certain preferences of the P. R. B. For instance, Burne-Jones made two trips to Italy, in 1859 and 1862, and found that he quite liked the rich, dark colors used by the post-Raphael Venetian masters and the elongated bodies painted by the Mannerists. He also eschewed the P. R. B.'s precise detailing of background landscape for a more textured effect that suggested the emotional key in which the foreground figures exist.

The Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic also inspired a pioneer of art photography, Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879), who was given a camera at age 48, in 1862, and was able to photograph for only 11 years. She achieved a pictorial effect by using a differential, or soft-focus, lens to suggest the spiritual gestalt more than sharply focused physical details. She also initiated close cropping to heighten the intensity of effect. For her photographs with biblical, literary, or Romantic themes, she dressed her subjects in flowing wraps and instructed them to exude a feeling of multilayered melancholy, as did the Pre-Raphaelite models (see Figure 3). In addition, she created portrait photographs of Tennyson, Holman Hunt, Robert Browning, and other Victorian luminaries with her radically new style.

Elements of late works by Rossetti and Burne-Jones influenced the Aesthetic Movement, including James Whistler (1834–1903) and Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898). More importantly, the later Pre-Raphaelite paintings clearly influenced the Symbolist movement. Pre-Raphaelite works were exhibited in the International Exhibitions in Paris in 1855, 1867, 1878, 1889, and 1900. Burne-Jones’ Cupid’s Hunting Fields (1885), for example, is closely related to the Symbolist gestalt that was soon to emerge. Joséphin Péladan was much taken with Burne-Jones’ work and invited him to participate in the Symbolist exhibitions of the Salon de la Rose + Croix in Paris, but Burne-Jones declined. Rossetti’s somewhat obsessive medieval-devotional portraits of women, following his wife’s suicide in 1862, also influenced the Symbolists with their flat pictorial spaces and saturated color. Finally, Burne-Jones’ languid, serpentine line that winds through many of his decorative surfaces may well have influenced the Art Nouveau aesthetic in the 1890s.

The Hudson River School

One of the distinguishing features of the Reformation was its rejection of the Thomistic, or Scholastic, teaching that God created nature with its own internal integrity, including the causal forces that drive its various functions. St. Thomas Aquinas held that the same God who transcends the created order is also intimately and immanently present within that order as upholding all causal dynamics: the whole universe participates in divine goodness as it unfolds through its causal forces. The Reformation Fathers, in contrast, taught the “radical sovereignty” of God, asserting that the panentheistic crediting of nature with any causal autonomy and immanent co-creativity amounts to taking honor away from God. They viewed this theological “error” as having resulted from the corruption of Christianity by Aquinas’s incorporating into his grand synthesis many of Aristotle’s pagen observations on the workings of nature. Nature in Protestant theology, then, is solely matter that was created by God and reflects his divine majesty: there is no divine presence in nature and its functions. This orientation was the context of the emergence of the
Hudson River School of landscape painting. If only nineteenth-century Americans would pay attention, beyond their materialist concerns, to the grand natural scenery given by God to the New World, its theorists explained, everyone would be spiritually inspired and improved.

The founder of this art movement considered himself a religious prophet. **Thomas Cole (1801–1848)** came to the United States from Lancashire at age 17, studied art, and took his first steamship trip up the Hudson in the fall of 1825 to paint landscapes. Ten years later he published “Essay on American Scenery,” in which he asserted that contemplation of the beauty, magnificence, and sublimity of American wilderness can be a source of “delight and improvement.” In gazing at “scenes of solitude” in untouched nature “the consequent associations are of God the creator—they are his undefiled works, and the mind is cast into the contemplation of eternal things.”

Inspired by Cole, the prominent engraver **Asher B. Durand (1796–1886)** decided to switch to painting landscapes and was invited to accompany Cole on a sketching trip in 1837. He, too, became a theorist of the movement and wrote in his “Letters on Landscape Painting” (1855) that “all which we behold is full of blessings that the Great Designer of these glorious pictures has placed them before us as types of the Divine attributes.” Moreover, he advised that Christians are intended to “conform the order of our lives” through daily contemplation “to the beautiful order of his works” in nature.

The Hudson River School, then, began in a deeply felt, Protestant response to nature as a complex display of potent reminders to us of the Glory of God. Cole was friends with the popular poet and newspaper editor William Cullen Bryant, who shared these views. Their influential friendship was memorialized by Durand in his painting **Kindred Spirits** (1849) the year after Cole died of pleurisy at age 47. **Frederic Church (1826–1900)**, who had boarded in the Cole household for two years while he studied painting with the master, sought to combine the best of Cole’s interpretive style with the scrupulous realism of Durand, always with attention to the spiritual dimension of his work.

Several painters of the Hudson River School were influenced by Edmund Burke’s treatise on aesthetics, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), in which he defines beauty as characteristic of things well-formed and pleasing to our senses, while the sublime is associated with astonishment, arrested consciousness, usually tinged with fear or even horror. Even more important to the movement, however, was John Ruskin’s five-volume *Modern Painters* (1843–1860), in the first of which he asserted that sublimity is merely a particular mode of pleasure in art and is not distinct from what is beautiful. In later volumes he wrote that the two modes are, indeed, distinct but that a broader sense of the sublime than Burke’s is called for: Ruskin’s version was less focused on fear and more influenced by Wordsworth’s participatory sense of awe. Among the Hudson River School painters, “picturesque” and “sublime” were two categories of landscape works, each understood within a Christian context.

A gradual influx of Romantic thought occurred in nineteenth-century American artistic circles, primarily through interest in Samuel Coleridge’s *Biographia Literaria* (1817); two popular essays by Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Nature” (1836) and “The Over-soul” (1841); and the religious teachings of the Christian mystic Emanuel
Swedenborg on the dualistic correspondences between the material and spiritual planes. Emerson, who drew from both Swedenborg and nondualist sources, asserted that the Supreme Being is present throughout nature, that we know the Universal Being as nature, and that the entirety of the physical world is unified in, as, and by the Over-soul. The painter George Inness (1825–1894) became deeply involved with Swedenborgian mysticism, which influenced his later, slightly abstracted works in which he draws the viewer’s eye into shadowy preserves where spiritual “influx” might occur.

In formal terms, the Romantic interest in suggesting divine presence in wilderness manifested itself as a category of Hudson River School painting that some art historians identify as Luminism. Luminist techniques include smooth, nearly invisible brushstrokes that remove the painter’s presence; dramatic, almost otherworldly light; a largely geometric composition; and a tranquil ambiance, often including a reflecting body of water. Several of Church’s works, especially his South American paintings, display these features, but the first thoroughly Luminist painter was Martin Johnson Heade (1819–1904). He was friends with the Hudson River School painter John Frederick Kensett (1816–1872) and met others—Church, Jasper Cropsey (1823–1900), Sanford Gifford (1823–1880), Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), and Worthington Whitredge (1820–1910). In the end, the movement spanned the continent and five decades, with its later works prefiguring the Tonalist movement in landscape painting, which was associated with the spiritual values of the Arts and Crafts movement.

Impressionism

Because the formal break from the academic style made by the Impressionists with their first exhibition was such a shocking departure, it has generally been assumed by most art historians that these courageous renegades of modernity would not have had any interest in religion. That may be true in general, but it may also be true that formative experiences in a religious orientation that encouraged them to see the natural world as full of divine presence stayed with them long after they had stopped attending church. One of the leading Impressionists left numerous statements to this effect; he also wrote and spoke about his spiritual home in the Catholic tradition and its effect on his paintings. Two other celebrated Impressionists engaged with Christian tradition in more partial, and hence modern, ways.

At the Catholic elementary school in Paris attended by Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), he was taught that nature, or the Creation, is infused with divine grace, a perspective that evidently made a deep impression for he spoke of it often throughout his life. He sang in the church choir, which was directed by the composer Charles Gounod. So pure was Renoir’s voice that Gounod offered him free voice lessons and a place in the chorus of his opera Faust when it debuted in 1859, continually encouraging the adolescent to become an operatic tenor. Renoir turned away
from the world of opera, but his formative experience of spiritual beauty expressed through artistic creation became a touchstone for him. He rarely set foot in a church as an adult but expressed in conversations a lifelong capacity for wonder and awe at God’s creation, particularly women, especially in nature. Renoir regarded women as possessors of eternal virtues, depth of presence, and spiritual beauty.

He enjoyed drawing pictures throughout his childhood and was apprenticed at age 13 to become a painter of Rococo scenes on fine porcelain, at which he excelled. He then supported himself by painting scenes on window shades, fans, and walls in cafés, while saving money to attend art school. During this period he registered as a copier of masterpieces in the Louvre, where he was drawn in particular to works by Rubens, Delacroix, Boucher, Fragonard, Watteau, Corot, and Ingres. Renoir then studied at the École des Beaux-Arts, followed by his fortuitous enrollment in the classical art studio of Charles Gleyre, where his fellow students included Claude Monet, Alfred Sisley, and Frederic Bazille—all of whom eventually rebelled and went outdoors together to the forest of Fontainebleau to paint in a new way.

The group, joined by Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, and Berthe Morisot (minus Bazille, who was killed in 1870 in the Franco-Prussian War), organized an exhibition of paintings by Independents in 1874 that prompted an enraged critic to label them mere “impressionists.” The group grew and exhibited together several times until 1886. By late 1882, however, Renoir experienced “a sort of break” in his work, which he later described to the art dealer Ambroise Vollard as follows: “I had reached the end of Impressionism and come to the conclusion that I could neither paint nor draw. In a word, I was in a blind alley.”

Although he had achieved many successes by that time, including having a portrait accepted in the prestigious Salon de Paris, Renoir felt restless and spent much of 1881 on a trip to see the art of Italy, also stopping in Spain (to see the works by Velázquez) and twice in Algeria (which he associated with Delacroix). He knew that he could paint in the new way so as to express ephemeral sensations of sensory perceptions, but he was deeply attracted to what he considered the immortal qualities and austere ecstasy of the paintings by the Old Masters. In Italy, he found himself drawn to the works of Giotto, Titian, and many others, though he soon tired of most of the Renaissance paintings. With the exception of The Madonna of the Chair, which he considered a moving depiction of “maternal tenderness,” Renoir was surprised to find Raphael’s madonnas modeled on what he perceived as coarse types, not unlike “a good, fat gossip on her way back to the kitchen.” (He was apparently unaware that Raphael’s choices were a coded expression of Renaissance humanism’s rejection of medieval symbolism, especially the glorified Virgin Mary as the enthroned, luminous Queen of Heaven.) Renoir then traveled to Naples, where he was intrigued by the collection of Egyptian art in the archaeological museum, the frescoes of Pompeii, and the tonal paintings of the city and harbor that Corot had made in the mid-1820s.

When he returned to Paris, Renoir temporarily rejected oil painting for painting frescoes. As he continued to struggle with his aesthetic and spiritual crisis, he came across a book in the open stalls along the quays: a copy of Cennino Cennini’s Tractate on Painting, which is thought to have been written in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century. The work had been translated into French in 1858 by one of Ingres’ pupils, Victor Mottez. Cennini, himself a painter, was much influenced by Giotto.
His treatise offered not only technical advice to young painters but also guidance on living a life dedicated to creating significant art. Encountering Cennini’s words almost 500 years later, Renoir was able to meld his various aesthetic convictions and his questing spiritual sensibilities. As he later explained to Vollard,

Though technique is the basis and the solid part of art, it is not everything. There is something else in the art of the ancients, who made their productions so beautiful; it is that serenity which leads to one’s never tiring of looking at them, which gives one the impression of something eternal. That serenity was part and parcel of themselves, and it was not merely the result of their simple lives; it was also due to their religious faith. They were conscious of their weakness so, amid success or defeat alike, they associated divinity with their acts . . . . Thus it was that their works acquired that aspect of sweet serenity that gives them that profound charm and makes them immortal. But man, with his modern pride, is bound to refuse that collaboration since in his own eyes he is diminished thereby. He has driven away God and in so doing he has driven away happiness . . . .

When Renoir returned to easel painting, he at first incorporated a somewhat severe emphasis on drawing and outlining. (His spiritual and aesthetic crisis did not really end until his first child was born in 1885, which delighted him.) In time, he returned to using thinly brushed color that dissolves outlines and creates soft boundaries. His favorite subject was woman surrounded by nature. Renoir often spoke of the “state of grace” that can result from contemplating God’s most perfect creation, the human body and, in particular, the female body. He told his middle son, Jean, “I loved women even before I learned to walk . . . . They put the right value on things . . . . You feel reassured when you are with them . . . . They make life bearable, a task that men can never dream of attempting.” Jean Renoir observed that his father bloomed both physically and spiritually when in the company of women. Men’s voices tired him; women’s voices soothed him.

In Renoir’s portraits of women, the eyes are indeed windows of the soul, conveying, along with the mouth, a sense of eternal serenity and spiritual allurement that is both charming and vital. Their rosy complexions seem to radiate light, though any distinctive bone structure of the sitter has been transformed into a round-cheeked framing for the eyes and mouth. In his paintings of a couple, including early examples such as The Promenade (1870), the man’s face is usually partially turned away or is obscured (by binoculars, or the brim of his hat, or a falling shadow) while the woman is positioned to face the viewer directly and radiate her presence (see Figure 4). In group compositions the women are, again, featured almost adoringly in the central foreground with partially obscured male figures nearby. Another favored subject was children, but Renoir’s major fascination was with nature, the glory of God’s creation. Its stunning forms and colors rendered it, in his view, the aesthetic master of artists.

In 1909 the son of Victor Mottez, who died in 1897, decided to publish a memorial edition of his father’s translation of Cennini’s Treatise on Painting, which would include a preface by Renoir based on a letter he had written. So crippled by rheumatoid arthritis was Renoir by then that he had to dictate his thoughts. (He had moved with his wife to a villa near Nice for the warmer climate and remained there, painting
painfully, until his death in 1919.) Renoir asked Maurice Denis, who was by then recognized as a theorist of sacrality and modern art as well as a painter, to read his eight-page text before it was submitted. In response, Denis traveled to the south to meet with Renoir, painted his portrait, and delivered the elderly artist’s text to the publisher. In the preface Renoir reflects on the spiritual context of art, which he believed had been nurtured in Europe within “Catholic culture”:

But to understand the general value of the art of the past it is necessary to recall that beyond the teachings of their master the painters had something else, something that has disappeared from modern life, something that filled the soul of the contemporaries of Cennini—a religious faith, the most fecund source of their inspiration. It is this that gives their work the character of nobility and candor that we now find so charming. In short, there existed then between men and the craft they practiced a harmony which came from a common belief... From this, one can understand the cause of the general progress in art and its unity wherever a lofty religious conception holds sway... .

Renoir was a considerate friend who generally refrained from contradicting the opinions of others. One result, according to his son Jean, was that his atheist friends were certain that he was one of them, while his devout Catholic friends were just as certain that he was one of them. A comment he made to Jean, in fact, situates Renoir as a modern artist who cherished and cultivated his formative spiritual experiences while feeling little connection to religious institutions: “Catholics, who, like all the others, have fallen for the tinseled rubbish and the plaster statuettes sold in the Rue Bonaparte, will tell you there is no salvation outside the Catholic religion. Don’t believe a word of it. Religion is everywhere. It is in the mind, in the heart, in the love you put into what you do.”

In 1879 Degas invited Mary Cassatt (1844–1926) to participate in the Impressionists’ fourth exhibition. She agreed, and when the art critics reviewed the 246 works displayed, they praised in particular her paintings and those by Degas. Later, she became intrigued with prints after seeing an exhibition of Japanese woodcut prints. She created a suite of ten dryprints and aquatint in 1890 and 1891 that are widely acclaimed as one of the great accomplishments in the history of printmaking. Her pastel drawings made her, in the view of the art critic William T. Gerdts, “one of the great pastellists of the 19th century.” In recognition of the critical acclaim for her paintings, pastels, drawings, and prints, Cassatt was awarded membership in 1904 in France’s Legion of Honor.

When feminist art historians began to study Cassatt’s oeuvre, several of them especially appreciated her paintings from the late 1870s of women in loge seating at the theater who gaze confidently, even defiantly, through their opera glasses at whomever they pleased. What perplexed these scholars was Cassatt’s subsequent focus on portraits of mothers and young children, which is evident throughout the 1880s and became her dominant interest in the 1890s. They wondered why Cassatt would opt for sentimental subject matter that seemed to “valorize” confining women to the domestic sphere. In the 1990s some of these scholars suggested Freudian theory as a way to explain these works. Following in that direction, a male journalist asserted in *The New Yorker* in 1999 that Cassatt’s most original contribution to art was giving...
form to “the nearly adulterous, exhausting love with which middle-class women have come to address their babies.”

In fact, the women in these works look anything but exhausting or even overly involved with the children, regarding them with an affectionate detachment. The holding and cuddling are entirely ordinary, good for the infant’s development, and not a sexual act. Rather, Cassatt was intent on conveying something else, for which purpose she hired models with a particular quality and then found baby models sufficiently similar in physiognomy to suit her purpose. But for a few exceptions, such as a few pictures of her sister-in-law with her baby, Cassatt did not paint actual mothers and their children.

The Cassatt scholar Judith A. Barter has observed that after 1890 the artist “seems to have turned toward a recognition of higher levels of meaning” such that her “preoccupation with modern women” is explored “in a larger, spiritual sense.” Barter notes that Cassatt would surely have read G.-Albert Aurier’s influential article in 1891 on Symbolism, Gauguin’s Synthetism, and the quest for spiritual, or Idealist, revelation in the new art. She was most likely also familiar with Maurice Denis’ article in 1890 on the new “neo-traditional” art partaking of the timeless qualities of great art: beauty and the gravitas of sacred icons. Cassatt probably welcomed these articles because she had long since privately set her course in this direction, combining two major areas of interest.

First, in 1871 Cassatt received a commission from the Catholic bishop of Pittsburgh to paint a copy of each of two works by Correggio to hang in the new cathedral. She traveled to Parma to do so. From her intensive study of Correggio’s paintings and frescoes, she brought to her own work the triangular and diagonal compositional schemes. She seems to have been struck, as well, by his depiction of the Madonna. In his *Madonna and Child with Saints Jerome and Mary Magdalen* (1527–1528), the mother is a substantial form who fills the central part of the canvas and exudes a calm and wise presence. The other figures lean toward her. Cassatt, whose paternal forebears were Huguenots who had fled to America in 1662 to escape Catholic violence against their sect in France, probably had little interest in the theological tensions that drove the changes in the iconography of Mary, but she seems to have been drawn to Early Renaissance interpretations of the Madonna that still glorified the Virgin as a majestic figure. She also admired several artists in Spain and the Lowlands who conveyed a powerful and monumental presence in the Virgin.

Second, Cassatt deeply valued and honored women, who were always her featured subjects. She was delighted to accept a commission to paint a large mural, *Modern Woman*, for the main hall of the Women’s Building at the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago, in which she depicted women plucking the fruits of knowledge. She not only supported the Women’s Suffrage movement but believed that women are morally superior. In addition, when she painted portraits of adolescent girls they often look somewhat depressed, perhaps because they are beginning to grasp that, as Virginia Woolf observed, the culture holds them in low regard.

Drawing from both Cassatt’s strong belief in the inherent dignity and worth of women and her attraction to relevant artistic expressions in the past, she created portraits of modern mothers who are inserted into a traditionally religious compositional structure; who emanate a calm, imposing presence; and whose substantial
form fills the central portion of the pictures, with a small child reaching for her or being held. These prints and paintings are commonly called Cassatt’s “modern Madonnas,” but there are many types of Marian art, and these clearly echo the iconography of the Great Mother, rather than images of her as the humble village woman. Hence it would be more accurate to label these works her “modern Great-Mother Madonnas.” The mothers depicted preside serenely and affectionately over a moral world informed by their own values: the integrity of loving relationships; trust, empathy, encouragement; and spiritual warmth. Cassatt’s mothers are not involved in playing games with the babies or feeding them or changing their diaper. Rather, they gently convey through their very presence their moral authority and spiritual guidance, exemplifying the manner by which one lives as a human being of significance. Cassatt alludes to the richly complex moral, relational, and spiritual universe of women that she herself experienced and observed in the women close to her. She wrote in a letter, “Almost all of my pictures with children have the mother holding them, and you could hear them talk, their philosophy would astonish you.”

Cassatt’s modern Great-Mother Madonnas are usually pictured reigning beneﬁcently over their own realm, or perhaps venturing into the backyard to pick ripe fruit, but in one print she depicted a trio traveling into the urban, public sphere: In the Omnibus (1891; see Figure 5). The mother is imposing, sitting erect with her hand resting on a cane, framed by the middle pane of the three windows behind them. The nursemaid and the baby sit close to her, forming a Holy-Family triangle. The mother is aware that the public sphere does not take women seriously; she is vigilant, coolly looking at someone or something to the left of them in the tram car. She commands the scene depicted, providing loving protection for her child—and her philosophy would astonish you.

When Claude Monet (1840–1926) made 30 paintings of the façade of the medieval cathedral in Rouen in 1892–1894, he conveyed its premodern spiritual presence with a modern approach that blended the sensibilities of East and West. Japanese woodblock prints known as ukiyo-e—which are colorful, inexpensive, nineteenth-century prints depicting scenes of daily life, reminding viewers of the evanescent quality of existence, the “floating world”—had been arriving in Europe ever since Japan opened its ports to foreign trade in the 1850s. In France, Japonisme, the interest in both the prints and information about their cultural context, was intriguing to many artists in Monet’s time. Finding considerable evidence of his attraction to this spiritual aesthetic—including his collecting ukiyo-e prints since the 1860s—the art historian Jacquelynn Baas asserts that “the paintings of Claude Monet may yet be the most eloquent Western expression of the Buddhist concepts of impermanence and the interdependence of all things.” He conveyed not only the evanescent nature of haystacks, water lilies, and cloud formations but also the permeable, soft boundaries between objects and their surroundings. That is, he painted interrelatedness.

As for Monet’s roots in Catholicism, if he had felt the revulsion toward religion that many art historians have assumed of modern artists, why would he have made so many paintings of a Gothic cathedral? It is possible that he felt an appreciation for the spiritual beauty of the faith but regarded it from the perspective of a modern distancing within his own life from the institution of the church.
**Post-Impressionism**

Born and raised Catholic in Aix-en-Provence, where he attended Catholic schools, Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) does not seem to have been a practicing Catholic during his years in Paris. There he studied art; learned to paint landscapes with a slow, deliberate technique *en plein air* under the kindly tutelage of Camille Pissarro (1830–1903); and exhibited twice with the Impressionists. Nor does he seem to have been a churchgoer during the first dozen years of his return to the south of France (where he divided his time between L’Estaque and Aix). Once he settled exclusively in Aix, however, Cézanne returned to the Church. This took place when he was arriving in his mature style and painting his masterpieces of the 1890s and early 1900s. He attended Mass frequently and hung a Crucifix on the wall of his studio. In 1895 he had his first solo exhibition, at Ambroise Vollard’s gallery in Paris.

During adolescence, Cézanne had spent much of his free time roaming the countryside with Émile Zola and another school friend, a formative immersion in nature that shaped his artistic quest throughout his life. As he later commented, “I am attracted by the boundless things of nature.” In conversations and letters near the end of his life with the painter Émile Bernard, Cézanne explained his method of painting as a response to the sensations he experienced in nature. Asked how he understood art, Cézanne replied:

> I understand it as personal apperception. This apperception I locate in sensation, and I require of the intellect that it should organize these sensations into a work of art. . . . I believe in the visual sensation above all else . . . . I consider the intelligence of the Pater omnipotens, and I say: what can I do better than He? Then I strive to forget our illustrious predecessors, and I ask of Creation that she alone become known to me.

Cézanne is widely acknowledged by artists and art historians as the father of modern art, having inspired not only the Cubists but several other formal developments that followed in his wake. As such, one of Cézanne’s sentences in particular— from a letter to Bernard on April 15, 1904—is intoned to students of modern art worldwide:

> “Render nature with the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, arranged in proper perspective so that each side of an object or of a plane is directed toward a central point.”

Students are rarely taught, however, the sentence that immediately followed that one: “Lines parallel to the horizon give breadth, that expanse of nature—or if you prefer, of the landscape—that the Pater omnipotens, aeterne Deus, spreads before our eyes.” He added, “Lines perpendicular to the horizon give depth.” In summary at the end of the letter, Cézanne advised that the Louvre is “a good book to consult” but that its great works of art should be regarded only as “intermediaries”: “The real and prodigious study to undertake is the diversity of the picture that nature presents.” In a similar vein, Cézanne wrote to Joachim Gasquet, “To achieve progress, nature alone counts, and the eye is trained through contact with her.”

In order to depict as much as possible of “Creation become known to me,” Cézanne arrived at a new method of painting based on his research into clarifying the commonly “confused” human perception of nature’s complexities. Counterbalancing his structural underpinning of a painting was his technique of *modulation*,...
by which he meant continually adjusting a color to the adjacent colors such that the multiplicity was reconciled as a harmonious atmospheric unity. He used reds and yellows to convey the “vibrations of light” and used blues “to make one feel the air.”

The art historian Meyer Schapiro observed, “He loosened the perspective of traditional art... The tilting of vertical objects, the discontinuities in shifting levels of the segments of an interrupted horizontal edge contribute to the effect of a perpetual searching and balancing of forms.” Schapiro felt that in some of Cézanne’s landscapes, such as Pines and Rocks (1897), he conveys “a visionary mood, a mystical immersion in nature’s hidden depths.”

In the paintings of Cézanne’s final years, both the structural forms and the modulating become more abstract (see Figure 6).

Six weeks before he died, Cézanne wrote to his son, “I am becoming, as a painter, more lucid in the presence of nature, but with me to realize my sensations is always painful. I cannot achieve the intensity that manifests itself to my senses. I do not have the magnificent richness of coloration that animates nature.” To Volland, Cézanne had wondered rhetorically the year before, “Is art indeed a priesthood that claims the pure in heart and takes them over completely?” Bernard eventually concluded that Cézanne was a mystic, a painter who expressed himself with “an instinctive and conscious perception of relationships and affinities.”

Cézanne himself never claimed more than he had “made some progress” in his quest, but he also observed, “The nobility of the conception reveals the spirit of the artist.”

It is generally held by many art world professionals that the decades-long obsession with Christianity in the life of Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890) ended when he began his final 15 years, freeing him to become a serious artist. In fact, his spiritual development, far from disappearing, took a decidedly modern trajectory during the last period of his life, which—according to his letters to his brother Theo—delighted him and opened up a deeply spiritual, nondenominational perception of the natural world. To express this new perception, Van Gogh created several formal innovations with which he painted or drew some 2,000 works. Clearly, he was energized and inspired, even though he suffered through episodes of mental illness.

Van Gogh recalled his youth as being “gloomy and cold and sterile” and spent much of his time taking long, solitary walks in the countryside. He was sent to board at a middle school in Tilburg that offered not only academic courses but also a rigorous program in drawing directed by the realist artist Constantijn Huijsmans (1810–1886). However, he withdrew abruptly during the second year and came home. When Van Gogh was 16, his father—a pastor in the Dutch Reformed Church, as was the artist’s paternal grandfather and an uncle—determined that he should study for a degree in theology. Vincent was very willing, but the family lacked sufficient funds, and his well-to-do uncles were not willing to provide.

Instead, they offered him an apprenticeship in their art gallery in The Hague. He completed a four-year training and was then transferred in June 1873 to their gallery in London, where he spent a pleasant year until a romantic involvement at his boarding house ended unhappily for him. During the summer of 1874, he underwent a spiritual transformation in which he committed to following intensely his father’s pietistic model of attaining spiritual deliverance: “through prayer and the fruit thereof—patience and faith—from the Bible.” He also studied the advice in Thomas à Kempis’ The Imitation of Christ to withdraw one’s heart from the love of
visible things and direct one’s affections to things invisible. Still, Van Gogh wrestled in his letters with the relationship between (Calvinist) religion and the love of nature and art. In May 1875 he was transferred to the uncles’ gallery in Paris. Now, however, he found himself revolted by the commodification of the art, an attitude he did not hide from the customers. He was fired.

Van Gogh then returned to London, where he worked as an assistant to a Methodist minister, which he enjoyed. His parents called him home, however, and decided that he should go to Amsterdam and prepare for the entry examination for theological studies (with financial support from the uncles). There he became aware of the “modernist” branch of the Dutch Reformed Church, which advocated a “natural supernaturalism” regarding the presence of God in this world and these times, rather than focusing on biblical times and the historical Jesus. He worked with a tutor (the uncle who was a pastor) for more than a year but failed the examination, having spent much of his time viewing art and hiking. He then attended a missionary training school and was appointed as an evangelist in a mining community in the Borinage area of Belgium. He was found to be overzealous and insensitive, though, so he was dismissed after six months.

Van Gogh then spent a year in poverty, hiking around, failing to find employment, and returning repeatedly to the Borinage to draw the peasant families he knew. He referred to this period as his “molting time,” during which he continued his ruminations about God, art, and nature. He arrived at a position that was the opposite of what he had advocated seven years earlier (withdrawing one’s heart from the love of visible things) and announced to Theo, “I think the best way to know God is to love many things.” In time, Van Gogh disengaged from the entire authoritarian track and its notion of God the Lawgiver, “that God of the clergymen.” After repeated urgings from Theo to become an artist, Vincent wrote to him, “… I said to myself, in spite of everything, I shall rise again: I shall take up my pencil . . . From that moment, everything has seemed transformed for me . . . .”

Van Gogh’s path was still difficult. He studied art in Brussels and The Hague, then wandered in debt and depression over the moors of the Drenthe region during the autumn months of 1883, where he had “an unutterable feeling” of seeing God. He assured Theo that the best life is one of “long years of intercourse with nature in the country—and Something on High—inconceivable, ‘awfully unnamable’—for it is impossible to find a name for that which is higher than nature.” He returned home by Christmas to help care for his injured mother; his father died in March 1885. During the weeks that followed, Van Gogh made his first major painting, The Potato Eaters. In addition to his great admiration for works by Millet and Puvis de Chavannes, he became fascinated later that year by Japanese woodblock prints.

Van Gogh enrolled in the Antwerp Academy of Art in mid-January 1886 and remained for six weeks. While in that city, he collected ukiyo-e prints and added hundreds more to his collection after he moved to Paris in late February. He also spent hours studying the vast collection of historical Japanese prints in the Parisian gallery of the art dealer Siegfried Bing. Van Gogh responded to far more than the arresting formal qualities of the prints: he felt strongly drawn to learn about the culture from which such an art could emanate.
For two years Vincent lived in Paris with Theo, who was the manager of their uncles’ gallery in Montmartre. He briefly attended studio classes at the Atelier Cormon but was far more influenced by seeing Impressionist paintings, which he found so compelling that he subsequently adopted their short brush strokes and illuminated colors. He became acquainted with Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Paul Gauguin, Camille Pissarro, Paul Signac, Émile Bernard, and other artists. By February 1888, however, Van Gogh’s health had deteriorated from too many late-night discussions combined with too much alcohol, particularly an addiction to absinthe. Weary of city life and friction among the artists, he decided to go south to Provence. Only two and a half years of his life remained.

In his very first letter to Theo from Arles, Van Gogh expressed delight that the winter scenery was just like that depicted by the Japanese. By June he knew he would stay in his own Japan and aspire to painting with an eye “more Japanese.” He considered the Impressionists “the Japanese of France” and counted himself among them. He declared that his work “is founded on Japanese art.” When Theo later sent Vincent a package of his ukiyo-e prints, as requested, he enclosed the first issue of a journal that Siegfried Bing had started entitled *Le Japon Artistique*. Vincent read and apparently agreed with the introductory essay on the Japanese artist as being attentive to the intricate mysteries and primordial elements of nature. He also read a contemporary French novel about Japan, *Madame Chrysanthème*.

Van Gogh was attracted to the plain rooms and understated gestures of Japanese décor, but he was especially attracted to the spiritual orientation infusing the Japanese prints. He wrote to Theo, “Come now, isn’t it almost a true religion which these simple Japanese teach us, who live in nature as though they themselves were flowers?” In October 1888, he painted a self-portrait as a Buddhist monk, describing the image as “the portrait of a bonze, a simple worshiper of the Eternal Buddha.” It was this blending of East and West in his spiritual blossoming beyond the Abrahamic “God of the clergymen” to a more celebratory cosmological communion that makes his spirituality seem as modern as his art. As he wrote to Theo that fall, “It does me good to do difficult things. It does not prevent me from having a terrible need of, shall I say the word—of religion—then I go outside in the night to paint the stars . . .”

Van Gogh found that he could paint very quickly in Arles and began sending completed works to Theo. Inspired by the Japanese aesthetic, he used strong outlines, color contrasts, and cropped compositions (see Figure 7). He eventually began to incorporate large areas of bright yellow, even though he joked that this ran the risk of his being connected with the Pont-Aven Symbolists. (Actually, the one positive review Van Gogh received, by the Parisian art critic G.-Albert Aurier, did praise him as a Symbolist.) Apart from the disastrous attempt to co-found an artists’ community in Arles with Gauguin, Van Gogh did not approve of the Symbolists because of their esoteric underpinnings and their failure, as he saw it, to be true to nature, opting instead for wild abstractions of form. He told Theo “their Christs in the Garden, with nothing really observed, have gotten on my nerves.” In a similar vein, he warned Émile Bernard, with whom he exchanged many letters, of religious posturing and “dreaming” before nature, adding that “if I am at all capable of spiritual ecstasy, I adore Truth, the possible, and therefore I bow down before the study . . .” Again,
to Bernard: “Christ . . . lived serenely, as a greater artist than all other artists, despising marble and clay as well as color, working in living flesh.”

Van Gogh sought to convey a vibratory field of sacred presence: “I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to communicate by the actual radiance and vibration of our coloring.” He strove to “express hope by some star, the eagerness of a soul by a sunset radiance.” A few months before he died, Van Gogh wrote to Theo about his work, noting, “One needs a dose of inspiration, a ray from on high that is not in ourselves, to do beautiful things.”

**The Synthetists of Pont-Aven**

Among young poets, writers, and artists in the major cities of Europe during the second half of the 1880s, opposition was growing toward the cultural dominance of positivism (the view that only knowledge derived from science is valid and deserving of respect) and what they called **materialism**, their overarching term for the rise of several interrelated problems: the mechanistic worldview; the spreading distain for that which cannot be quantified (the Age of Disbelief); and the upheavals in society caused by industrialization. Their critique and the post-materialist alternatives they sought and expressed gelled into the avant-garde movement that lasted from the late 1880s until World War I. Because they believed that so powerful a force as “materialism” could be countered only by a deeply rooted spiritual force, most of the avant-garde artists turned away from Christianity to what they felt were more ancient and profound sources of spiritual strength and wisdom, as we will see in Chapter 2.

The one exception in this avant-garde trajectory was the very first wave of Symbolist painters, whose context was both the larger anti-materialist and anti-naturalist sentiments of many young European painters as well as the coded, contested field of Catholic art in nineteenth-century France. This group consisted of young Parisian artists who traveled to the village of Pont-Aven in Brittany during the summers of 1888 and 1889 to paint in a new way. According to the standard narrative of the history of modern art, one would assume that any subset of the emergent Symbolist avant-garde that was involved with Catholic iconography would produce the most conservative, least daring visual art. Actually, Symbolist painting, which spread across Europe throughout the 1890s and was considered shockingly modern, was never more revolutionary in its formal qualities than in the initial paintings by the Pont-Aven group. They rejected naturalistic color entirely, abstracted all forms, and cancelled the rules of perspective—all while maintaining the dignity and spiritual presence of the figures they portrayed.

Many young painters in the late 1880s in France rejected not only the near-photorealism of academic paintings of mid-century but also the more dynamic, Romantic version of naturalistic painting—although they were intrigued by the strangely decontextualized naturalism in the two paintings of Christ made by Édouard Manet (1832–1883). They also felt that the Impressionists had drained meaning from painting by focusing on the play of light on material surfaces, concluding, as Gauguin put it, that they “neglect the mysterious centers of thought.”
Moreover, the young artists felt a strong compulsion to break free of the rule of perspective in Western painting, which controls the eye when looking at a painting and dictates the angle from which it must be viewed. Perspective, after all, had been introduced during the rise of fifteenth-century humanism, a movement that began the slide away from the spiritual, it was felt, toward a neoclassical culture of deadening materialism. In effect, perspective standardizes space. Although the artists appreciated the pre-Renaissance spiritual quality of the figures in certain contemporary paintings such as *Saint Genevieve before Paris* (1885) by Edmond Aman-Jean, they felt that a much more vigorous assault on the aesthetics of materialism was badly needed.

In the summer of 1888, three Parisian artists traveled independently to “primitive” Brittany, where they took lodgings in a village called Pont-Aven. Artists had been summering there for several years, painting in either academic or Impressionist modes, but these three men shared the ideals of the emergent avant-garde. The oldest among them, Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), had painted in Pont-Aven two years earlier and had since then become converted to the rebellion against positivism and materialism and against the accompanying aesthetics: naturalism. Yet he believed that even a post-positivist painting is less important than the spiritual process of making it, as he wrote to a young painter that summer: “Art is an abstraction; derive this abstraction from nature while dreaming before it, but think more of creating than of the actual result. The only way to rise towards God is by doing as our divine Master does, create.”

Perhaps Gauguin, like others at Pont-Aven, had been inspired by the “Symbolist Manifesto” by Jean Moréas, which had been published in the literary supplement of *Le Figaro* on September 18, 1886. As a defense of the Symbolist poets, the statement expressed the key concerns of the avant-garde: Moréas opened by noting that literature, like all the arts, evolves and that a new manifestation of the arts should be seen as expected, necessary, and inevitable. In the new poetry, he explained, material phenomena are not described for their own sake but as perceptible surfaces noted in order to represent their affinities with the primordial Ideals. (Here he is referring to the Platonic notion that every material entity is informed by a corresponding, intangible Ideal [also called an Idea or Form], which is the essence, or purest form, of the entity. Plato taught that only those people who are able to perceive the Ideas, or Ideals, behind material forms can have true and reliable knowledge of the world. Various esoteric versions of this premise were developed over time.)

In mid-summer, Émile Bernard (1868–1941) painted a pioneering work called either *Breton Women in a Meadow* or *The Pardon of Pont-Aven*. The Pardon was a folk custom in Brittany dating from the third-century Christian conversion of the pagan population by Celtic monks from Wales and Cornwall. It involves a procession to the tomb of a saint or a site at which a visitation by the saint took place, where the people pray for intercession. In Bernard’s depiction of a group of Breton women in their traditional dress with white headdress, they are arrayed across a chartreuse expanse in which perspective does not exist, and they are stylized as almost sculptural presences. Bernard later explained,

The first means that I use is to simplify nature to an extreme point. I reduce the lines only to the main contrasts, and I reduce the colors to the seven fundamental colors of
the prism. To see a style and not an item. To highlight the abstract sense and not the
objective.... There was an invisible meaning under the mute shape of exteriority.

In this breakthrough work, Bernard used flat areas of color that were outlined
by dark contours, suggesting the leadwork in stained glass, a technique known as
Cloisonnism.

Gauguin contributed his own ideas on breaking free of materialist perception and
depiction: he advised his younger colleagues to intensify the coloration of various
compositional components of their paintings and enter into a dream state when
regarding their subject matter. Adding some of Bernard’s ideas to his own, he cre-
ated in September the painting called The Vision of the Sermon, which later became
known as The Vision After the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel. In this work,
several highly stylized Breton women are shown in prayerful contemplation on a field
of red as they imagine the biblical scene. At the end of the summer, Paul Sérusier
(1864–1927) arrived and received a painting lesson from Gauguin, during which
he created an even more radically abstracted composition: a woodland scene enti-
tled The Woods of Love at Pont-Aven (which later became known as The Talisman).
Sérusier took this small painting back to Paris, where it became a catalyst for another
new trajectory, this time among his fellow art students.

The following summer more young painters who were committed to the avant-
garde ideals traveled to Pont-Aven to join Gauguin, Bernard, and Sérusier in
painting the premodern—and also antimodern—Bretons. (The Bretons had col-
lectively resisted, since the French Revolution, the modern state’s efforts to force
their assimilation; for instance, the modern French state made it illegal after 1803
for them to register Celtic/Breton names for their children.) Gauguin coined the
label Synthetism (Synthèse or Synthétisme) for the new style he and Bernard
had devised, explaining that it synthesized, or combined, flat images; employed
bold color; and eschewed perspective and sculptural shading, favoring the use of
Cloisonnism and spare geometrical composition involving sacred geometry. In the
words of the art historian Herbert Read, they formulated a thesis of symbolism as
art that is “not expressive but representative, a correlative for feeling and not an
expression of feeling.”63 Gauguin’s term Synthetism was widely adopted by artists
and art critics in Paris through the early 1890s but then faded from usage. Paint-
ings by the Pont-Aven group are generally considered a style within the Symbolist
movement.

At the end of the second summer, Gauguin organized an exhibition in Paris of
Synthetist works by nine of the Pont-Aven group, which coincided with the Universal
Exhibition of 1889. Eventually, 21 artists joined the Pont-Aven group at various
times, traveling to Pont-Aven or a nearby fishing village, Le Pouldu, through 1894.
Their Symbolist art became highly influential through many exhibitions held in the
major cities of Europe and the United States between 1890 and 1915. The spiritual
ideals behind the new type of painting were discussed in several new journals in Paris,
including Le Lotus: Revue des hautes études théosophiques; La Revue blanche; La Plume;
L’Ermitage; and Mercure de France. Particularly important to young artists was the
extensive exhibition of Gauguin’s oeuvre at the Autumn Salon in 1906, three years
after his death.
An article in 1891 in the journal Mercure de France by the art critic G.-Albert Aurier entitled “Symbolism in Painting: Paul Gauguin” helped to situate Gauguin as the leading light of the new Symbolist art. In terms of his breakthrough paintings, he was certainly that. However, some art historians writing about Gauguin have accepted the claims he made in letters that he was the original source of both the challenge to naturalist, or materialist, perception in painting and the fascination with premodern, “primitive” culture. Actually, both of those ideas were in the air before he and Bernard created a post-naturalist style of painting in Brittany in 1888. In addition, it was because of the widespread interest in “primitive” cultures during the last quarter of the nineteenth century in Europe that Gauguin played up his being one-eighth Peruvian. For example, he described his Pont-Aven painting Children Wrestling (1888) as “thoroughly Japanese by a savage from Peru.” Like many other avant-garde painters, he was influenced by the austerity and flat effect in Japanese prints. (Also, like many French painters of the day, Gauguin had also absorbed the use of flat forms from the spiritually inflected murals created by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes in the 1860s through the mid-1880s; in fact, he hung reproductions of works by Puvis de Chavannes on the walls of his room in Pont-Aven.) As for Gauguin’s self-identification as a “savage from Peru,” he exaggerated his indigenous credentials: though born in Paris, he had spent his first few years in the upper-class household of relatives in Lima.

Gauguin’s spiritual formation took place largely at a seminary school in Orléans, where Bishop Dupanloup urged the boys to cultivate their powers of imagination and creativity so as to be able to counter the positivism of the secular culture. Gauguin enjoyed his years there and took from that education a practice he called “inner worship” to guide his engagement with self and the sacred. Even so, his behavior was characterized by egotism and self-absorption. He was known to be domineering and sometimes violent in his interpersonal relationships and seems to have harbored the bully’s inclination in his impacted relationships and seems to have harbored the bully’s inclination to feel martyred by the world. Gauguin did not hesitate to insert his own face when painting Christ crucified (The Yellow Christ, 1889) and Christ in near despair in the Garden of Gethsemane (Christ in the Garden of Olives, 1889), a practice that shocked even some of the avant-garde artists, though today it is widely regarded as a bold, modern gesture on his part. He spoke of being a martyr of art and also considered himself the Christ of the new way of painting.

In 1891 Gauguin left France for two years in Tahiti, explaining to a journalist, “I am leaving to be at peace, to rid myself of civilization. I want only to create art that is simple... to see nothing but primitive people, to live as they do...” The Tahitian culture he encountered had long since been crushed and demoralized by French colonialism, yet Gauguin was inspired to paint the people as stylized, serene forms, who are often arranged in tableaux reflecting Catholic themes and situated in the lush, tropical abundance of a Garden of Eden.

Before he left Paris, Gauguin had become interested in Madame Helena Blavatsky’s Theosophical extrapolations on comparative religion. When he returned to Paris in 1893 for two years, he delved further into Theosophy, probably through Émile Schuffenecker, and also read French translations of Buddhist texts. During both of his stays in Tahiti, to which he returned in 1895 for his final eight years of life, Gauguin often included in his paintings a blending of symbolic references to
Christianity, Buddhism, Easter Island statues, and the mythology of Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands. At the end of his life, Gauguin wrote, in the tenth leaf of his Notebook, that art becomes “the reproduction of what one sensibly grasps in nature but is seen through the veil of the soul.”71

The Nabis

Following Paul Séruisier’s painting lesson with Gauguin at Pont-Aven in the fall of 1888, he showed the resultant painting, The Woods of Love at Pont-Aven, to some of his fellow art students at the Académie Julian in Paris. They were fascinated by the radically abstracted and wildly colored composition, which they took to calling The Talisman. The impact of their seeing that painting was later recalled by Maurice Denis (1870–1943):

Thus was introduced to us for the first time, in a paradoxical and unforgettable form, the fertile concept of the “plane surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order.” Thus we learned that every work of art was a transposition, a caricature, the passionate equivalent of a sensation received. This was the origin of an evolution in which [we] participated in without delay.72

At the urging of Sérusier and Denis, several of those art students—including Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947), Édouard Villiard (1868–1940), and Paul Ranson (1864–1909)—formed a group in 1889, which they called Les Nabis (based on the Hebrew word for prophet, navi). They were joined later by Jan Verkade (1868–1946), Félix Vallotton (1865–1925), and Ker-Xavier Roussel (1867–1944). Aristide Maillol (1861–1944) was also associated with the group early on. They were fascinated by Mallarmé’s writings on synesthesia; Balzac’s Swedenborgian novels, Louis Lambert and Séraphite; Cézanne’s paintings; the works of the Quattrocento painters; Byzantine icons and mosaics; Cimabue; medieval stained glass; the Breton Calvaries carved of granite; Etruscan and Egyptian painting; various esoteric texts on sacred geometry and mystical numbers and proportions; as well as other ancient wisdom, including Édouard Schuré’s The Great Initiates: A Study of the Secret History of Religions (1889). Schuré was a Theosophist who was convinced that the world was on the threshold of a great spiritual era in which spiritual art had a crucial role to play. Sérusier, who had a strong educational background in philosophy and religion, was particularly interested in the Idealist philosophy of the Theosophists. He had many conversations with Aurier about the Idealist (or idéiste) underpinning the new painting before the critic wrote his influential article in praise of Gauguin and Synthetist Symbolism in 1891.

The Nabis dedicated themselves to developing new forms of visual expression that would illuminate, through the immutable principles of art, the subtle plane beyond the material world. They sought, in particular, to transform spiritual and visual sensations into form and color. They met initially at the Académie Julian and later on in weekly meetings in the studio of Paul Ranson and his wife, which they jokingly called the Temple. Ranson devised a secret language for them, for they considered themselves initiates who gathered to hear esoteric texts read aloud and to discuss
their ideas about a new aesthetics of engagement with the sacred. They addressed each other as “Brother Nabi,” called a studio an *ergasterium*, and ended their letters with the first letters of the words “In the palm of your hand, my word and my thoughts.”

Although Ranson, who had been raised Protestant, was rather anti-Catholic, most of the other Nabis felt themselves to be spiritually rooted in Catholicism. For that reason they were particularly drawn to the writings of Schuré, who hoped for a deepening of mysticism within the Catholic tradition and for a reconciliation between religion and science. Initially, the Nabis drew frequently from Schuré’s explication of Eastern spirituality in their paintings, but several of them eventually focused on creating a new mystical aesthetics for Catholicism, which was widely seen in nineteenth-century France to be relentlessly assaulted by the new secular culture. In this work they drew from Schuré’s presentation of Pythagoras’ teachings on mathematical proportions and the elements of universal harmony. Most of the Nabis attended religious discussions regularly at the Dominican seminary on Rue Faubourg, arranged by Sérusier, though the first priest with whom they met passed them off to another Dominican who was more tolerant of their impatience with the status quo, their opinionated questioning, and their interest in both Catholicism and Schuré’s Theosophical Catholicism.73

The Nabis sought to convey in their paintings the spiritual or the affective states experienced by the artists when engaged with a stimulus, such as a scene in nature, without any intention of providing a copy of the scene. Thus they championed what Denis called a “subjective deformation” of the material plane in service to conveying the more subtle states of perception. Their paintings exist in an otherworldly realm, sometimes fluid and dreamlike, as in Ranson’s *Nabi Landscape* (1890), and sometimes shimmering with an intangible vitality, as in several of the domestic interiors painted by Bonnard and Vuillard.

Aided by discussions with Sérusier, Denis wrote a manifesto of their new ideas about art: “The Definition of Neo-Traditionalism,” published in August 1890 in the periodical *Art et Critique*. Denis asserted, “All the feeling of a work of art comes unconsciously, or nearly so, from the state of the artist’s soul,” and he affirmed Fra Angelico’s admonition that he who wishes to paint the story of Christ must live with Christ. Further, “When unjustifiable partisanship and illogical prejudices are eliminated, the field is cleared for the imaginations of the painters, for the aesthetes of beautiful appearances … . It [neo-traditionalism] attains definitive synthesis. Everything is contained within the beauty of the work itself.”74 He also championed the flatness of the picture plane and defended distorted figuration as a modern type of symbolization.

The Nabis had their first exhibition in a gallery in December 1891, but they were also committed to freeing art from easel painting and making a new kind of public art for religious spaces. They were intrigued by the relationship of murals to architecture and were inspired by the modern ecclesiastical murals by Puvis de Chavannes. Denis, for instance, created many easel paintings, such as *The Road to Calvary* (1889) and *Catholic Mystery* (1890), but later focused on murals in Catholic churches. Their religious paintings, ecclesiastical murals, and declaration of a neo-traditionalism situated the Nabis with the Catholic renewal movement in the arts that
manifested across Europe during the 1890s. Just as the dramatic Baroque works of art in the seventeenth century had reverberated as a grand rebuttal of the Reformation’s focusing of Christianity solely on the text so the artists in sympathy with the Catholic renewal movement of the 1890s expressed their own refusal of modernity’s demands that everyone should become more rationalist and text-based: they created, instead, an engaging burst of new religious art. These innovative Catholic artists, and all who commissioned them, believed that re-energizing the aesthetic was the irrefutable way to protect spiritual communion with the ineffable from all who would shrink, contain, or deny it altogether.

Beyond easel paintings and decorative art for homes and churches, the Nabis were involved in designing for Symbolist theater productions and took on many decorative commissions—including set designs, costumes, and posters—in which they sought to express a particular state evoked by a drama or by a symbolic element therein. Although the Nabis did not formally disband until 1899, Sérusier began to drift away in 1893, and Denis underwent a radical conversion on a trip to Rome in 1898 when he discovered that he greatly admired paintings by Raphael and Michelangelo. He immediately abandoned Symbolism and developed a more traditional style that reflected order and clarity.

Denis took on several commissions in the following decades for ecclesiastical murals and other decorative art; in 1919 he cofounded the Ateliers d’Art Sacré to train artists in creating high-quality modern art for churches. He also wrote the book *New Theories on Modern and Sacred Art* (1922). Sérusier wrote a book on sacred proportions in art, *The ABC of Painting* (1921). Bonnard became interested in the philosophy of Henri Bergson and created a large body of work based on painting from memory and conveying the shimmering evanescence of life. In Vuillard’s paintings, he often created a vibratory field of relationships, whether domestic scenes or views of the park across from his apartment, Place Vintimille.

At the same time the Nabis were working as a group in Paris, the American artist **John Singer Sargent (1856–1925)**, a highly successful painter of society portraits in London, signed a contract with the Boston Public Library in 1893 to create decorative art, the genre he and many artists of the time considered the most elevated. Puvis de Chavannes, regarded by many of the library’s promoters as the greatest living muralist in the world, was commissioned to cover the walls of the grand staircase. For a vaulted hallway on the top floor, Sargent chose the subject *Triumph of Religion* (1895–1919), a progressivist saga that began with pagan gods, arrived in Abrahamic monotheism, and then alluded to a modern subjective and private notion of spirituality.

***Gaudí and Jujol***

The Catholic renewal movement of the 1890s was the catalyst for the aesthetic radicalization of the most inventive architect and designer of his time: **Antoni Gaudí i Cornet (1852–1926)**. The residences, churches, schools, and a park he designed in Barcelona comprise the most profoundly organic oeuvre in modernist architecture. He helped to pioneer the *modernisme* style in Barcelona, which is sometimes considered a Catalan version of Art Nouveau although Gaudí used long, curvilinear
forms in his buildings several years before the emergence of the Art Nouveau style. Moreover, Gaudí’s use of those organic forms was structural, not merely decorative. He was determined to discover the structural principles of the Creation, which are obviously not Euclidean.

Gaudí was born and raised in a town in the south of Catalonia, descended on both sides from a lineage of coppersmiths. This ancestry endowed him, he believed, with a talent for imagining a spatial form before it is created. He was often kept out of school because he suffered from a rheumatoid condition, but he enjoyed spending solitary days exploring on a donkey and learning through attentive observations of nature. In school Gaudí was a mediocre student because he had scant tolerance for abstractions, always preferring lessons that conveyed concrete knowledge. He excelled at geometry and even invented his own geometric system, possibly because Euclidean geometry cannot illuminate nature.

Gaudí moved to Barcelona to finish his secondary education and enroll in the newly established Barcelona Provincial School of Architecture, where one of his courses included field trips to the Gothic churches throughout Catalonia. Concurrently he became interested in the analytical and rationalist approach to French Gothic architecture propounded by Eugène Viollet-le-Duc, Goethe’s organic philosophy and scientific work, and certain writings of Nietzsche. Later, Gaudí was drawn to John Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice*, especially the passionate chapter on “The Nature of Gothic,” and to William Morris’ conviction that artisanal ornamentation inspired by nature is inherent to good architecture. Gaudí had long felt a deep allurement to the aesthetic values of Gothic structures, but he observed that they are fragmented and could be improved upon. He was inspired by the medieval sense of the architect as a master designer with direct knowledge of all the arts involved, as well as the social and religious considerations bearing on function and form.

Gaudí was not particularly religious at this time and was even somewhat anticlerical. After graduating from architecture school, in 1878, he immediately received commissions and also joined the circle of promising young architects around Joan Martorell, formerly one of their professors and a practicing architect. Gaudí worked as a draftsman with Martorell on plans for the façade of Barcelona Cathedral and assisted him in 1882 in the design of a Jesuit church and a Salesian church. He became deeply influenced by Martorell’s sense of architecture as a ministry, or sacred calling, in service to both God and society. Martorell was supportive of social reforms, but his major focus was the development of a neo-Gothic style, drawing on Catalan roots, that could help to revive the spiritual depth that had characterized the Middle Ages. Years later Gaudí said of Martorell, “He was a wise man and a saint!” It was Martorell who suggested his young assistant to be the head architect of the Expiatory Temple of the Holy Family (Templo Expiatorio de la Sagrada Familia, known in Barcelona as Sagrada Familia) after the original architect resigned over a disagreement in 1883. Because the grand neo-Gothic church was being built by the local Society of St. Joseph, Gaudí considered his appointment to be a miracle effected by that saint.

When a priest who had been Gaudí’s spiritual counselor died in 1893, Gaudí experienced a profound spiritual crisis. He emerged with the conviction that “a man without religion is a spiritually diminished man, a mutilated man.” In 1899 Gaudí
joined the Artists’ Circle of St. Luke, an artists’ association with which he remained involved until his last years. He also became involved with another religious organization, the Spiritual League of the Virgin of Montserrat, which attracted many poets and artists and played a prominent role in the revival of Catalan culture.  

Although Gaudí’s early designs incorporated features of Moorish architecture (a synergistic style known as the *Mudéjar*), he soon began his 45-year quest to overcome what he considered to be visual discontinuities and fragmentation in Western architecture resulting from a distinction between load-bearing and support walls. Even the elegant Gothic churches he admired were flawed, he felt, by conceptual deficiencies in the design that required ornamentation to mask them or “crutches” (flying buttresses) to hold them up. Gaudí asserted that continuous forms are perfect forms, which could be melded to create a dynamic unity.

After much study and experimentation, he concluded that the parabolic curve is the ideal solution to several basic construction problems and, moreover, is the key-stone of a sacred geometry that is rooted in the Creation. He used the parabolic curve for the naves in the Sagrada Familia, for instance, because he felt it outlines and recreates an infinite space open to God, while avoiding the cavernous rigidity of neo-Gothic churches and incorporating the movement and vitality of nature’s vegetal curves. In addition, Gaudí felt that that the parabolic curve guides the soul in its development toward a culmination of unity with God. A few other forms were favored in his system as well: the tetrahedron was seen as the synthesis of space; the helicoid (spiral solid) connoted movement, life, and energy; and the hyperbolic paraboloid was regarded as the perfect representation of the Holy Trinity because it is born of two straight lines (the Father and the Son) that are united by the placement of the third (the Holy Spirit).  

To distinguish his system of sacred geometry from those that float conceptually at a distance from body and nature, Gaudí delighted in demonstrating its basis in elements of the Creation. He was known to spread his fingers and exclaim, “Look! These are paraboloids,” then extend his arms and twist from the waist to create a helical form. Similarly, when he was challenged about the architectural logic behind the undulating stone façade of the apartment building known as the Casa Milá (“How do you justify the curvilinear forms and volumes of this façade?”), Gaudí replied, “They are justified because they are connected to those of the Collserola and Tibidabo mountains that you can see from here.” Gaudí often incorporated elements of nature not seen in architectural ornamentation, let alone as structural forms, to create his “natural grammar”: bone, parts of muscle, fish scales, seeds, and flowers (Casa Batlló); foam and waves of the sea (Casa Milá); ice, smoke, and clouds (Sagrada Familia); and dynamic trunks of trees (as pillars in both Park Güell and Sagrada Familia). He studied the structure of seashells to glean new approaches to vaulting and let the topography of the hillsides determine the shapes of the walls and terraces he built in Park Güell. To underscore the spiritual basis of his approach, Gaudi stated, “Those who look for the laws of Nature as a support for their new work collaborate with the Creator.”

Gaudí’s inspiration in the use of color was, again, the Creation: “Ornamentation has been and will be colored. Nature presents us with no object that is not colored; everything in vegetation, geography, topography, and the animal kingdom is a
more or less sharp contrast of color. That is why every architectonic element must be colored.” Elsewhere he asserted, “Color is the complement of form and the clearest manifestation of life.” Color, of course, requires light, and Gaudí believed that the inhabitants—and especially the artists—of the Mediterranean basin have always been particularly blessed because the sunlight strikes landforms and objects at a 45° angle, an equilibrium that is an ideal light for defining things and revealing their forms without perceptual distortion. For this reason, he felt, the art of northern Europe (distorted by light that is too slanted) and of the tropics (distorted by glaring overhead light) would always be inferior to that of the Mediterranean.

In 1906 Gaudí began work on a large apartment building, which stands as one of his sculptural masterpieces, the Casa Milá. He envisioned this residential structure as a homage to the Virgin Mary and designed a large stone sculpture of her holding the infant Jesus to be installed at the center of the top level. Since the undulating waves of the curvilinear façade decrease sequentially from street level to roof level, the waves would seem to be breaking at the feet of Mary. In July 1909, however, anticlerical riots erupted in Barcelona during which some 50 religious establishments were burned to the ground. In the aftermath, the two clients who had commissioned the Casa Milá canceled the statue of the Virgin Mary and the small tower in her honor that was to have flanked the façade. Consequently, Gaudí lost interest in the project and entrusted all the remaining ornamental work to his younger associate, Josep Maria Jujol i Gibert (1879–1949).

Although Jujol was 27 years younger than Gaudí, he turned out to be the perfect collaborator. The two worked closely together from early 1906 until the master died 20 years later. Jujol, who was an extremely inventive sculptor as well as a designer, was less interested in the theoretical principles of organic structure than in creating elegant and often playful organic forms, including stunning organic banisters of wrought iron and graceful calligraphic sgraffito, which sometimes included visual references to the Virgin Mary. He contributed a vitality to the structures that brought them to fruition. Jujol created, for instance, the ceramic mosaic work in the long, undulating bench at Park Güell; the exterior ceramic murals and interior metalwork at Casa Batlló; wall paintings for the cathedral in Mallorca; and considerable work on the interior and exterior of Casa Milá that metamorphosed the structural elements. In documentary films on Gaudí, the camera often lingers over work by Jujol though he is not mentioned. The architectural critic Rowan Moore has observed, “If you have visited a Gaudí work and felt a lightness of spirit, perhaps a flicker of a smile, it’s likely you’re looking at something Jujol made under the old man’s supervision.”

After leaving the completion of Casa Milá to Jujol, Gaudí gradually withdrew from all private commissions and dedicated himself fully to the completion of the Expiatory Temple of the Holy Family, or Sagrada Familia, which he had been directing part-time since 1883, the beginning of a 40-year process of creating what he considered “the Hellenic temple of Mediterranean Gothic.” The longer he immersed himself in the consuming project of the Sagrada Familia, the more ascetic and penitent he became, most likely reasoning that he was offering up his sacrifices as atonement for the Catalan people and, especially, for the anticlerical aggression that was so intense in Barcelona. After all, Sagrada Familia is an expiatory church (facilitating atonement for sins of omission or commission, as well as for the repair of a
people’s relationship with God), which was founded by a Catholic publisher after the earlier anticlerical eruptions in Catalonia that followed the civil war of 1868.

In stark contrast to Gaudí’s routinely arriving at the building site of the Sagrada Familia in the mid-1880s in a carriage and dressed in the fashionable attire of a successful young architect, during the last 12 years of his work on the church he dressed in old, tattered clothes and sloughed off material concerns. This development was merely an intensification of the austere, but not unhappy, lifestyle he had preferred since the mid-1890s, when he explained to concerned acquaintances: “One must not confuse poverty with misery. Being poor leads to elegance and beauty; wealth leads to opulence and complication, which cannot be beautiful.”87 To ease his rheumatoid condition, he adopted the spartan diet recommended by the German naturopath Abbot Kneipp, took homeopathic medicines, and walked long distances daily. As the funds ran out for work on the Sagrada Familia, Gaudí continually begged for alms from wealthy donors (who soon took to avoiding him) so that construction might continue. He kept only the barest amount of money for his own needs; he gave up his house and moved into a small room in the crypt of the Sagrada Familia in 1925. When questioned about the slow pace of progress on the church, he would reply that his client is not in a hurry.

As with all of Gaudí’s building sites, certain sections of the Sagrada Familia were designed, constructed, and torn out repeatedly while he pursued experimental organic solutions to various design problems and challenges. Gaudí once mentioned to a perplexed acquaintance that he put into effect the design suggestions conveyed to him each evening by the Virgin Mary.88 At the end of every work day, Gaudí walked to the St. Philip Neri Catholic Church in the old section of the city “to say a few words to Mary.”89 He was en route to that appointment on the evening of June 7, 1926, when he stepped off the sidewalk and was run over by a trolley car. Unconscious and mistaken for a tramp, Gaudí was taken to a charity hospital for the indigent. When his friends were summoned the following day to the open ward where he lay, they urged him to let them move him to a better hospital, but he replied calmly that he belonged with the poor. He died two days later and was buried in a tomb in the crypt of the Sagrada Familia.

At the time of his death, many residents of Barcelona considered Gaudí a saint. Unfortunately, his last plans were destroyed during the Spanish Civil War when anarchist forces set fire to his office in the crypt, desecrated his tomb, and attempted to blow up the entire church. Today the building stands unfinished, but the extraordinary Nativity façade of the Sagrada Familia continues to inspire testimonials of conversion to Christianity, as a result of working on it or simply seeing it in person.

Jujol would have been the logical successor to direct work on the Sagrada Familia, as he had been designing elements of it for years with Gaudí, but the municipal officials appointed a clerk instead. Jujol continued taking private commissions—he had run his own architectural firm since 1908 and was a professor at the architectural college—but these were small jobs and usually underfunded. Fortunately, he had always enjoyed using found objects and old farm equipment, transforming them into original organic ornamentation. He continued working until his death in 1949, but his most fruitful decade was 1913–1923, when he created his most highly regarded
structures (residences and small churches) and when, according to one architectural historian, he was one of the most creative architects of his time.90

We have seen that the radically new types of painting invented in the nineteenth century were created in reaction against the following: perceived shortcomings in institutional Christianity (Blake and Friedrich) and the mechanistic worldview (Blake); the eclipse of religious subjects by secular subjects in paintings (the Nazarenes); the failure of a modern, hustling society to see God’s glory in nature (the Hudson River School); the spiritually barren, neoclassical trajectory in art that began with Raphael (the Pre-Raphaelites); the failure of modern society to actually see the epitome of God’s creation, woman (Renoir); the failure of landscape painting to achieve an atmospheric mystical immersion into God’s creation (Cézanne); Dutch Reform asceticism that needed to be liberated by “the floating world” of ukiyo-e (Van Gogh); mechanistic thinking now enlarged as “materialism” and naturalism (the Pont-Aven group); the uninspiring nineteenth-century French Catholic visual art (the Nabis); and the dependence of architecture on man-made Euclidean geometry instead of figuring out God’s natural geometries for design (Gaudí).

From the moment Blake mounted his defiant rejection of Enlightenment rationalism, neoclassical painting, and hide-bound strictures in Christianity and deployed his dramatic alternatives through poetry and printmaking, a new stream of modern art began to flow, one that was postmechanistic and dedicated to spiritual freedom. Blake influenced the Pre-Raphaelites (as did the Nazarenes, who had been influenced by Friedrich), who in turn influenced the emergence of Symbolist painting (as did Puvis de Chavannes’s hieratic murals). Clearly, the sequence of new art forms was sparked by spiritual as well as formal innovation. Moreover, we have seen—in the artists’ own words—that spiritual concerns related to their art were very much on their minds during the years when they were creating many of their most highly regarded works. Those direct testimonials by the artists about spiritual influences, presented here, are almost never mentioned in art history textbooks, largely because they are not widely known.

As for the commonly held notion that protomodern, neoclassical architecture categorically replaced the medieval aesthetic, the struggle between religious, organic medieval design versus secular, geometric neoclassical design was by no means over by 1800. Modernity and its discontents, which became increasingly apparent as the nineteenth century progressed, evoked a popular interest in many European countries in the sensibilities and coherence of their own premodern, medieval culture. Gaudí admired the spiritual integrity of medieval churches, but even those builders had failed to crack the code of nature’s structural design elements. That was his grand obsession, and certainly he would not settle for the banal artificiality of geometric design. Unfortunately, the rest of us have had to do so because the mechanistic sensibilities of modernity proved to be largely impervious to organic challenges.
From the perspective of many of the young painters and poets in the mid-1880s and beyond, civilization—by which they meant European civilization—was being destroyed by the deadening grip of materialism. This was their umbrella term for the positivist contempt for all knowledge derived from any source other than empirical science, the loss of Europe’s spiritual grounding through tightly constrained mechanistic thinking called “reason,” the destructive effects of industrialization, and the increasingly powerful market forces rending family and community. Anything precious that could not be quantified was now drained of value; even a human being was reduced to the cash value of his labor. The young artists considered it unthinkable that their generation would sit idly by while the disintegration continued unchallenged. All around they saw capitulation to the soulless juggernaut. They felt that the Protestant churches were useless in the struggle against materialism because nearly all of them had chosen accommodation, seeking a few shreds of respect from the new empiricist culture by emphasizing their most rational teachings, such as research on the historical life of Jesus or the rational application of Christian ethics, while no longer mentioning the medieval mystics locked away in their closets. The Catholic Church took a defensive posture against the new secular culture but was focused mainly on its own institutional survival. (An exception was the influential papal encyclical of 1891 on economic justice, Rerum Novarum [On the New Condition of the Working Class].) Judaism, too, had accommodated the rationalist preferences of modernity through the addition of its Reform branch following the French Revolution.
Influences

The avant-garde’s philosophical, spiritual, and aesthetic challenge to the menacing forces of “materialism” sought to reject its deadening premises and to manifest new ways of thinking, seeing, making art, and living—all of which, they believed, could lead to a new age for society. To power their quixotic endeavor, the avant-garde in the 1880s and 1890s drew from several sources: ancient systems of occult spirituality, new discoveries in science and mathematics, “primitivism,” and Symbolist poetry. Many art historians, while now well aware of these influences, have found it baffling that intelligent and radical artists would have been involved with esoterica so they have downplayed its importance. I will, therefore, seek first to clarify the appeal of this cluster of influences in light of the concerns of that period before moving into the art movements. It does seem to be one of those situations, though, where “you had to be there” to apprehend the synergy of enthusiasm and high-minded purpose that swept up young poets, writers, artists, and composers across Europe, a phenomenon that clearly exceeded the sum of the following parts.

Occult Traditions

Believing the religious institutions to be inadequate to the task, many young people turned instead to traditions of occult (hidden), or esoteric (inner), teachings of ancient knowledge and wisdom. They felt that these explications of deeper metaphysical knowledge about existence might well hold the key to transforming society from dynamics of ignorant destruction to dynamics of revelation, enlightenment, and social evolution. After all, they reasoned, what new ways of thinking would stand a chance against the crushing forces of materialism but those with deep, ancient roots that are aligned with the powers of the cosmos?

Esoteric traditions generally hold that the material plane is a rather crude level of existence that is underlain by a vast, subtle realm of immaterial forces in sync with the most essential operating principles of reality. That is, it is the invisible metaphysical realm that informs the gross physical plane. In this orientation, the material world is understood to be infused with the anima mundi (world spirit) and is governed by a complex dynamic of correspondences and forces that either attract or repel. Elaborate antique charts are often featured in occult texts to illustrate the correspondences, although the primary mode of communicating metaphysical concepts is through symbols. It is also taught that a transcendent unity underlies all religions and that the esoteric systems of knowledge provide a pathway to that core of metaphysical truth. The secret truths of the universe and the means by which one can become adept at achieving communion with them are conveyed solely to initiates of esoteric societies. Examples of Western esoteric systems include Renaissance hermeticism, neo-Platonism, alchemy, Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry (in France), and Kaballah (also in its Christian form). Prominent Western esoteric sages include Paracelsus (a sixteenth-century Swiss alchemist); Jakob Böhme (an early seventeenth-century German Christian mystic); Robert Fludd (an early seventeenth-century English Christian alchemist); and Emmanuel Swedenborg (an eighteenth-century Swedish Christian mystic).
During the period from the mid-1880s until World War I, interest in esoteric teachings resulted in the emergence of an international counterculture, which was especially strong in cities in Germany, Russia, France, and The Netherlands but also present in Britain, Belgium, Sweden, Austria, and other countries. It consisted of numerous lodges of esoteric organizations, public lectures, informal gatherings, and publications. Interest in the occult was hardly limited to avant-garde artists and poets. In the upper echelons of St. Petersburg society, for instance, both Theosophy and spiritism were fashionable. All across Europe, dozens of esoteric teachers attracted followers among young artists. In Paris, seekers could choose from occult groups such as the Swedenborgians, the Rosicrucians, the Gnostics, the Cult of Isis, the Cult of Light, the Luciferians, and the Last Pagans. For our purposes, the three major organizations, however, were the Theosophical Society, Rudolf Steiner’s Anthroposophical Society, and Joséphin Péladan’s Ordre de la Rose + Croix. Through the inspiration of esoteric traditions, the young artists and poets sought to cultivate and express illuminating ways of perceiving and thinking that were derived from ancient, metaphysical truths, which would have the effect of drawing people beyond their daily slog through rationalist, materialist constrictions to a New Age of societal transformation.

**Theosophy**

Theosophy (meaning “divine wisdom”) has a long history but was given a modern form as a synthesis of Eastern religions and Western esoteric traditions, which was framed by the Russian mystic Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891). She cofounded the Theosophical Society in 1875 and wrote two influential books, *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy* (1888). Another early work of Theosophy that attracted a large audience was *The Occult World* (1881) by A. P. Sinnett.

Modern Theosophy emerged at a time when popular interest in the new field of comparative religion had partially decentered Christianity, a perspective explicated initially by Charles F. Dupuis, minister of education following the French Revolution, in a multivolume study entitled *The Origin of All Religious Worship* (1794). Dupuis concluded from his research that all ancient religions had a common source, which—in his view as an astronomer—was engagement with the heavenly bodies. In addition, his scholarly assertion that all ancient sacred mythologies embodied a duality of heaven and earth, sun and moon, and male and female, as well as a tripartite matter–mind–spirit concept (as evidenced by triune godheads), was repeated by numerous esoteric writers in the decades to come. Continuing this line of thought, Blavatsky explained that Theosophy conveys the core truths that prevailed at the origin of all religions and that studying the root teachings of religions would further the birth of a future religion.

Similarly, she responded to the popular interest in Darwin’s revelation of evolution by situating Theosophy within the new scientific worldview, explaining that material evolution is merely a small part of a far larger metaphysical evolution. Blavatsky taught in *The Secret Doctrine* that spirit and matter are complementary aspects of a boundless reality, that metaphysical evolution is guided by a law of cyclical change, and that individual souls are reflections of the Universal Spirit, with which one can
gain ultimate unity through a progression of reincarnated lives in which one strives to gain virtue and wisdom. In this process, one's karma (understood at the most basic level as the consequence of one's actions) will either impede or advance one's progress, but following the prescribed disciplines will result in metaphysical means of knowledge ("superconsciousness") that transcend the limitations of the senses. She was confident that the human race was entering a period of progress that would result in a New Age. Blavatsky explained that the occult knowledge she had synthesized and conveyed had been related to her by the Masters, highly advanced beings whom she did not identify further. Still in existence today, Theosophy encourages the study of world religions and is regarded by its adherents as both as a vehicle of personal development and the nucleus of a brotherhood of humanity that can effect social transformation.

**Anthroposophy**

Anthroposophy (meaning “wisdom concerning the human”) is a Christian-oriented esoteric system devised in 1913 by Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), who had been the unofficial head of the German section of the Theosophical Society since 1902. He broke from Theosophy in 1912–1913 because Annie Besant (successor to Blavatsky) was, in his view, overemphasizing Eastern religions and because she had chosen an Indian adolescent, Jiddu Krishnamurti, to be the new World Teacher. Steiner then launched his own orientation, Anthroposophy, as a “Spiritual Science” for the modern age, an experiential metaphysics that communicates knowledge gained by spiritual means (beyond sense perceptions). He delineated four levels of human knowledge: sensory perception; imaginative knowledge (via the “etheric body”); inspirational knowledge (via the soul, or astral body); and intuitive knowledge (via the I or Spirit).

Like Blavatsky, Steiner provided an explanation for perplexing subjects that dominated the zeitgeist. For instance, he taught that the evolution of the human race passes through seven levels of consciousness and corresponding cycles of cosmic history; he determined that we are currently in the fifth ("Aryan") stage of the fourth cycle, in which humans are prone to materialism. Anthroposophy draws from philosophical Idealism; Goethe’s phenomenological approach to science; esoteric Christianity (including German Rosicrucianism); and various elements of Theosophy. Anthroposophy has a wide following in Germany and elsewhere to this day, Steiner having created a system of K-12 schooling (Waldorf Schools); a system of biodynamic horticulture; an approach to healthcare; and an engagement with the arts, including eurhythmy. Both before and after Steiner left Theosophy, many avant-garde artists attended his lectures in Germany on the role of art as a bridge between the spiritual and material realms.

**L’Ordre de la Rose + Croix**

In Paris a young art critic and occult novelist, Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918), drew from cabalistic Rosicrucianism and Catholicism to create an esoteric organization with two other seers, but he broke off that association in 1890 to form The Catholic and Aesthetic Order of the Rose + Cross of the Temple of the Grail. In this endeavor
he assumed the titles of Imperator and SuperMagician, using the title Sâr (a title of Assyrian kings). Péladan argued in a flamboyant prose style in numerous articles and pamphlets for a new art of spirituality and philosophical Idealism, asserting that if an artist created a perfect work a soul arrives to inhabit it. He also wrote polemics against what he saw as the materialist focus of both academic French art (which adhered to the standards of the Académie des Beaux-Arts) and that of the Impressionists (who were felt to be interested merely in the physical plane). He also opposed the new Decadent style of painting, as he felt it simply mirrored the disintegration of Europe’s spiritual culture. Art, he maintained, is the spirituality of forms and is the meeting point between culture and mysticism.

He declared that his Salon de la Rose + Croix “wants to ruin realism, reform Latin taste, and create a school of Idealist art.” Toward that end, Sâr Péladan hosted six successful exhibitions featuring a new style of painting that had recently been labeled Symbolist. He also included new types of music by Wagner and Erik Satie, suggesting that his art exhibitions approximated a rite of initiation. These exhibitions were intended to compete with the official Parisian art salons, which he considered decadent and repulsive. He began by placing a notice in Le Figaro and then selecting 250 works that fit his preferences: the “Catholic Ideal” (i.e., a Catholic version of Idealist metaphysics) and mysticism; legends, myths, allegory, dreams; the depiction of great poems; and all lyricism. The well-attended and critically well-received exhibitions of the Salon de la Rose + Croix, held between 1892 and 1897, featured some 230 artists, including Émile Bernard, Ferdinand Hodler, Jan Toorop, Fernand Khnopff, and Félix Valloton. In 1896, Jean Delville (1867–1953), a Belgian painter and occultist who had exhibited in the Salon de la Rose + Croix, returned to Brussels to found the Salon d’Art Idéaliste, which combined Theosophical teachings, freemasonry, and the ideas of Péladan.

Relevant Discoveries in Science and Mathematics

Many art historians have expressed puzzlement that serious artists in the fin de siècle period “succumbed” to spirituality when they were living in an age of science. The avant-garde artists, though, regarded several of the latest discoveries of science as vindications of esoteric teachings. When the first X-rays were exhibited by the Berlin Physical Society in 1896, for instance, there was great excitement in artistic circles about this scientific support for exactly what Madame Blavatsky had taught in The Secret Doctrine: an invisible structure underlies every material surface.

Similarly, two topics discussed in contemporary mathematics—the possibility of a fourth dimension and the possibility of non-Euclidian geometry—were embraced by the avant-garde as further proof of the loosening grip of materialism on modern minds. Throughout much of the nineteenth century, several mathematicians had hypothesized about n-dimensional geometry (which would result in forms having a dimension beyond height, width, and depth) and also about non-Euclidian geometry. In addition, J. C. F. Zöllner, a German professor of astronomy who became curious about spiritism, published a widely read series entitled Scientific Treatises in 1878, the third of which was translated as Transcendental Physics in 1880. He proposed that paranormal phenomena are four-dimensional; for example, ghosts live...
in an external, four-dimensional world and what we see of them are merely the shadows they cast into our three-dimensional spatial realm. With regard to clairvoyance, Zöllner posited that “cubical vision” results when “a spatial widening of the three-dimensional circle of sight” occurs such that physical bodies appear increasingly transparent.6

Speculation about a fourth dimension of reality migrated from mathematics to public interest largely through the writings of Charles Howard Hinton, an English mathematician and author of science fiction, beginning with an article entitled “What Is the Fourth Dimension?” (1884) and ending with his final, widely influential book, The Fourth Dimension (1904). Hinton proposed a philosophy of hyperspace, which holds that the fourth dimension of reality is both physical and transcendent. Citing Kant’s determination that space is an a priori intuition, Hinton asserted that we can train our minds through various exercises to perceive this more subtle dimension, resulting in an expansion of consciousness that would lead to a new era of thought and the next stage in human evolution. Hinton’s ideas were widely discussed and were cited in P. D. Ouspensky’s writings in Russia and in C. W. Leadbeater’s Theosophical books in England. These works, although not Hinton’s, were translated into French. Hinton’s ideas were discussed in several periodicals in Paris, where they were sometimes associated with the Theosophical notion that one can develop “astral vision” to see beyond the dimensions of the material plane.7 In Berlin, Steiner delivered a series of lectures in 1905 on esoteric aspects of the fourth dimension, addressing such topics as the relationship between geometric studies and developing direct perception of spiritual realities, how to construct a four-dimensional hypercube, and the six dimensions of the self-aware human being.8 Many avant-garde artists were in attendance.

In three books published between 1902 and 1908, the renowned mathematician Henri Poincaré conveyed contemporary scientific thought, including work on the fourth dimension and non-Euclidean geometry, in a style accessible to the general public. The subject was so widely discussed that Scientific American sponsored an essay contest in 1909 with a prize of $500 for the best popular explanation of the fourth dimension. They received 245 essays from all over the world and selected 22 prize-winners, which they published in a book the following year, The Fourth Dimension Simply Explained. Many of the winning contestants cited the writings of Zöllner and/or Hinton. All such discussions of the fourth dimension as a subtle plane of space were superseded after 1920, when Einstein’s theory of relativity began to be discussed in popular publications, and the fourth dimension was henceforth identified with space-time.

“Primitive” Cultures

The term primitive had three connotations during this period that are relevant here. First, the emergent field of ethnography was bringing to public awareness a new field of scientific knowledge: the study of indigenous, or “primitive,” cultures in distant lands. Most of the major European cities created a museum of ethnography during the second half of the nineteenth century, such as the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris. In essence, these were intended to be showcases of the
advanced state of European science and to present a European view of the recipients of European colonialism. Second, in Continental discussions of art, medieval artists were traditionally referred to as “the Primitives,” that is, those who painted prior to the Renaissance. Curiosity about the “primitive” (premodern) medieval era was common in several European countries during the nineteenth century because it was the culture that had immediately preceded their own era of materialism, industrialization, and other rough edges of the modern condition. Third, beginning in the 1890s, there was widespread fascination in avant-garde and intellectual circles across Europe with primal truths that were seen as having been preserved in indigenous cultures. Many of the avant-garde artists, especially in Paris, collected “primitive” masks from Africa and Micronesia and displayed them in their studios. In addition, several young artists felt drawn to explore or learn about Christianized indigenous cultures at the margins of their own country (such as the Ziryian culture in western Siberia), as well as quasi-nonmodern cultures that blended Christianity with their own ancient traditions (such as the Celtic culture of Brittany). Among the avant-garde, then, “primitive” was a term of admiration that referred to any of these nonmodern peoples: medieval European cultures; distant indigenous cultures; or largely unassimilated indigenous cultures living within the borders of a modern European state, as well as the somewhat “primitive” folkways of agrarian cultures in those European states.

**Symbolist Poetry**

Energized by these resources—esoteric knowledge, new discoveries from science, and a new awareness of “primitive” wisdom—the avant-garde saw clearly what needed to be done. Art must be wrenched from materialist constraints in ways that would be striking enough to jar people into realizing that the physical plane is merely a derivative expression of the vast immaterial realm. They must be brought to realize that civilization will sink even lower if people continue to settle for conventional modes of perception and expression when there is so much more. The Symbolist poets had already articulated the need to address the concrete obliquely in order to engage with the unbounded abstract. They often credited the pioneering work of Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), who asserted in his sonnet “Correspondences” (1857) the Swedenborgian concept of seeking correspondences between the physical and the metaphysical worlds so that one can reunite with original, primitive modes of expression, long since disintegrated and fragmented by civilization. In framing a new aesthetics, Baudelaire was also influenced by his conversations with **Eugène Delacroix** (1798–1863), the leading Romantic painter in France.

The Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé (1842–1898) sought to escape the limits of the material plane by using indirect invocation rather than direct description. He constructed his poems such that a word or phrase had multivalent meanings. In addition, the Symbolist poets favored the use of **synesthesia**—the mixing of sense perceptions, such as hearing the sound of a color or seeing the color of a musical note—so that the reader is forced to suddenly experience a primal gestalt, or wholeness of impressions.
Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, and several other Symbolist poets—like many avant-garde artists and (in their early years) composers—were admirers of the late works of Richard Wagner (1813–1883). As the creator of a new art form, the Gesamtkunstwerk (a total work bringing together all of the arts), he was inspirational in several genres. The poets appreciated that Wagner called his operatic libretti “poems” and that he incorporated his innovation of the leitmotif so elaborately and with such multivalence that it takes on the qualities of a symbol. They applauded his idiosyncratic adaptation of medieval Christian legend and Norse and German myth, as well as his pushing the limits of the traditional tonal system by giving keys and chords their own identity. In several ways, Wagner foreshadowed developments that soon followed in the arts.

Although one often reads that the Symbolist poems and paintings of the fin de siècle period were a continuation of the Romantic movement in art, such an assertion overlooks the cultural history involved. In the matter of critique, the two movements of artists had different concerns. The Romantics refuted the errors and constraints of the mechanistic worldview imposed during the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. The fin de siècle avant-garde artists were concerned about a much broader materialist assault on “civilization”: the mechanistic, rationalist worldview; the reigning doctrine of positivism; the deadening effects of rapid industrialization and the rapacious market economy, and the inability of religious institutions to resist. Moreover, in the matter of responses mounted by the two movements to address the destructive developments they decried, the Romantics opted for a deep and dynamic communion with nature, while the fin de siècle artists took the opposite tack: they turned to esoteric teachings, which hold that the “mere” material plane is of far less significance than the subtle realm that informs nature. The Romantic and the Symbolist painters did share a key concept, however: the revival of the ancient (and, indeed, indigenous) ontological sense of a symbol as being continuous with and embedded in a field of vital interrelatedness, which includes the viewer or reader. This far more dynamic interpretation rejects the conventional view of a symbol as being merely a sign referring to something else.

**Symbolist Painting**

It was clear to young painters by the second half of the 1880s that a radically new art was needed, but who among them would make the first breakthrough? It turned out to be the Pont-Aven group, who created a new art that broke free of Renaissance perspective and was no longer tethered to naturalist forms and coloration. Their style of abstracted forms, a flattened picture plane, and boldly suggestive color influenced many artists across Europe up until World War I. In the 1890s, other styles of Symbolist painting emerged as well. Their general metaphysical orientation was analyzed in art criticism of the period, such as the article in 1891 in the journal *Mercure de France* by the young art critic G.-Albert Aurier. In this essay, entitled “Symbolism in Painting: Paul Gauguin,” he asserted that art has always contained two great contradictory tendencies: the realist trend, which depends on blindness (though it may convey the “worker’s soul”), and the Idéiste trend, which depends on “that inner eye of man of which Swedenborg speaks” and is “more pure and more elevated.” As was common in French writing about the metaphysical concerns of the avant-garde at
that time, Aurier used the philosophical term *Idéiste* (meaning Idealist, not ideal or idealistic) for the Platonic concept of a correspondence between material entities and the intangible Ideas, or Ideals, that inform them. Strengthening awareness of this correspondence was widely viewed as a way to build a counterforce against materialism. Aurier positioned the new type of painting as an affirming metaphysical response to this Idealist trend:

We can even affirm that the supreme art cannot be but Idealist, art by definition [as we know intuitively] being the representative materialization of what is highest and the most truly divine in the world, of what is, in the last analysis, the only thing existent—the Idea . . . . The normal and final end of painting, as well as of the other arts, can never be the direct representation of objects. Its aim is to express Ideas, by translating them into a special language.  

Aurier held that painting since the late medieval and early Renaissance era had been merely realist, as if painted by the prisoners in Plato’s allegorical cave, but that the new works emerging from the Pont-Aven group have five noble qualities: they are Idealist; Symbolist [expressing an Idea by means of forms]; Synthetist (Gauguin’s term for synthesizing the [flat] forms and colors with the *Idéiste* subject matter); subjective (conveying deep imaginative communion); and decorative (closer to the art of “primitives” than is easel painting, which was seen as a commercial demand of decadent societies). The true artist, Aurier maintained, brings the gift of “transcendent emotivity, so grand and precious, that makes the soul tremble before the pulsing drama of the abstractions.” He concluded by attributing existential deliverance to the new mode of painting:

Thanks to this gift, symbols—that is, Ideas—arise from the darkness, become animated, begin to live with a life that is no longer our life of contingencies and relativities, but a splendid life that is the essential life, the life of Art, the being of Being. Thanks to this gift, art that is complete, perfect, absolute, exists at last.  

The Synthetist Symbolists of Pont-Aven and the Nabis

As we saw in the previous chapter, most of the Pont-Aven painters and nearly all of the Nabis were influenced by both the esoteric quest of the emergent avant-garde and by their spiritual ties with the renewal of Catholicism in France. They had in common with the rest of the emergent Symbolist movement in the visual arts an interest in Theosophy, in particular Édouard Schuré’s *The Great Initiates: A Study of the Secret History of Religions* (1889). Gauguin, soon joined by the others, studied mystical systems of mathematical proportion derived from the Pythagoreans and various systems yielding harmony of relationships and sensations, which they employed in their paintings.

Other Styles of Symbolist Painting

The Symbolist aesthetic spread from France to Belgium, The Netherlands, Germany, Norway, Russia, Switzerland, Scotland, and parts of Spain. In all of these countries, young painters joined the quest to reach beyond the material plane, to escape
the confines of Renaissance perspective, and to express esoteric concepts in bold art that would awake the consciousness of Europe. Prominent Symbolist painters include Ferdinand Hodler (Swiss, 1853–1918), Jan Toorop (Dutch, 1858–1928), Fernand Khnopff (Belgian, 1858–1921), and Gustav Klimt (Austrian, 1862–1918). Some painted figures in a simplified sculptural form, while others created opulent scenes, which the French critics called *notre Byzantinisme* and which often included a languid female form.

In addition, there were Symbolist painters in several countries who constitute what might be called the pessimistic branch of the movement. They were avant-garde artists who fully accepted the widely held anxieties about the imminent ruination of European culture and society by materialism but did not feel drawn to evoke a counterforce by acquiring esoteric knowledge. They cultivated a no-exit state of mind about the ruination of “civilization” by conveying the foreboding accretion of *fin de siècle* concerns. For instance, the popular interpretation of discoveries related to the Second Law of Thermodynamics held that entropy will cause the universe to run down to a formless puddle, our inescapable fate. Also disconcerting was new research in physiology showing that the human brain can be riddled with disease. Degeneration, materialism, and superficiality were seen to rule the day.

These Symbolist painters often depicted the dark, irrational side of modern man, accompanied by a dualistic depiction of woman as either a wistful innocent or a dangerous *femme fatale*. They favored nightmarish, graphically distorted depictions of inner states such as fear, yearning, anguish, and death. Like the majority of Symbolist artists, the anguished branch produced numerous great works, notably by Odilon Redon (1840–1916), James Ensor (1860–1949), and Edvard Munch (1863–1944). They developed their own, human-centered response to the spiritual avant-garde’s call for engagement with the invisible: they would achieve it by penetrating not the cosmos but the veneer of modern human existence. Ensor, for instance, painted several Christian-themed works in which a somewhat hapless religious figure is set in a fantastical, anxious flux of visual references to modernity. Redon had initially been disappointed that his fellow art students in the early 1870s were closed off from that “which might bring the light of spirituality…. I mean an illumination that seizes our spirit.” Eventually, though, he developed a style of fantastical creatures in eerie settings about which he stated, “My whole originality, therefore, consists in making the most implausible beings live human lives according to the laws of the plausible, placing the logic of the visible, insofar as it is possible, at the service of the invisible.”

The “Spook School”: Symbolist Art and Design in Glasgow

Architectural students worldwide study the Glasgow School of Art building, considered by many to be the first example of modern architecture. This elegantly original structure was designed in 1896 and 1907 by Scotland’s most famous architect, Charles Rennie Mackintosh (1868–1928). It was unsurpassed for a century while boring geometric design motifs were increasingly embraced as the modern norm. Mackintosh was a member of the design group known as “The Four,” or “The Glasgow Four,” which included Margaret MacDonald (1865–1933); her
sister, **Frances MacDonald** (1873–1921); and Mackintosh's fellow artist-architect, **Herbert MacNair** (1868–1955). The two men had been students at the School since 1886; the two sisters arrived in the early 1890s. The Four were introduced to one another by the school's director because of the *simpatico* character of their work and soon began to collaborate. By mid-decade, the women had left the School to establish a design studio, while the men continued to work as apprentice architects. The sisters were also part of a loose association of artists and designers known as the Glasgow Girls. (A group of young male painters, the Glasgow Boys, were active then as well, though most of their work was less Symbolist than that of the designers.) In London, detractors of the Glasgow Style, especially the ethereal figurative Symbolist designs produced by the MacDonald sisters’ studio, labeled it the Spook School.

All of these overlapping circles loosely connected to the Glasgow School of Art were involved throughout the 1890s in the fascination with esoteric teachings that gripped the avant-garde on the Continent. The Glasgow Style was particularly influenced by the work of the German Swiss Symbolist artist **Carloz Schwabe** (1866–1926), who was closely associated with Péladan's Salon de la Rose + Croix. Many of the young artists and designers attended a series of lectures on the wisdom of Eastern religions that was delivered in Glasgow by Max Müller, the renowned scholar of comparative religion. In addition, they read and discussed the mystical, Symbolist plays by the Belgian writer Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949). The Four, like the larger artistic community of which they were a part, were interested in the Celtic Revival, Rosicrucianism, Theosophy, and a blend of East and West symbolism that expressed the interrelatedness of all life. Reflecting on the symbolic content in the design work by the Four prior to 1900, Herbert MacNair noted in later life that “not a line was drawn without purpose, and rarely was a single motif employed that had not some allegorical meaning.” The Symbolist art of the Four was most fully realized in their watercolor sketches, from which they frequently adopted forms in their architectural décor.

In his lectures, Mackintosh often cited *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth* (1892), a book by **W. R. Lethaby** (1857–1931), an English architect and architectural historian associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement. Lethaby advocated a cosmic symbolism, in which the Tree of Life is both a symbol of the universe and a basic form of building construction. Mackintosh absorbed that idea into his design of the new building for the Glasgow School of Art, making the Tree of Life a symbol for inspired architecture. He also adopted, to striking effect, Lethaby's assertion that portals need guardians. Throughout the structure, Mackintosh—who was additionally inspired by Ruskin and Morris—incorporated organic motifs, as well as symbols drawn from Rosicrucian, Egyptian, Judaic, and Christian traditions, plus some that he created. In unifying (spiritual) decoration and construction as never before, he declared himself to be a Modernist and a Craftsman. Mackintosh believed that “the soul that lied beneath” an inspired architect’s work is “best expressed through a language of symbolic illumination.”

Use of the rose as a symbolic motif, which figures in both Christianity and several occult traditions, first emerged in various designs by the Glasgow Girls and became known as the Glasgow Rose. Mackintosh and Margaret MacDonald developed a
stylized version that is both austere (a long, rigid stem) and alluring (the sensuous swirl of the rose). This became known as the Mackintosh Rose, which appears as the signature motif in all their projects. It can be seen in the Glasgow School of Art; Hill House (a residence); and Miss Cranston’s Tea Rooms. The celebrated Hill House, near Glasgow, contains light-filled, serene white rooms that are detailed with a gracefully restrained Symbolist décor, including the repetition of symbols like a motif in Wagnerian music. When Hill House was featured in The English House (1904), a German book by Hermann Muthesius, it became influential in new schools of modern architecture on the Continent. In 1900 Charles Rennie Macintosh and Margaret MacDonald were invited to contribute to the eighth exhibition of the Vienna Secession. They designed a dramatic tea room, which was influential with Josef Hoffmann (1870–1956) and Koloman Moser (1868–1916), who subsequently founded the Wiener Werkstätte (Vienna Workshops).

In 1927, the year before he died, Charles Rennie Mackintosh wrote to Margaret, his wife since 1900, “You must remember that in all my architectural efforts, you have been half, if not three-quarters, of them...” He also observed to someone else, “I had talent, but Margaret had genius.”

### The End of the Fin de Siècle Period and the Dawn of the Twentieth Century

The old century passed without an entropic meltdown after all. In the spring of 1900 a world’s fair opened in Paris, the Universal Exposition, in which countries showcased their nineteenth-century achievements and welcomed the new. An optimistic mood at the Exposition supported the view that change was dissolving old boundaries and constraints such that a new manifestation of universal brotherhood would emerge. In the Hall of Machines, Henry Adams reluctantly became convinced that the huge dynamos and all they stood for would dominate the coming century, shunting aside the claims of religion, in which he had recently been immersed at Chartres Cathedral.

The avant-garde artists made no such concession to materialism, but they, too, felt the invigoration of the new century. The fin de siècle pessimism and its anxieties dropped away, as did interest in “old-fashioned” esoteric teachers (such as Böhme, Fludd, and Paracelsus). The esoteric spiritual orientations that remained compelling to the avant-garde after 1900 were the two that positioned themselves as modern, specifically as the contemporary synthesis of science, religion, and philosophy: Theosophy and, after 1913, Steiner’s Anthroposophy. Fascination with the fourth dimension and the revelations of X-ray photography continued to be widely discussed among artists throughout the pre–World War I period.

The overarching quest to save civilization from materialism (broadly defined) remained strong among most of the prominent artists and numerous new arrivals. The possibility of a New Age was seen to rest on the emergence of new ways of seeing and thinking about our embeddedness in invisible reality. This would not occur without new art that was so vital and courageous as to escape the confines of materialist perception, naturalist depiction, and Renaissance perspective. There could be no going back. Only art that challenged, penetrated, and went beyond the limits of ordinary perception was considered worthwhile. This compelling necessity
evoking the new art forms energized the avant-garde from the mid-1880s into the early 1920s. That is, the formalist agenda throughout the most inventive period of modern art was closely related to the spiritual crusade against materialist art, thought, and life. Consequently, even artists with no interest in the spiritual, such as Picasso, knew very well that any new art they created that refuted, altered, or broke apart material objects in their depiction would be celebrated as a vigorous assault against materialist perception.

The new styles of art received an influential justification when Wilhelm Worringer, a scholar of aesthetics and art history, published his dissertation, *Abstraction and Empathy*, in Germany in 1908. He argued that naturalistic art results from empathy, or satisfaction, with the material world, while the partially abstracted forms of Expressionist art result from a desire to reveal the transcendent aspects of reality. As such, he argued, the shocking new styles of art were of aesthetic value equal to that of realist art. Also in 1908, two influential Theosophical books—*Thought Forms* by Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater (1901) and *Man Visible and Invisible* by Leadbeater (1902)—were translated into German and were discussed among avant-garde artists in Munich and elsewhere.

Along with the quest for post-materialist realization, the fascination with pre-modern wisdom held by “primitive” cultures continued into the new century. Examples are the ballets Sergei Diaghilev commissioned from Igor Stravinsky for the Ballets Russes to be based on “primitive” subject matter: *The Firebird Suite* (1910) and *The Rite of Spring* (1913), subtitled *Pictures of Pagan Russia in Two Parts*.

**NEW PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCES: HENRI BERGSON**

An addition to the philosophical orientations attractive to many of the artists after 1900 was the work of Henri Bergson (1859–1941). His books postulated a new perception of reality as being far more indeterminate than the rigid assumptions of positivism, determinism, and reductionism allowed. In his best-known book, *Creative Evolution* (1907), he challenged Herbert Spencer’s mechanistic sense of evolution. Bergson agreed that life forms became more complex over time through the interplay of novelty and continuity, but he asserted that the new arises through undetermined creation, not mechanistic forces.

On the human psyche, Bergson held that the essentially pragmatic (analytical and quantitative) orientation of human intelligence precludes its having access to the essentially qualitative nature of life. What is needed, then, is that one pay attention to flashes of intuition, which are vestiges of instinct that allow us to have partial communion with the original creative, animating impulse, or vital force, which Bergson called the *élan vital*. It is intuition that allows us the “sympathy” to be, for instance, transported to the interior of an object so as to coincide with what is unique, and hence inexpressible, about it. He regarded intuition as both the integrative experience and also a method for achieving it. By cultivating intuition, one can integrate, to a small degree, some of the qualitative multiplicity of all existence: the infinity of “durations,” or spans of existence, that occur within the continuity of time. Philosophy, Bergson held, ought to seize upon fleeting intuitions, “first, to sustain them, then to expand them and so unite them . . . . Thus is revealed the unity of spiritual
life. We recognize it only when we place ourselves in intuition in order to go from intuition to the intellect, for from the intellect we shall never pass to intuition.”

It is worth noting that, like Steiner's lectures in Germany on the fourth dimension in 1905, the philosophical issues Bergson chose to address in Paris in 1907 were those that were being actively pondered by the avant-garde in their quest for knowledge of what lies beyond the material plane.

**The Metaphysical Quest in Music**

It is sometimes claimed by art historians of this period who wish to downplay the influence of the spiritual on the new art that the artists were influenced, instead, by contemporary music. Actually, prominent avant-garde composers joined with the artists and poets in the cultural quest of their time: the spiritual effort to find ways to break free of materialist constraints. For example, **Claude Debussy (1862–1918)** was considered part of the Symbolist movement in the 1890s and often attended Mallarmé's gatherings in Paris. He was inspired by a poem by Mallarmé to compose *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* (1894), a work so revolutionary that many musicologists consider it to be the beginning of modern music. Debussy rejected the constraints of key structures, conventional tonality, and harmonic structures. Instead, he introduced vague tonalities; seemingly improvisational free rhythms (with a very detailed rhythmic structure he made nearly invisible); color ranges; languorous melody; harmonic fluidity; and shimmering orchestration. Debussy, who rejected the label “Impressionist” for his music, composed several songs interpreting poems by Baudelaire and Verlaine in the 1890s and continued to pioneer new music until his death from cancer in 1918. In 1912 his *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* was adapted as a ballet by the Ballets Russes featuring Vaslav Nijinsky.

Debussy was friends with the composer **Erik Satie (1866–1925)**, whom he considered a kindred soul. They met in 1891, the same year that Satie joined Péladan’s Order of the Rose + Cross, becoming its official composer and choir director the following year. It was there that Satie was introduced to the mystical sounds of Gregorian chant and plainchant, which influenced his compositions. He composed several hauntingly beautiful Rosicrucian works through 1894, but he broke publicly with Péladan in August 1892. The following year Satie founded his own church, The Metropolitan Church of Art of Jesus the Leader, and published a manifesto in which he raged against music critics. The influence of Satie’s pared-down style is apparent in several works by both Debussy and his friend **Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)**.

In Russia, many painters took inspiration from the compositions of **Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915)**, who was initially focused on the lyrical and idiosyncratic style of Chopin but was then drawn to the teachings of Theosophy and the musical possibilities of synesthesia. His vision of a truly mystical music led him (independently of Schoenberg) to create atonality. In 1903 he conceived a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (multimedia presentation) that would have involved the design and construction of a temple in India where the performance would run for seven days and nights; he was able to write only a sketch of part of this work before he died. Scriabin’s music was felt by many listeners to transport them to another dimension, a dream world beyond the material plane.
The German-speaking avant-garde included the Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951), who invented musical ways to escape traditional harmonic ratios, which, as Pythagoras had demonstrated, result from the mathematical relationships of nature: sound and the proportional length of plucked strings. Moving away from the “material perception” of those natural proportions as the basis of music, Schoenberg wrote and performed in 1907 the *Chamber Symphony*, Op. 9, which departed from traditional tonal harmony by using chords built on nominal dissonances without immediate resolution. The following year, he wrote the thirteenth song of the cycle *The Book of the Hanging Gardens*, Op. 15, based on the collection of poems of the same name by the German mystical poet Stefan George (1868–1933); this was the first composition without any reference to a key. In 1909 Schoenberg completed the first musical composition to dispense with all reference to tonality, his piano piece Op. 11, No. 1. In 1912 Schoenberg composed *Pierrot Lunaire*, a cycle of 21 songs with instrumental accompaniment set to texts by the Belgian Symbolist poet Albert Giraud (1860–1929). In these works he replaced precise pitch by systematically using *Sprechstimme*, a gliding speech-song.

With a sense of the cultural context in which the remarkable burst of inventiveness occurred after the turn of the century, we turn now to the styles of painting that were created: Expressionism; Cubism; Futurism; Orphism; and Non-Objective Painting, which we now call abstract art.

**Expressionism**

Symbolist painting morphed into what eventually came to be called Expressionist painting in the new century, though the term was used more widely in Germany than in France. What fell away after 1900 was the interest in fantastical figures and symbols. What continued was the obsession with breaking through the confines of materialist perception and depiction, as well as the intriguing challenge of creating artistic engagement with invisible aspects of the subject matter.

In service to these Idealist goals, two formalist trends remained strong: (1) color was repeatedly liberated from its traditional role as a direct copy of materialist perception, resulting, for instance, in portraits featuring a green complexion, and (2) violating the constraints of Renaissance perspective was *de rigueur*. As the Dutch Expressionist painter Jacoba van Heemskerck (1876–1923) observed about the presence of color in her landscapes, “As a rule, it takes some time before the color gets free from nature, showing its own inner worth.”

In addition, two new formal elements emerged after 1900 as options for the non-materialist painters: (3) objects and surfaces were sometimes depicted in fragmented planes, intimating the fourth dimension; and (4) landscapes were sometimes painted with wavy trees and surroundings, suggesting invisible, vibratory fields of energy. Drawing on these four formal options, the aim was to create art that expressed the spiritual (or metaphysical) perception of the artist—or, failing that, an emotional state experienced by the artist. The artist’s metaphysical (Idealist or, at very least, non-materialist) engagement with the subject and the resultant fresh perceptions and depictions were central in Expressionist art.
One area of interest from the *fin de siècle* years that continued to intrigue the avant-garde artists in the new century was “the primitive.” Indigenous cultures were seen to hold ancient wisdom encoded in their art and artifacts, and peasant cultures, too, were seen to exhibit vestiges of the ancient knowledge. Two different types of arresting, primitive qualities of portraiture during this period are found in works by Henri Rousseau (1844–1910), in Paris, and by Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876–1907), who divided her time between Worpswede, an artists’ colony near Bremen, and Paris. Rousseau was a self-taught artist who continued working in the flat, naïve style he had developed during 1890s, which influenced several Expressionist artists who came after him. He felt that he had created a new genre, which he called *portrait landscape*, involving a lush jungle or detailed urban scene with a figure painted in the foreground.

Modersohn-Becker had been impressed during her first of four extended stays in Paris, in 1900, by the bold directness of the contemporary art: “The great French artists dare to see things naively.” In developing her starkly “primitive” portraits of German peasants and working-class Parisians, Modersohn-Becker sought “to express the gentle vibration of things, their roughened textures, their intricacies.” She pioneered an overall textural treatment of a canvas to give her work transcendent presence. In 1906, she reconciled with her artist-husband, returned from Paris to Worpswede, and died in childbirth the next year at age 31.

Paintings of the “primitive mystique” of Russian indigenous and peasant cultures were created by avant-garde Russian artists working in both Munich and Paris after 1900. The sets for the ballet *The Rite of Spring* (1913), for instance, were designed by the mystical Russian painter Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947). Roerich earned degrees in law and art in St. Petersburg and then became involved in archaeological excavations and documenting historical architecture. After 1900, he and his wife became Theosophists, developing a strong interest in Vedantist essays of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, the *Bhagavad Gita*, and the poetry of Rabindranath Tagore. From 1910 to 1916, Roerich chaired the World of Art society, a group of young Russian painters founded by Sergei Diaghilev in 1898. Diaghilev produced a magazine, *World of Art*, with which he imported the *fin de siècle* causes, essentially the fight against positivism and materialism in art, and honored Russia’s ancient myths and spiritual art forms. Roerich was a prolific painter of landscapes, mystical figures, and premodern structures, all alluding to the presence of ancient wisdom.

Like many young intellectuals in Russia, he initially viewed the revolutions of 1917 as apocalyptic catalysts of the long-awaited spiritual New Age. Once Lenin’s Bolshevik regime attained control, however, Roerich ascertained correctly that Russia’s artistic and architectural heritage—which he viewed as the repository of ancient myth and legend, potentially the source of the triumph of Russian culture—was greatly imperiled. He wrote an anti-Soviet pamphlet entitled *Violators of Art* in 1919 and then left the country with his family, going first to Finland and then to England. In 1920 a director of the Chicago Institute of Art arranged for a tour of Roerich’s paintings that traveled to 29 American cities, which led to his settling with his family in New York City, though they spent many years in the Himalayan foothills of northern India. In New York, Roerich founded a small art school as well as a small school of mystical philosophy. (US Vice-President Henry A. Wallace was a
follower of Roerich’s spiritual teachings for a while.) Until around 1912, Kandinsky, too, painted many ancient scenes of the Russian peasant and indigenous cultures but with a more folkloric style and a radical rejection of perspective.

Another branch of post-1900 Expressionism was the loosely associated group known as les Fauves (the Wild Beasts), who continued the rejection of natural coloration and opted for the substitution of “wild” colors instead, which Bernard and Gauguin had begun at Pont-Aven. This further development of non-imitative art was led by André Derain (1880–1954) and Henri Matisse (1869–1954). They had studied art for six and a half years in the atelier of the Symbolist painter Gustave Moreau (1826–1898), who believed that art should affect the viewer’s spirit via the imagination. Les Fauves held three group exhibitions between 1904 and 1908 involving some 15 painters. The movement’s influence continued for several years.

Cubism

In the Montmartre district of Paris a number of avant-garde artists lived, worked, or met for discussions in a ramshackle building nicknamed Le Bateau-Lavoir (because it creaked and swayed in stormy weather like the laundry boats on the Seine). The habitués included Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, André Derain, Georges Braque, Juan Gris, Amedeo Modigliani, and Kees van Dongen, as well as the writers Guillaume Apollinaire, Maurice Raynal, and Jean Cocteau. The overarching challenge on nearly everyone’s mind was how to continue the escape from naturalism in order to see more—and to see more deeply into apparent reality. Toward that end, several approaches were cultivated. Cubism emerged from the creative convergence of three fascinations of the avant-garde: “primitivism,” Cézanne’s geometric style, and the elusive fourth dimension.

Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) arrived in Paris from Barcelona in 1904 and became friends with the poet and painter Max Jacob (1876–1944), whom he accompanied one night to a lecture by the mystic Sâr Péladan. Picasso took an instrumental view of the popular spiritual teachings, which he viewed as an energizing path to power for some artists, but he made clear that he would take a different path. He adhered to the staunchly anticlerical sentiments typical of Spanish anarchists, associating religion with the bourgeois past that modernity must surely crush. By 1906 he had become fascinated by the angular lines in the “primitive” sculptures displayed in the Trocadero Museum, interpreting the African masks as a powerful sort of mediation not so much between the visible and the invisible worlds, in his view, as between humanity and “the unknown, hostile forces” surrounding us.24 He collected numerous small, wooden African sculptures, which he gazed upon every day in his studio. They clearly influenced his breakthrough painting Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (1907), which features the angular display of five standing nudes—three whose expressions seem to indicate that they are resigned to their pose of naked display, two who look somewhat menacing. (Picasso’s title was The Brothel of Avignon, but the art dealer who arranged for the first showing of the painting gave it a more ironic title, The Young Ladies of Avignon, with demoiselles alluding here to the demimonde.)

Georges Braque (1882–1963) had been painting in a subdued version of the boldly expressive coloration of les Fauves when, in 1907, he attended the first
major retrospective of the works of Cézanne, at the Autumn Salon. Like many young painters, Braque became fascinated by Cézanne's ability to perceive and depict the structural planes and basic geometry of the shapes involved in a landscape, all the while imbuing the entire picture with the compelling sense of a unified and atmospheric gestalt. Braque then began a series of Cézanne-inflected, proto-Cubist landscapes in L’Estaque in October. (The label for this new style was derived from a critic's disparaging one of Braque's early paintings in the new style as bizarre cubiques.)

In late 1907 Braque saw Les Demoiselles d’Avignon in Picasso’s studio, and the two began a collaboration that lasted until the outbreak of the World War I. Braque enlisted in 1915 and was wounded, temporarily losing his eyesight.

Although neither of the two inventors of Cubism seems to have been involved in the esoteric quest, they were certainly aware of it, including the avant-garde's fascination with the fourth dimension. The mathematician Maurice Princet, for instance, made presentations to the Bateau-Lavoir group, explaining Poincaré's work on this subject and showing drawings of hypercubes and other complex polyhedra. More importantly, Picasso and Braque would have realized that their pioneering Cubist works would be received by the avant-garde artists and critics as the most powerful blow to materialist perception and Renaissance perspective since the Pont-Aven group had invented Symbolist painting nearly 20 years earlier. Indeed, the new style was embraced by a range of painters and critics, nearly all of whom, unlike the two founders, celebrated Cubism both for its radical rejection of naturalism and for advancing the metaphysical quest for deeper truths and new possibilities. Some critics used the term Simultaneity for the new art depicting an object or grouping from many angles simultaneously.

Apollinaire was the foremost advocate of Cubism among the Parisian critics. By 1912 he was able to draw from scores of his articles to compose a book, The Cubist Painters: Aesthetic Meditations, in which he discussed the Cubist works of Picasso, Braque, Jean Metzinger, Albert Gleizes, Juan Gris, Marie Laurencin, Fernand Léger, Francis Picabia, Marcel Duchamp, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, and others. Apollinaire explained that the new painters “no longer limit themselves to the three dimensions of Euclid” but opt for new types of spatial engagement, which “in the language of the modern studios, are designated by the term the fourth dimension . . . . It is space itself, the dimension of the infinite; the fourth dimension endows objects with plasticity.” To establish the historical significance of Cubist art, Apollinaire observed,

Greek art had a purely human conception of beauty. It took man as the measure of perfection. But the art of the new painters takes the infinite universe as its ideal . . . . They discard more and more the old art of optical illusion and local proportion, in order to express the grandeur of metaphysical forms. 25

In a similar vein, a typical statement by the art critic Maurice Raynal cites the cubists’ “mysticism of logic, science, and reason.” The Cubists’ spiritual quest, he asserts, is no less profound than that of the “primitives” for being thoroughly modern:

The Primitives . . . obeyed a very exalted need, that of the mysticism which illuminated their thinking . . . . Instead of painting objects as they saw them, they painted them as
they thought them, and it is precisely this law that the cubists have readopted, amplified and codified under the name of “The Fourth Dimension.” The cubists, not having the mysticism of the Primitives as a motive for painting, took from their own age a kind of mysticism of logic, of science and reason, and this they have obeyed like the restless spirits and seekers after truth that they are.26

We cannot know if Braque and Picasso discussed the contemporary meanings of the fourth dimension swirling around them, but decades later Braque, reflecting on the period of his Cubist collaboration with Picasso, observed, “The things that Picasso and I said to one another during those years will never be said again, and even if they were, no one would understand them anymore. It was like being roped together on a mountain.”27 No one would understand them anymore? Surely, he is not referring to formalist concerns about line, form, and color, which would still be understood by artists in 1954, when he made this statement. Rather, he is saying that he and Picasso were sparked by concepts that once were in the air (such as the fourth dimension) but would no longer be understood. In his mature decades, Braque developed an interest in Zen Buddhism, Lao Tzu, and Confucius, as well as the works of Heraclitus and Hesiod.

The largest center of Cubism outside of Paris was Prague. Czech Cubist painters, sculptors, and architects felt that objects carry their own internal energy, which could be released by splitting the horizontal and vertical surfaces, which were seen as constraining to the human soul. They favored the use of sharp points, slicing planes, and crystalline shapes. An example of the Cubist buildings from this period is a large residence called the Cubist House of the Black Madonna in the old section of Prague, designed by Josef Goèár (1880–1945). In 1911, the Cubist architect and theorist Pavel Janák (1881–1956) wrote “The Prism and The Pyramid,” an article advocating a dynamic architecture that would destabilize the traditional right-angled building. Another theorist-architect, Josef Chochol (1880–1956), asserted that Cubist architecture penetrates matter by “plastic” means in order to create metaphysically significant works.28

Cubism was introduced to the New York art world largely by the American Cubist painter Max Weber (1881–1961), who lived and worked in Paris from 1905 to 1909 and became acquainted with many of the leading avant-garde artists. After he returned to New York, he wrote the article “In The Fourth Dimension from a Plastic Point of View,” which Alfred Stieglitz published in the July 1910 issue of his magazine Camera View. Weber described the fourth dimension as “the consciousness of a great and overwhelming sense of space-magnitude in all directions at one time.”29 He also had an exhibition of his own Cubist paintings at Stieglitz’s gallery, 291, which was fiercely attacked by critics. He later defended in print the French Cubist paintings that enraged most of the American critics who reviewed the Armory Show in 1913.

**Simultaneity, Futurist Dynamism, Orphism, and Orphic Cubism**

Cubism had blown apart perspective, cancelled gravity, and eschewed natural coloration other than pale, nearly neutral hues. For the painter Robert Delaunay
The Spiritual Dynamic in Modern Art

(1885–1941), however, a particular cubistic arrangement of bold color was precisely the way to express his sense that the unitive dimension of existence emerges from separate but simultaneous actions and objects. Beginning in 1909, Delaunay's partially abstracted paintings—including interiors of St. Séverin Church and idiosyncratic Parisians cityscapes, several featuring the Eiffel Tower—distort the image of the painting's subject via fluid and curvilinear lines such that the action of the colors becomes the primary content. He held that “our soul exists in a state of harmony, and harmony is engendered only by the simultaneity with which the measure and proportions of light arrive through our eyes to our soul.”

In 1908 Delaunay met Sonia Turk (1885–1979), a Russian painter who had attended art school in Germany. At that time, she was painting striking portraits with bold figuration and color. Delaunay attributed her impressive talents as a colorist and the “primitive” power of her portraits to the atavistic, intuitive powers he associated with artists of the East. They married in 1910.

In 1909 the Italian Futurists shook up the Cubist revolution in Paris by declaring that the most important characteristic of the new art called for by the new century must be dynamism. On February 20, 1909, Le Figaro published on its front page a translation of “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” by F. T. Marinetti (1876–1944), which had first been published two weeks earlier in Milan. With strategic exaggeration and macho bombast, Marinetti cast the past into oblivion and sang the praises of the new form of beauty: speed. He declared that Futurists admire racing cars and airplanes, while glorifying war (“the only true hygiene of the world”), militarism, patriotism . . . and “the scorn of woman.” In subsequent years, Futurists in various fields of art and design issued less extreme, more constructive manifestos, such as “Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe,” “Futurist Photodynamism,” “Manifesto of Futurist Sacred Art,” and “Futurist Sacred Architecture (The Predominance of Glass and Aluminum).”

During the year following the initial Futurist Manifesto, five Italian Futurist painters—Umberto Boccioni (1882–1916), Carlo Carrà (1881–1966), Luigi Russolo (1885–1947), Giacomo Balla (1871–1958), and Gino Severini (1883–1966)—published “Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto” (1910). Incorporating a Bergsonian inflection, they called for a new way of thinking about the visual arts:

Our growing need of truth is no longer satisfied with Form and Color as they have been understood heretofore. The gesture we would reproduce on canvas shall no longer be a fixed moment in universal dynamism. It shall simply be the dynamic sensation itself (made eternal). . . . We conclude that painting cannot exist today without Divisionism. . . . Divisionism, for the modern painter, must be in innate complementariness, which we declare to be essential and necessary . . . . Our art will probably be accused of tormented and decadent cerebralism. But we shall merely answer that we are, on the contrary, the primitives of a new sensitivity, multiplied hundredfold, and that our art is intoxicated with spontaneity and power.

The Italian Futurists, always photographed in elegantly tailored clothing, insisted that their theories did not arise in response to French Cubism: their interest had been focused, instead, on new types of German Expressionism. (Their sense of
Divisionism, the separation of color into dots or strokes of pigment, however, was closely related to Pointillism.) In any event, several Futurist painters did incorporate Cubist elements in their work after 1910. Conversely, Futurist ideas about dynamism and motion in painting influenced many Cubistic Parisian artists almost immediately. The first international exhibition of Italian Futurist paintings was shown in a gallery in Paris in February 1912 and then traveled to London, Brussels, and Berlin.

Delaunay corresponded with Kandinsky during this period about their respective Idealist theories of the new art. Each of them continued to remove objects from their compositions, transforming the picture into a description of the universe itself. In 1912 Delaunay painted his Windows series, a fascinating demonstration of what he called Simultaneity, applying his own meaning to the term: a style based solely on color contrasts emerging from simultaneous dynamics involving the interactions of light, space, and motion. Through experiencing the color relationships (contrasts, speed of vibration, and intervals), the viewer was to recognize macrocosmic harmony (“supreme reality”) from the simultaneous, mutually intensifying and compensating contrasts between the colors.

Apollinaire called this work *Orphism*. (He had written a cycle of poems the year before in which he portrayed Opheus as a mystical poet and artist; the term Orphic sometimes refers to art that is as pure and non-objective [abstract] as music.) Delaunay respected Apollinaire as “sensitive, always in search of new spiritual values,” but he continued to refer to his own technique as Simultaneity, or “Pure Painting.” He then moved further into “inobjective” art during his circular forms period, which culminated in the Sun Disks of 1912–1913. Of these works he noted, “A painting created according to the laws of this organization is a small universe in tune with the rhythm of the cosmos.”

Sonia Delaunay adopted many of her husband’s ideas about color and dynamism, applying them initially as Simultanist objects for everyday use, such as a quilt for their infant son’s bed. Besides her abstract works, she also employed principles of Simultaneity in painting energy-infused scenes of partially abstracted human figures at balls, in marketplaces, and in cafés—often using multicolored, circular forms as energy nodes of the body, such as the solar plexus, the mind, and the womb. While Robert Delaunay’s paintings depict dynamic cosmic energy in and around objects (such as windows or structures), many of Sonia Delaunay’s works incorporate both organic and cosmic energies in rhythmic compositions of people embedded in a dynamic context.

Delaunay and Apollinaire each befriended a young artist from Russia, Marc Chagall (1887–1985), when he moved to Paris in 1910. Chagall had no interest in mathematical or strictly formalist approaches to Cubism but gravitated toward the two men’s respective spiritual sense of much of the new art. He was also drawn to Delaunay’s color theory. During the next four years in Paris, Chagall created most of the dream-like paintings recalling his home village, where he had been raised in a Hassidic family. Apollinaire praised these works as *surnaturel* (supernatural). In the painting *Homage to Apollinaire* (1911–1912), Chagall incorporated several esoteric and biblical themes with a striking use of the Cubist aesthetic.

During the autumn months of 1912, a group of avant-garde artists, poets, and writers began meeting in the studio of Jacques Villon (né Gaston Duchamp,
1875–1963) in Puteaux, near Paris. They formed a group they called The Golden Section, alluding to mystical geometry and the Golden Ratio, or Section. Delaunay was attracted to this group because the painters were critical of Braque’s and Picasso’s static and immobile Cubist still-life paintings, preferring new, more dynamic ways of depicting increasingly abstracted objects and forms. (For Delaunay, though, dynamism and movement referred to the movement of light and the effects of color.) During a presentation to the Golden Section group, Apollinaire referred to paintings by František Kupka (1871–1957) as Orphic. In his reviews and essays, Apollinaire also applied the label Orphism to works by the Delaunays (from 1912 on) and later included works by Marcel Duchamp (1887–1968), Francis Picabia (1879–1953), and Fernand Léger (1881–1955). The metaphysical paintings of Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978) were also associated with Orphism.

As the Salon of the Golden Section, the group held a significant exhibition in October 1912 at Galerie la Boétie. In preparation for this display of dynamic, Orphic Cubism, two of the members, Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, wrote the book On “Cubism,” asserting that Cubism “plunges with Cézanne into profound reality, growing luminous as it forces the unknowable to retreat.”35 The “Cubo-Futurist” painting Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2 by Duchamp was to be included in that exhibition, but when an artist-curator asked him to change the title, Duchamp withdrew the painting.

Duchamp, considered one of the most influential artists of the twentieth century, had spent late June through September of 1912 in Munich studying Kandinsky’s recently published book, On the Spiritual in Art, and filling the margins of his copy with notes. While there, he may well have seen Bavarian religious folk paintings on glass, examples of which were featured in The Blue Rider anthology, published only weeks earlier. In any event, Duchamp referred to those weeks in Munich as “the scene of my complete liberation.”36 Following a trip to the Jura and his return to Paris, he began his life-long rejection of what he called “retinal art” and “the physical side of painting” by launching his “ready-mades” in 1913: supposedly found objects that are accompanied by a “text” meant to carry the viewer to other regions.37 It has been noticed that his ready-made entitled Fountain (an inverted, curved urinal) loosely replicates the shape of a cloaked Buddha sitting in meditation. Similarly, his ready-made entitled Bicycle Wheel has been linked with the Buddhist Wheel of the Dharma and also with the wheel in illustrations explicated alchemy in seventeenth-century texts. In a large painting on glass, Bride Stripped Bare by Her Batchelors, Even, the bride seems to be a large, four-dimensional being in the realm of the ascended (Duchamp called her “the apotheosis of virginity”38), in contrast to the more simply constructed three-dimensional bachelors in the lower realm, who resemble dangling carcasses of empty clothes. Duchamp was extremely interested in the works of Poincaré on the fourth dimension, as well as what the artist called “meta-realism.”

The Blue Rider

In the autumn of 1909 Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) and several other artists—including Alexej von Jawlensky (1864–1941), Marianne von Werefkin (1860–1938), and Gabriele Münter (1877–1962)—left the Munich Secession to form
Neue Künstlervereinigung München, or NKVM (the New Artists’ Association of Munich). Kandinsky served as chairman of the NKVM and brought in musicians, writers, and dancers, as well as visual artists. In the founding letter to members, he explained, “By founding this association we are hoping to give material shape to the spiritual kinship among artists, a form that will give us occasion to address the public with joint forces.” Such was the entwined continuity of spiritual and artistic concerns from Pont-Aven in 1888 to Munich in 1909 that the new group was joined in its first two meetings by Paul Sérusier and Jan Verkade (then a Benedictine priest called Fr. Willibrod). The NKVM held two group exhibitions, in December 1909 and September 1910, each of which was attacked by the Bavarian art critics as displays of dangerously pernicious foreign and radical influences. The sole defender of both exhibitions was a 30-year-old artist, Franz Marc (1880–1916), who wrote in newspaper reviews as “a true Bavarian” in praise of the “fully spiritualized and dematerialized inwardness of feeling” in the art exhibited by the NKVM. In 1911 Marc was invited to join the organization and was elected to its board of directors. In his art, he created many dynamic paintings of partially abstracted landscapes with deer (see Figure 8) or blue horses, as he associated that color with both the masculine and the spiritual.

Within the NKVM a schism developed over the issue of whether the spiritual aims of the group were better served by representational art (including Cubism) or by increasingly non-representational art (Kandinsky’s and Marc’s). Speaking for those opposed to largely abstract art, Otto Fischer argued, “These confused individuals may talk about the spiritual—but spirit makes for clarity, not confusion. A few colors and dabs, a few lines and notches are by no means art . . . .” Kandinsky defended freedom of expression—and resigned from the NKVM in early December 1911 along with Marc and several supporters.

This climax to the mounting tensions was not entirely unexpected, however. Kandinsky had privately proposed to Marc during the previous summer that the two of them edit a Jahrbuch (an annual periodical, or almanac) and also curate an exhibition, which was held in Munich in December 1911 and January 1912 and which then traveled to several German cities, Budapest, and Scandinavia. Two-thirds of the works they chose were partially abstract. A second exhibition was held in Munich in April 1912. They chose a roster of international, kindred artists to demonstrate the reach of the new thinking, including Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962), who was in Moscow, as well as German, French, and foreign artists working in Munich and Paris. They selected Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider) as the name for both the exhibitions and the book, which is widely regarded as “the most important printed document of early 20th-century art.” (They included a cubist painting by Picasso even though Kandinsky felt that that style was “frankly false” but was “a sign of the enormous struggle toward the immaterial.”) Marc brought in his friend August Macke (1887–1914), who contributed two semi-abstract paintings and a poetic essay on masks.

Kandinsky had conceived of The Blue Rider book as a synthesis of the arts, bringing together essays; musical scores (by Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern); and artworks chosen to cause “confrontations as enlightening as possible.” To create those fruitful “confrontations,” he and Marc selected works of art not only from the avant-garde
but also from numerous “primitive” sources such as ethnographic artifacts, medieval sculpture, Bavarian folk paintings on glass of religious scenes, and children’s art. As Marc recounted, “With a divining rod we searched through the art of the present and the past. We showed only what was alive, what was not touched by the tone of convention.” To indicate the spiritual seriousness of the book, Kandinsky suggested to Marc at one point that Theosophy should be mentioned “powerfully” and “statistically, if possible”—that is, by listing all the contributors who were engaged with the Theosophical approach to metaphysics.

Kandinsky expressed his and Marc’s hopes for *The Blue Rider* as follows:

> If the reader of this book is temporarily able to banish his own wishes, thoughts, and feelings, and then leafs through the book, passing from a votive picture to Delaunay, from Cézanne to a Russian folk-print, from a mask to Picasso, from a glass picture to Kubin, etc., etc., then his soul will experience a multitude of vibrations and enter into the realm of art.... These vibrations and the plus that derives from them will be a kind of enrichment of the soul that cannot be attained by any other means than those of art.

(Readers wishing to have this experience, as Kandinsky and Marc intended for you, are referred to the paperback facsimile edition in English, which is entitled *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*.)

Besides two paintings, Marc contributed three short, charming essays. In “Spiritual Treasures,” he asserted that El Greco and Cézanne are “spiritual brothers” because “both felt the mystical inner construction, which is the great problem of our generation.”

Looking back on the NKVM exhibitions, which “drove critics to despair,” Marc observed in his essay “The ‘Savages’ of Germany” that the new art was not merely a formalist revolution: “They stimulated thought, and people came to understand that art was concerned with the most profound matters, that renewal must not be merely formal but, in fact, a rebirth of thinking. Mysticism was awakened in their souls and with it the most ancient elements of art.”

In one of Kandinsky’s two essays, “On the Question of Form,” he described the process whereby form in art emerges from spirit, or “inner necessity”:

> At a certain time, what is inevitable ripens, i.e., the creative spirit (which could be called the abstract spirit) makes contact with the soul, later with other souls, and awakens a yearning, an inner urge.... Consciously or unconsciously man tries, from this moment on, to find a material form for the spiritual form, for the new value that lives within him. This is the search by spiritual value for materialization. Matter is a kind of larder from which the spirit chooses what is necessary for itself, much as would a cook.... Thus, behind matter, within matter, the creative spirit lies concealed.... Form is the external expression of inner content.... Of prime importance in the question of form is whether or not form has arisen out of internal necessity.

*The Blue Rider* was published in May 1912, and plans for a second edition were discussed well into the following year. At the same time, Kandinsky and Marc initiated a new project of *The Blue Rider*: an illustrated edition of the Bible. They invited others artists to join them in this work—Alfred Kubin (1877–1959), Paul
Klee (1879–1940), Erich Heckel (1883–1970), and Oscar Kokoschka (1886–1980)—but the project did not come to fruition. In the spring of 1914, The Blue Rider book was republished as a “second edition” with minor changes and a brief preface by each of the editors. In his preface, Kandinsky explained that the aim of the book had been “to demonstrate through examples, practical juxtapositions, and theoretical proofs that the question of form in art is secondary, that the question of art is primarily one of content.” He noted that the “spiritual movement” they had addressed is still developing but added wistfully, “Perhaps the time is not yet ripe for ‘seeing’ and ‘hearing.’” Marc observed that another issue of the book would be possible only “when the cult of modernity has stopped trying to industrialize the virgin forest of new ideas.” He closed by expressing the hope that they and their supporters could find “the strength for inner stillness amid the roaring of their time,” as had the early Christians.

In August 1914 some members of the avant-garde in every European country felt that the Great War might actually be the powerful catalyst, quite apart from any nationalist goals, that would finally bring about the New Age so fervently desired. August Macke enlisted and was killed in action during the second month of the war. Franz Marc enlisted and was killed in action in 1916 at the Battle of Verdun.

**Non-Objective Painting: Picturing the Immaterial Realm**

It is sometimes stated erroneously that the invention of abstract painting was strictly a formalist quest or was achieved when the artists “abandoned the premise of making a picture of something,” as the Museum of Modern Art’s catalogue asserted in its 2013 exhibition entitled Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art. The head curator of that exhibition asserted in the introductory essay, moreover, that abstract images such as “theosophical” and “cosmogonic” images “may resemble abstract art. But these are not art at all, for despite any formal similarity they were intended to produce meaning in other discursive frameworks.”

In fact, nearly all of the pioneers of abstract painting, who were rightly celebrated in the MoMA’s exhibition, were participating in and expanding the “discursive framework” of Theosophical concepts with their creation of the new art form. It was because of the metaphysical context of the birth of abstraction that the artists most certainly did have a subject in mind when they made their respective breakthroughs: they were painting, at last, the transcendent immaterial realm. They called this new, fully abstract art “non-objective” (gegenstandslose Kunst in German, l’art non-objectif in French). Had they held that the new art had no subject, they would have called it subjektlose Kunst or l’art sans sujet. They did not do so because the almost insurmountable challenge of conveying the ineffable subject was well understood by the international avant-garde.

Remarkably—since only five years had passed since the extensive exhibition on Traces du Sacré at the Centre Pompidou with its substantive catalogue essays, adding to Maurice Tuchman’s exhibition and its catalogue essays, plus the considerable stream of books on the spiritual dimension of modern art that are listed in the Appendix, several by distinguished art historians—the Museum of Modern Art’s curators brushed all that historical documentation off the table. They presented a
reiteration of the formalist theory of the birth of abstract art asserted in 1936 by the Museum’s first director, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., in the influential exhibition entitled Cubism and Abstract Art. Theorizing from within an imagined explanatory framework, Barr allowed that if Kandinsky, for instance, was painting anything it was merely “a graphic representation of a mood.”

The 2013 exhibition—while still ignoring all Kandinsky’s writings on the metaphysical subject of the revolutionary art, including his clear statements that the new art is not merely a formal endeavor—asserted that his breakthrough work was simply the aftermath of having attended a performance of some of the radically new music of the day. Nothing spiritual there, the MoMA curators assume—except that, as we have seen, the leading avant-garde composers of the period—Debussy, Satie, Scriabin, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky—were all involved with the anti-naturalist, metaphysical orientation they shared with the painters, poets, and writers (though most of those composers did not mention this orientation after World War I, when it was no longer in vogue). To claim that the pioneering abstractionists were inspired not by the metaphysics gripping the prewar avant-garde but, instead, by the avant-garde composers makes no sense—unless one favors theories of art history that are disembedded from the cultural dynamics from which the art emerged.

This problem shows up numerous times, including in the MoMA curator’s essay “Vasily Kandinsky, Without Words” in the Inventing Abstraction catalogue. She states that “Kandinsky conceives abstraction in relation to his anxieties about modernity itself.” Nearly the entire avant-garde had articulated the destructive aspects of modernity for some 25 years. His anxieties about modernity itself? She cites a passage from the introduction in On the Spiritual in Art, which Kandinsky speaks disparagingly about the barrenness of conventional art from “the period of materialist effort, which held the soul in check” and which “has no power for the future.” However, the curator asserts that Kandinsky is actually bothered by nominalization and that he “builds the association between the thing named and the base materialism of modernity”—as if a critique of objectivism and “materialism” were unique to him. (Also, it is not clear that the curator is taking into account the avant-garde’s deep and broad meaning of “materialism,” which is very different from what “the base materialism of modernity” would mean in 2013.) In the end, she concludes that Kandinsky’s notion of the “internal necessity” of form has nothing to do with the core metaphysical teaching, or Idealist premise, that forms manifest themselves out of the transcendent immaterial realm, which he wrote about in his essay “On the Question of Form.” Rather, she asserts that Kandinsky’s goal was actually the “phenomenological fantasy of being able to bypass language, gaining unchecked access to the perceiving mind.” In fact, “access to the perceiving mind” was not his goal, nor did he think that he alone had achieved literal perception of the workings of the immaterial realm. Rather, Kandinsky’s goal was a necessarily partial and expressive art that was in contact in some way with the dynamics of the transcendent realm and was deeply informed by them. He felt that he finally had a sense of how spirit in the state of formlessness suddenly manifests (because of inner necessity) myriad forms and actions myriad times with great rapidity, which is why his prewar abstract paintings are so dynamic. To ignore the abundance of Kandinsky’s writings on the all-encompassing spiritual quest of the day and to pluck out a few words to which
can be applied a narrowly psychologized reading of art history works nicely for a modern narrative—but it yields a severely truncated understanding of what the artist explained repeatedly that he and his work were about.

One more example of ignoring the cultural history of the avant-garde occurs when the curator states that the reason Kandinsky opened *On the Spiritual in Art* with a declaration of “our sympathy, our understanding, our inner feeling for the primitives” was that Worringer’s book *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908) had explicated a “will to abstraction” in both “primitive” and modern cultures! This interpretation gets the history backwards: the avant-garde artists had been deeply fascinated with nonmodern, spiritual “primitive” cultures since the mid-1880s, and the reason they welcomed Worringer’s book enthusiastically was that he validated their perspective by situating it within the framework of “scientific” German scholarship and theorizing. Overall, the MoMA curator is correct to emphasize that abstraction grew from a network of artists, but as they make clear in their letters and other statements, most of them regarded their fellow artists involved in this quest as kindred spirits, not merely inventive formalists.

The notion of painting a picture without objects was not unthinkable in the years prior to 1906. After all, the novelist Victor Hugo had created fully abstract watercolor paintings in the 1850s, which were shown to prominent artists of the day, though not exhibited publicly. In addition, Sérusier’s influential painting *The Talisman* (1888) was all but abstract in its composition. Ever since the initial Symbolist paintings at Pont-Aven, the avant-garde artists had refuted naturalistic depiction by distorting shapes, colors, and perspective in order to engage with the invisible realm “behind” material forms. Their rejection of complacency with the material plane was thought to free up new ways of perceiving and new thinking, but it remained almost inconceivable for many years that anyone would lop off either side of the correspondence between the visible and invisible realms. After 1906, though, several artists struggled to depict the ineffable itself, without recourse to abstract patterns or other decorative pitfalls. Here follow six variations of the common subject painted by the inventors of abstract art: the transcendent immaterial realm.

**Hilma Af Klinton: The Invisible Realm as Cosmos-scape**

Although she was apparently the first European professional artist to create fully abstract paintings, beginning in 1906 in Stockholm, *Hilma Af Klinton* (1862–1944) was not in contact with the network of avant-garde artists on the Continent. A second reason she is a late-comer to the narrative of art history is that her abstract paintings were exhibited for the first time only in 1986, as part of the exhibition on *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1888–1985* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. She earned her living as a painter of landscapes and portraits, while keeping her 1,000 abstract works hidden, with a stipulation in her will that they were not to be shown until 20 years after her death, when she thought the world might be ready for them.

Af Klinton graduated with honors from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in 1897. She had already formed a group called “The Five,” five female artists who met for many years and shared an interest in popular occult pursuits of the day, such as
séances, spirit guides, automatic drawing, plus the Theosophical writings of Madame Blavatsky and, later, Annie Besant and Charles Leadbeater. Like the other pioneers of abstraction, Af Klint was intrigued by the challenge of conveying the issuance of material form from spirit, the structure of the invisible realm, and the relationships of patterns and forces therein. In her first series of abstract, oil paintings (1906–1908), she felt that her hand was being moved by “the spirits” as she created the organic imagery on very large canvases.

When Rudolf Steiner came to Stockholm to lecture, in 1908, Af Klint invited him to view her spiritual paintings in her studio, which he did. He became angry, told her she was not supposed to have direct access to the spirits, and was particularly disapproving of a figurative painting entitled Evolution in which she had painted the male and female figures on the same level of a spiral, which, he said, was thoroughly incorrect. Af Klint was so shaken by Steiner’s response to her work that she did no painting of any kind for four years. In 1913–1915, though, she felt that the spirits were urging her to create more paintings of the immaterial realm, this time incorporating some geometric forms. She believed that her paintings would—if installed together in a “temple” setting—provide a catalyst for the coming of a New Era. She developed an extensive metaphysical system and formal vocabulary in her abstract art, which she explicated in 125 notebooks. The first retrospective exhibition of her work was held in 2013 at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm.

**František Kupka: The Invisible Realm as Vibratory Fields of Cosmic Order**

Born in rural Bohemia, František Kupka (1871–1957) was apprenticed at age 13 to a saddle-maker, who was also a medium. Kupka was trained as a medium and supported himself as such while he studied art, first in Prague (under the Nazarene painter František Sequens) and then in Vienna (under the Nazarene painter August Eisenmenger). Kupka also worked as a medium after he moved to Paris in 1896. In a letter to a friend the following year, Kupka mentioned one of his experiences in spiritism:

> Unfortunately—or it may it even be good luck—I came again in contact with the Spiritists.... I experienced a split consciousness where it seemed I was observing the earth from outside. I was in great empty space and saw the planets rolling quietly. After that it was difficult to come back to the trivia of every day life and so in my thoughts I seek refuge in you.63

Not only did Kupka have a life-long interest in esoteric matters but he felt that he was particularly gifted with intuition and the sort of subtle perception necessary for exploring the essence of reality. He viewed such skills as essential to being an artist: “As a sensitive, open to all impressions, he feels the movements and events of the whole universe. His visions, the representations that fill his mind, are not exclusively the work of the organs of intellect.”64

During his years in Vienna, Kupka became interested in Theosophy, astrology, Eastern religions, and the occult sciences that intrigued many of the avant-garde painters. In Paris, he developed his own ideas of how an artist might engage with the
immaterial realm. Drawing on Theosophical teachings about etheric vibrations and telepathic communication, Kupka came to think of his increasingly abstracted paintings as “fields of exteriorization,” created when he had exteriorized his perceptions of the vibratory, dynamic realm that informs the material plane. The painted surface of the canvas then communicates with the viewer, he held, through telepathic vibrations.

In 1909 Kupka created his first abstract painting, an ethereal cosmos-scape, The First Step, demonstrating his strong interest in color theory, especially the associative powers of colors. The following year he began work on the abstract painting The Primitive. In 1911 Kupka painted several abstract works of fascinating coloration, including Newton’s Discs, referring to Newton’s experiments with color. He also began work that year on the first of several canvases depicting vibratory dynamism, Creation. His Study for Amorpha: Fugue in Two Colors (1911–1912) and Amorpha: Fugue in Two Colors (1912), both exhibited at the Autumn Salon in 1912, were the first entirely abstract works to be shown publicly—and caused an uproar. Kupka continued to create abstract paintings until the mid-1950s, though he changed after the early 1920s from an orientation of organic dynamism to one of geometric forms.

Arthur Dove: The Invisible Realm as the Essence Within Nature

The American artist Arthur Dove (1880–1946) lived and painted in Paris during 1907–1909, exhibiting in the Autumn Salon twice. He became acquainted with the premises of Theosophy and Bergson’s Creative Evolution, subsequently developing techniques of abstraction that he applied not to the realm informing nature but the realm within nature. That is, Dove held that he “extracted” the spiritual essence of what we see as the material plane, or nature. He conveyed these “extractions” as shapes that suggest the organic dynamics of Bergsonian élan vital. He stated, “A painting is an object. If it has spirit, it is a work of art. The truer the spirit the more of a work of art.” After returning to New York in 1909, Dove was the first American painter—and one of the few emerging from the European mix—to create fully abstract works, beginning in 1910. These were exhibited in Alfred Stieglitz’s gallery, 291—which also exhibited, often in a serene ambiance resembling a chapel, works by Delaunay, Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Cézanne, Picabia, Duchamp, and others, as well as publishing their articles on the aims of new art. After Dove’s early period of full abstraction, he painted partially abstracted, spiritually infused landscapes for the rest of his professional life until his final six years, when he returned to full abstraction.

Wassily Kandinsky: The Invisible Realm as Inner Necessity

In 1919 Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) was invited to write a “self-characterization” for the German periodical Das Kunstblatt, in which he addressed, writing in the third person, his role in the birth of abstract art:

He progressed with logical, precise steps on the path that led to pure painting and gradually removed objects from his pictures... During the years 1908–1911 he stood
almost alone, surrounded by scorn and hatred. Colleagues, the press, and the public labeled him a charlatan, trickster, or madman. In 1911 he painted his first abstract picture, and in 1912 made *inter alia* a series of non-objective etchings (dry-point) . . . Kandinsky's theories are based on the principle of "inner necessity," which he defines as the guiding principle in all realms of spiritual life. His analysis of linear and colored forms is founded upon the psychic effect that form produces on the individual. He rejects, however, attempts at a purely formal solution and asserts that the question of construction can only be of relative value: every work of art selects its own form, depending solely on inner necessity."66

Kandinsky considered his first abstract painting to be *Picture with a Circle* (1911). In 1936 he celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of this painting, although it had gone out of his possession around the time of World War I, and its location, probably in Moscow, was unknown. He apparently had more exacting standards for what constitutes abstract art than do most people, for several of the paintings he created in 1910 as part of the two series entitled *Compositions* and *Improvisations* are all but abstract—with only a hint of barely recognizable abstracted forms amid the fluid dynamism. As he asserted in his essay "On the Question of Form" in *The Blue Rider*, "... those abstracted or abstract forms (lines, planes, patches, etc.) are not important in themselves but, rather, for their inner sound, their life."68

Kandinsky’s long quest in the visual arts was informed by his constitution, his heritage, and his formative experiences. These formed a remarkable fit with the values and goals of the avant-garde art world he entered in the late 1890s. With regard to his nature, he was gripped from an early age by bouts of “inner tension” and “unclear longing,” but he discovered as a young child that art rescued him: “…drawing released me from this condition, that is, it let me live outside of time and space, so that I no longer felt myself.”69 (Kandinsky suffered privately with neurasthenia well into adulthood but was calm and reserved in his public demeanor.) Second, he was fascinated from an early age by color and experienced it with all his senses; later, as an art student, he found particularly compelling the Symbolist fascination with synesthesia. Third, he never lost the perception from early childhood that all objects and beings have an inner reality as well as an external form.

Much later, he struggled throughout the decade following art school to figure out “what would replace the object in painting” and found eventually that he had always carried the answer within him: the new subject would be the inner reality of the world. Around 1908, he noticed that his acute perception of the colors and material forms of daily life diminished, while his awareness of the complex dynamics of inner reality became more acute: “My capacity for absorbing myself in the spiritual life of art (and thus, too, of my soul) increased so greatly that I often passed external phenomenon without noticing them, something that never could have happened before.”70 For the rest of his life, his canvases presented a dance of the visible and the more-than-visible world.

Kandinsky’s father told him that his own maternal grandmother had been a “Mongol princess.” (His paternal forebears had moved from western Siberia in the eighteenth century for political reasons to eastern Siberia near the border with Mongolia, south of Lake Baikal, where Kandinsky’s father was born.) Few people
knew of his “Tatar blood,” but this heritage probably accounts for a personal dimension to his fascination with ethnology, a popular subject in his time.

Ethnology became Kandinsky’s third area of study, along with economics and law, at the University of Moscow. During his university years, he made a research trip to study “peasant law” and the “remnants of the heathenish religion” of the Zyrian culture, a Komi people some 300 miles north of Moscow. He found among the Zyrians a syncretic system of religious beliefs and practices, blending folkloric Russian Orthodox icons and the ministrations of shamans. It has been suggested that Kandinsky began on that trip to identify with the role of the shaman, who mediated between the visible and invisible worlds and who had to suffer great physical tribulations as an initiate before he could assume healing powers.71

What is known from his autobiography, Reminiscences (1913), is that Kandinsky’s time with the Zyrians evoked in him a vivid experience that influenced the course of his art:

In these wonderful houses I experienced something that has never repeated itself since. They taught me to move in the picture, to live in the picture. I still remember how I entered the room for the first time and stopped short on the threshold before the unexpected vision. The table, the benches, the great oven, important in Russian peasant houses, the wardrobes, and every object was painted with bright-colored, large-figured decorations. On the walls folk paintings: a hero in symbolic representation, a battle, a painted folk song. The “red” [old Russian for “beautiful”] corner thickly and completely covered with painted and printed pictures of saints; in front of this a small, red-burning hanging lamp which glowed and flourished like a knowing, gently speaking modest star, proudly living in and for itself. When I finally entered the room, I felt myself surrounded on all sides by painting, into which I had thus penetrated.72

Although that passage is cited in many studies of Kandinsky, little or nothing is made of what he wrote next:

The same feeling slumbered within me, unconsciously up to then, when I was in churches in Moscow and especially in the great cathedral of the Kremlin. On my next visit to this church after my return from the trip, this feeling revived in me perfectly clearly. Later I often had the same experience in Bavarian and Tyrolean chapels. Naturally the impression was differently colored each time since different elements formed this impression: Church! Russian Church! Chapel! Catholic chapel!73

Kandinsky’s formative religious experience in the Russian Orthodox Church immersed him in the branch of Christianity that is distrustful of any logic too constricting of one’s communion with the Divine (which is why they often consider Roman Catholicism too doctrinal). The depth of the faith is conveyed in the liturgy, prayer, and contemplation through an elaborate system of symbols, primarily the icons. To live with the mystical resonance of symbols and to honor that which cannot be captured in words—this was the orientation that guided Kandinsky’s explorations in ethnology and art, especially his encounters with Symbolism. In the Orthodox tradition, the patron saint of Moscow is Saint George, whom Kandinsky chose for his own patron saint. This religious hero mounted on a steed is included or alluded to in
many of his paintings. He also may have identified with Egori the Brave (St. Gregory of Pobedonosets), a mounted hero in Russian folktales. He always kept one of these two images above his desk, each of which accommodated his fascination with the horse as a personal symbol.

For much of his first 30 years, Kandinsky lived in Moscow, a city with such resonance for him that he wondered in 1913 whether all his paintings had actually been about the forms, the colors, and the light that one sees in Moscow one hour before sunset. He felt that his father’s “deeply human and loving soul” understood “the spirit of Moscow,” and the artist fondly recalled his “solemn voice” relating the names of the old churches of the city. Kandinsky’s feelings for Moscow were also mingled with this loving description of his mother:

My mother is a born Muscovite [though her mother was from a German-speaking Baltic province] and unites in herself the qualities which to me symbolize Moscow: external, striking beauty, serious and strict through and through; aristocratic simplicity; inexhaustible energy; a unique union of tradition with true free thinking, woven out of great nervousness, imposing majestic calm and heroic self-mastery. In sum—the “white-stone,” “gold-headed” “Mother-Moscow” in human form. Moscow: two-sidedness, complexity, intense movement, collisions and confusion in outward appearance, which ultimately forms an individual, unitary image...this totality of the outer and inner Moscow I believe to be the origins of my artistic endeavors.

The winters were too harsh for his father’s health, however, so the family, including a German-speaking maternal aunt, moved when Kandinsky was six to Odessa, where his father relocated his business as a prosperous tea merchant. The boy was raised with immersion in both German and Russian folktales. During every summer of his adolescence Kandinsky’s father took him back to Moscow, where he moved at age 18 to attend the university. One year after graduation, Kandinsky was made a lecturer in jurisprudence at the university. The offer of a professorship in Estonia soon followed, but at age 30 Kandinsky decided to study art in Munich. While taking art classes, he recalled, “The word composition moved me spiritually, and I later made it my aim to paint a composition. The word affected me like a prayer.”

From 1903 to 1908 Kandinsky traveled, with the painter Gabriele Münter, to several European countries and Tunisia. They lived near Paris in 1906–1907, where Kandinsky attended exhibitions of the Fauves’ paintings. After they settled in Murnau, a rustic village near Munich, he continued to paint folkloric themes from Russian history with a Jugendstil inflection but now incorporating bright Fauvist coloration. Following his transformation in 1908 from a fascination with material forms and colors to an immersion in the dynamics of inner reality, Kandinsky began to combine abstract and symbolic forms with figurative depictions. In 1909 he began work on his two most famous series, the dynamic and increasingly abstracted paintings he titled simply Improvisation or Composition plus a number.

Kandinsky had begun sometime after 1900 to write journal entries about his thoughts on the new types of painting that were emerging and the spiritual currents inspiring artists to break through with new ways of perception that would spark the emergence of a new age. By 1910 he had combined several of these passages to
create a long article, which he sent to be read at the Second All-Russia Congress of Artists, in St. Petersburg. The following year a fuller version of the text was published in Germany as a book, On the Spiritual in Art; editions in other languages soon appeared, including a British edition in 1914. An American edition was published by the Guggenheim Foundation in 1946 to accompany a memorial exhibition, which influenced many young painters in New York who subsequently became known as Abstract Expressionists.

Kandinsky opens On the Spiritual in Art with two sentences that allude to his entire program: “Every work of art is the child of its age and, in many cases, the mother of our emotions. It follows that each period of culture produces an art of its own which can never be repeated.” He felt that a new type of art was emerging in the early twentieth century that could potentially evoke within viewers the refinement and elevation of their souls, such that a spiritual revolution and the Great Spiritual Epoch would result, which would save Europe from “materialism.” Inspired by the Theosophical writings of Madame Blavatsky and the lectures he had attended by Rudolf Steiner, as well as his own spiritual temperament and his life-long contemplation of symbolism, form, and color, Kandinsky expounded his theories of the new painting that is derived from “internal truth” and “inner necessity.” He further developed these theories in his essays in the Blue Rider almanac, asserting that contemporary art not only reflects the spiritual standpoint but embodies that spiritual element as a materializing force.

As a Russian national, Kandinsky had had to leave Germany when the war broke out and return to Moscow. There he came in contact with the young Russian avant-garde painters, whose Suprematist and Constructivist styles were starkly geometric and who generally viewed him as an older and less relevant artist than they. Throughout his years back in Moscow, Kandinsky was not swayed by the clear dominance of geometric modern art; as late as 1920 he was still painting organic abstract works. It was only after he and his young Russian wife moved to Berlin in 1921 and to Weimar the following year for his teaching job at the Bauhaus that Kandinsky shifted, for the rest of his life, to painting geometric abstract art.

Although Kandinsky’s consuming turn toward geometric form remains a loss for all who feel a deep response to his prewar, dynamically organic paintings, he himself saw this aesthetic trajectory as a progression into the clarity of a more calm, quiet background: “My ‘secret’ is purely and simply that I have over the years acquired . . . the happy ability to rid myself (and, therefore, my painting) of ‘background noise.’” More importantly, his postwar embrace of geometry, which had been unthinkable earlier, as well as the organic, cosmological elements he eventually came to include, resulted in what he regarded as an essential unity between the new art and the postwar trajectory, which he saw as the continuation of the great spiritual awakening. During his last decade, after the Nazis had closed down the Bauhaus in 1933 and the Kandinskys had moved to Paris, he incorporated a range of biomorphic elements into his geometric paintings, dispelling the severity and invigorating the picture plane, often with amoeba-like organic forms.

Kandinsky’s art is unimaginable without the esoteric influences he eagerly absorbed and pondered once he moved to Munich. Yet he always viewed the occult wisdom as powerful additions that rumbled but enhanced his spiritual home in
Orthodox Christianity. In Reminiscences he associated the esoteric revelations of invisible reality with the revelations of the Holy Spirit: “Here begins the great epoch of the spiritual, the revelation of the spirit. Father-Son-Holy Spirit.”80 Throughout his formative years, Kandinsky had heard the opening lines of the Gospel According to John recited: In the beginning was the logos—the divine order of the universe. Now he felt that he had a sense of the “inner necessity” of that order, leading him to proclaim: “The world sounds. It is a cosmos of spiritually acting beings.”81 Like the other pioneers of abstract painting, Kandinsky felt that they were living through a historic moment of revelation and were helping to manifest it. He believed, moreover, that the evolution of painting must be matched by a spiritual evolution of viewers as well, which was beginning to occur.

Piet Mondrian: The Invisible Realm as Dynamic Equilibrium

After a strict Calvinist upbringing in the eastern part of The Netherlands, Piet Mondrian (1872–1944) studied at the Academy for Fine Art in Amsterdam and became a teacher, while continuing to work at his own art. Around age 28, a spiritual crisis caused him to renounce Calvinism, after which he became increasingly interested in the “spiritual science” of Theosophy, which he knew about through other artists. Beginning in 1900 he read Madame Blavatsky’s The Secret Doctrine and other Theosophical texts. He was particularly drawn to her explication of the vertical as associated with the male principle and spiritual progress, and the horizontal as associated with the female principle and spiritual regression.82 He came to see the artist as containing both principles and being charged with the role of illuminating the unification of opposites in equilibrium through the new art.

In March 1908 Rudolf Steiner came to Amsterdam and delivered a series of lectures to the Theosophical community there. That September Mondrian made the first of many annual visits to the seaside resort of Domburg, where several other Theosophically minded painters also congregated. There he painted Expressionist landscapes in which the compositions are often structured by strong vertical lines (a group of tree trunks, a lighthouse, a church) and strong horizontal lines (the sea, the dunes); he explicated the esoteric meaning of this structure at length in his sketchbooks. In May 1909 Mondrian formally joined the Amsterdam Lodge of the Theosophical Society.

He was exposed to Cubism through a major exhibition at the Moderne Kunst Kring in 1911. In December of that year, he moved to Paris, staying initially in a guest room in the headquarters of the French Theosophical Society. His Cubist paintings eschew the blown-apart effect, emphasizing instead a stylized grid of verticals and horizontals, which form the nearly dominant ground surrounding the foreground figures. He then moved quickly into stylized and abstracted grid-based paintings, such as his Flowering Apple Tree (1912) and his charcoal Composition (1913–1914). His grid paintings of 1914 are colorful and energetic, almost playful.

Mondrian left Paris in the summer of 1914 to be with his dying father. After war was declared in August, he was unable to leave The Netherlands for the duration of the conflict. He began work that summer on a book presenting his ideas on the new art. He had long felt strongly that the traditional, highly complicated illustrations
demonstrating spiritual principles in the classic books of Western esoterica, as well as traditional religious paintings, were entirely wrong for spiritual seekers in the twentieth century. He declared in a letter in 1909 that “everything in our own time must be expressed very differently” and was determined to create a new art to bring the pure truth of the immaterial realm into his era.83

Eventually Mondrian moved to Laren, an artists’ colony near Amsterdam, for the remainder of the war years. There he met the painter Bart van der Leck (1876–1958) from whom Mondrian adopted the spiritual necessity of painting with only primary colors on white. In 1916 he was visited by Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931), a younger painter and theorist who had been converted to the spiritual mission of the new art by reading Kandinsky’s book Reminiscences in 1913—and who had praised in print the spiritual precision of Mondrian’s Composition paintings. Van Doesburg, Mondrian, and Van der Leck founded the movement called De Stijl (The Style). To launch that project, they also founded the journal De Stijl, which was edited by Van Doesburg and was issued somewhat regularly throughout the 1920s. As they stated in their first manifesto, De Stijl called “all who believe in the reformation of art and culture” to a process of “a radical purification of the arts” and the determination that “the new is connected with the universal,” no longer with the individual.84 De Stijl included the artist Georges Vantongerloo (1886–1965); the designer Gerrit Rietveld (1888–1964); the architect J. J. P. Oud (1890–1963); and many others.

Mondrian’s book, Neo-Plasticism in Painting, was originally published in 12 installments during the first year of the journal De Stijl, 1917–1918, as “Nieuwe beelding in de schilderkunst.” In these essays he explained the significance of the perpendicular composition of his paintings:

In nature, we perceive that all relationship is governed by one prime relationship: that of extreme opposites. The abstract plastic of relationship expresses this prime relationship determinately—by the duality of position, the perpendicular. This relationship of position is the most equilibrated because it expresses the relationship of extreme position in complete harmony and includes all other relationships . . . . The tragic [corporeality] adheres to all form and natural color, for the impulse toward freedom is expressed by the tension of line and the intensification of color as a struggle against a stronger counterstruggle. Only when line is tensed to straightness and naturalistic color is intensified to pure plane color—only then is it possible to reduce tragic expression to a minimum.85

While Mondrian was in residence at Laren, he also met the philosopher M. H. J. Schoenmaekers (1875–1944), a former Catholic priest and former Theosophist who published an esoteric book on scientific, or “positive,” mysticism in 1915 entitled The Image of the New World in which he purported to present the absolute underlying structure of the universe. It was probably from Schoenmaekers that Mondrian adopted the term beelding (image-creation from the subtle realm into the material realm) for his grid paintings as a way to side-step the contemporary debate over abstract versus realism. He would call his art “new image-creation” (nieuwe beelding) and later neo-plasticism, by which he meant the abstract expression of determined relations underlying the cosmos. However, when Van Doesburg wondered in a letter
to Mondrian in 1918 if he had been influenced by Schoenmaekers’ work while writing *Neo-Plasticism in Painting*, Mondrian replied testily, “I got everything from The Secret Doctrine (Blavatsky), not from Schoenmaekers.” Mondrian always considered Madame Blavatsky his main spiritual teacher. When he moved to London shortly before Paris was invaded by the Nazi army, he had only one picture on the all-white walls of his studio: a photo of Madame Blavatsky. (During his lifetime, he formally transferred his registration in the Theosophical Society from the lodge in Amsterdam to the lodge in Paris and subsequently to the lodge in London.)

As for his relationship with the Anthroposophist Rudolf Steiner, Mondrian sent him a letter in 1921 accompanying a gift copy of the recently published French translation of his book, *Le Neo-Plasticisme*. In the letter Mondrian stated that his grid paintings are “the art of the near future for all true anthroposophists and theosophists.” Steiner never replied.

By 1919, Mondrian had arrived at his geometric style of grid paintings in which he continued to work for the remaining 25 years of his life. During this time he wrote several more articles on what he felt were the clear implications of his art. In 1931, he wrote an unpublished manuscript of a book to be entitled *The New Art—The New Life: The Culture of Pure Relationships*, in which he stated, “Through its neutral or universal forms and pure relationships, the new art established rhythm free from the oppression of form.” Mondrian admired jazz for its rhythms, relationships, and “inwardness”—perhaps the same qualities he loved in the work of his favorite of the Old Masters, Fra Angelico. He collected jazz recordings for many years and made its dynamics the subject of his final two paintings, after he had fled to New York from the Nazi aerial bombing of London: *Broadway Boogie-Woogie* and *Victory Boogie-Woogie*. When he died, in 1944, he had only a few books with him. Nearly all were related to Theosophy.

**Kasimir Malevich: The Invisible Realm Glimpsed Through Superconsciousness**

Kasimir Malevich (1879–1935) studied art at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture and in a private studio from 1904 to 1910. He was influenced during his student years by the Blue Rose group, second-generation Russian Symbolist painters who sought to evoke feelings of transcendence in the viewers of their paintings. Several exhibitions brought metaphysical paintings by French artists to Moscow. In 1909 Maurice Denis made a significant visit there, speaking on his early years with Gauguin and exhibiting his own mystical Symbolist and Expressionist images, which Malevich and others found intriguing.

Theosophical books by and about Madame Blavatsky had long been available in Russia, but around the time Malevich was finishing his studies, a new wave of translated metaphysical books were published there, including works by Henri Bergson, William James, and Annie Besant. In 1909 the Russian Theosophist P. D. Ouspensky published *The Fourth Dimension: A Study of an Unfathomable Realm*. This was followed two years later by his highly influential work *Tertium Organum: The Key to the Enigmas of the World*, which brought together Eastern teachings and extensive citations from popular metaphysical authors in the West. He held the Theosophical
belief that an esoteric body of teachings was transmitted from Hermes Trismegistus through Pythagoras, highlighting the importance of sacred numbers, proportions, and geometry. On the subject of art, Ouspensky asserted, “The phenomenal world is merely a means for the artist—just as colors are for the painter, and sounds for the musician—a means for the understanding of the noumenal and the expression of that understanding.” The emphasis here is not only on communing with and exploring the immaterial realm but with depicting how it works. Malevich seems to have taken this challenge to heart.

In 1912 Malevich joined with Marc Chagall (1887–1985), Natalia Goncharova (1881–1962), Mikhail Larionov (1881–1964), and Alexander Shevchenko (1883–1948) to form a group called The Donkey’s Tail. They held one group exhibition, featuring works in a style called Cubo-Futurist, and then disbanded. The following year, Malevich joined with two friends, a musician and a poet, committed to developing a Cubo-Futurist theory of aesthetics. They produced a Cubo-Futurist opera entitled Victory Over the Sun and founded the Cubo-Futurism group of artists, whose focus was art and transcendence, particularly the challenge of expressing the highly developed consciousness of a future species of humanity who would possess radically new organs of sight as well as a new and universal language.

They were deeply influenced by a book by M. V. Lodyzhenskii, which was published in 1912: Superconsciousness and Ways to Achieve It. Most members of the group also held the belief that all forms of being, both animate and inanimate, are alive with an inner vitality, or cosmic life. The Cubo-Futurists disbanded in 1915, disillusioned by the limitations of both Cubism and Futurism, but Malevich went on to develop the theory and aesthetic practice he called Suprematism, a new type of abstract art distinct from that being made in Paris and Munich.

For some time Malevich had been trying to discover a way to express visually the zaum poetry created by his friend Aleksei Kruchenikh (1886–1968), which was modeled on his sense of what it is like for someone to be in the “superconscious” state of samadi, as might be attained through yoga. (The word Zaum, coined by Kruchenikh, means beyond the reasoning mind.) Encouraged by Matiushin’s translations from Gleizes and Metzinger’s book On “Cubism” that drew analogies between the Cubist vision and its implication of higher geometries, Malevich had initially thought that his tubular-Cubist paintings in 1912 of “primitive” peasants at work, embedded in a dynamic field, would achieve “Zaum realism.” By mid-1913, however, he concluded in a letter to Matiushin that they must push further, that “in this beyond reason there is also a strict law that gives pictures their right to exist. And not one line should be drawn without the consciousness of its law; only then are we alive.”

It is clear from Malevich’s writings around the time he created his Suprematist paintings that he was familiar with the popular Russian translation of Raja-Yoga by Swami Vivekananda, particularly the practice of concentrating the mind on the gross level of perception of objects, arriving eventually at finer and more subtle levels of perception, and arriving finally in the level of inner perception in which all forms dissolve and one experiences the cosmic state. Explicating a version of Advaita, a school of Vedantic philosophy in Hinduism, Vivekananda taught, “The human mind has a higher state of existence, beyond reason, a superconscious state, and when the mind
Malevich's geometric, “object-free” paintings allude to the realm of “supreme consciousness” of “the pure Absolute,” where one witnesses and is continuous with the source of all forms. His Suprematist paintings are intended to help the viewer approach that state of mind. In a poem entitled “The Artist,” he wrote, “I imagine a world of inexhaustible forms. From that which I do not see—an endless world arises.”

Malevich began creating Suprematist paintings in 1913 and first showed them publicly in the exhibition known as “0,10” [“Zero-Ten”] in St. Petersburg in December 1915. This event, The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings—0,10, also featured works by painters in the Suprematist group that had formed around Malevich, including Lyubov Popova (1889–1924) and Ivan Puni (1892–1956). (Olga Rozanova [1886–1918] joined the group the following year.) In Malevich’s wing of the gallery, he installed 39 of his paintings in geometrically determined arrangements that continued the proportions and relationships in the paintings themselves. It was a visual manifesto of what he considered the New Realism, art freed at last from the ballast of physical objects. He hung his painting Quadrilateral (which became known as The Black Square) high in a corner, the location in Russian rooms given to a religious icon. Some years later he wrote that this was his first depiction of “nonobjective feeling,” precognitive awareness of a form emerging from the white void behind it. To determine the measurements for his canvases—and, indeed, for all the forms and proportions within his system—he used the “primitive” Russian unit called an arshin (equivalent to 71.12 centimeters) and its subset, the vershok.

In the years that followed the 0,10 exhibition, Malevich continued to paint abstract-geometric works, most of which have Suprematism in the title (see figure 9). He introduced color into these paintings and often featured rectangles tilting from the vertical plane. Around 1918 he returned to a more purist approach with his White on White paintings. He explained that this third version of Suprematism “is on the way to white non-objective nature, to white excitations, white consciousness, and white purity as the highest stage of every condition, of repose as of motion.” Thereafter, Malevich determined that he had gone as far as he could with nonobjective painting and devoted himself entirely to his theoretical writings and to teaching. He demonstrated that Suprematism was generative by creating three-dimensional models that were adapted by designers in the Russian Constructivism movement.

The period from the mid-1880s until World War I saw the greatest stream of artistic breakthroughs in the entire modern era—all of which were embedded in the avant-garde’s positioning themselves against the materialist, positivist, naturalist consciousness they felt was ruining Europe and the future of civilization. To create, discover, and invent new ways of seeing and of manifesting new forms—and, therefore, a new kind of thinking—was the driving impetus of their endeavors.

At the mid-point in this fecund 30-year period, the dawning of the new century brought about a buoyant mood of expectation after the fin de siècle anxieties. The avant-garde maintained their interest in “scientific,” contemporary occult teachings, principally Theosophy, and they continued their fascination with nonmodern “primitive” culture and artifacts, but they added to the mix Bergson’s philosophy...
of duration and the élan vital. In this heady ambience, a new and significant style of painting arose in Paris nearly every 18 months for several years, with form either loosened, blown apart, or increasingly abstracted. To most of the public, though, the strange new art carried none of the significance so obvious to the artists. As Kandinsky and Marc concluded dejectedly after the response to *The Blue Rider* almanac, their time was apparently “not yet ripe for ‘seeing’ and ‘hearing’” because the “cult of modernity” with its relentlessly industrializing forces was too formidable. “Materialism” won.

Still, between 1906 and 1913, six artists proceeded through what esoterica calls the material “veil of illusion” to paint their sense of the dynamics of the immaterial realm. From Gauguin to Malevich, the metaphysical questing inspired—even indirectly by energizing an atmosphere of imminent discoveries—an abundance of extraordinary art.
CHAPTER 3

1919 – 1939

THE REACTION AGAINST PREWAR ESOTERIC SPIRITUALITY

After most wars, a grave issue of great immediacy has been resolved, favorably or unfavorably. After some, the political reasons for the slaughter are painfully inadequate to the loss. In the months and years following Armistice Day—November 11, 1918—a mood of pessimism and depression weighed on the European psyche. Almost an entire generation of young men in France, England, and Germany had been fed into the trenches, often to be killed within a few weeks by being ordered to go “over the top” and charge straight into rifle fire—or into the spewing barrage of a new invention, the machine gun. The postwar disillusionment was not solely with the prewar statesmen who crafted a disastrous entanglement of alliances, nor solely with the callous senior military leaders who devised and persisted in the most idiotic form of battle imaginable, but also with the entire infrastructure of beliefs, principles, and momentum that had carried Europe buoyantly into the twentieth century. The nineteenth century’s confident grasp of history as an unfolding progression led by the advanced nations; the pride in Europe’s sophisticated institutions of culture, science, higher education, and governance; the Enlightenment’s promise of the perfectibility of the human through thoroughly rational institutions of social engineering—all these driving assumptions had delivered the grand civilization to... the relentless carnage in the trenches. It was an end-point, a collapse, the cancellation of optimism.

Within that profound disillusionment and crisis of confidence felt by European societies in general, however, many of the avant-garde artists regarded the Great War as the latest and most hideous demonstration of what they had been rebelling against for years: the dangerous premises of rationalism, both scientific and diplomatic, with its narrow and instrumental boundaries of what is to be considered significant. The rejection of rationalism was the impetus for the emergence during the second half of the war of the Dada movement, which began in Zurich in 1916. During the intermission of a Dadaist presentation, for example, a Dada performer donned a military uniform, went on stage, and fired several bullets at the ceiling, demanding
to know why, if it is rational to kill someone on a battlefield, the same act is not rational in a theater. One of the cofounders of Dada, the German poet Hugo Ball (1886–1927), not only expressed their common disgust for the war and the entire positivist, rationalist edifice behind it but also helped to signal a profound change in the attitude of young artists toward the prewar esoteric abstract art. Ball wondered in print whether abstract art would ever produce any societal results “more than a revival of ornament and a new access to it? Kandinsky’s decorative curves—are they possibly only painted carpets (that we should sit on, and not hang them on the wall as we do)?”

This line of thinking was expanded and intensified after the war by two artists, George Grosz (1893–1959) and Theo van Doesburg (1883–1931), editor of De Stijl. Around 1920 they began attacks against Walter Gropius (1883–1969), director of a new art school, the Bauhaus, for his continuing the prewar embrace of spiritually informed art. Could he not see that the “cosmic wallpaper” of prewar abstract art had proven impotent to stop the carnage in the trenches, let alone delivering on its vision of a new age for society? Enough of that philosophical Idealism! The new high priests for the postwar era, Grosz and Van Doesburg asserted, are the architect and the engineer with their precise drawings of concrete truth.

Indeed, a shift to the values of the Machine Aesthetic was embraced in many areas of culture and design during the interwar period. In an essay in 1922, the photographer Paul Strand (1890–1976) proclaimed that man has “consummated a new creative act, a new Trinity: God the Machine, Materialistic Empiricism the Son, and Science the Holy Ghost . . . . The deeper significance of a machine, the camera, has emerged here in America, the supreme altar of the new god.” He added, however, that “not only the new God but the whole Trinity must be humanized unless it in turn dehumanizes us.” Strand’s friend Alfred Stieglitz saw the American skyscraper as a colossal “machine.” The architect Le Corbusier called the house “a machine for living in”; the film director Sergei Eisenstein called the theater “a machine for acting”; and the literary critic I. A. Richards now saw the book as “a machine to think with.”

In design, four styles emerged sequentially over 20 years, the first three inspired by the Machine Aesthetic: moderne, machine purity, streamline, and biomorphic.

Most artists realized that the prewar aesthetic in painting was over but rejected the substitution of mechanistic sensibilities. In Paris, Jean Cocteau (1889–1963) and the poet Raymond Radiguet (1903–1923) advocated The Return to Order in poetry and the arts. They founded an eccentric magazine called Le Coq, which lasted for six issues between May and November 1920. In the first issue they proclaimed their slogan: Return to poetry. Disappearance of the skyscraper. Reappearance of the rose. The contributors displayed anti-Dada wit and nonchalant gaiety that celebrated the “pure” French spirit. (Here begins the Parisian conviction that all that muddled prewar abstraction was, in any event, essentially German.) Cocteau had begun this crusade in 1918.

It was soon supported by a painter in Rome, Mario Broglio (1891–1948), who founded Valori plastici, a magazine of “plastic values” published in Italian and French from 1918 to 1922. It presented the Return to Order movement as return to the painting of realistic subjects—figuration, landscapes, and still-lifes—depicted via classical aesthetic values yet created with a contemporary inflection.
In the first issue of *Valori plastici*, the artist Alberto Salvinio proposed a new “metaphysical classicism,” presenting principles of a metaphysical poetics. These concepts became associated with the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico (1888–1978), Carlo Carrà (1881–1966), and Giorgio Morandi (1890–1974), who became known as the Metaphysical School. De Chirico was particularly inspired by the writings of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer on the profound essence that is hidden under superficial appearances. He skewed perspective in order to dislocate mundane consciousness, asking, “Who can deny the disturbing relationship that exists between perspective and metaphysics?” Carrà studied the works of Giotto in search of a way to express the spiritual atmosphere he felt had been obliterated by naturalism.

The prewar international counterculture of the avant-garde dispersed into an unharmonious array in the aftermath of the Great War, much like the societies in which they lived. Within each new orientation that emerged—Dada, *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), Surrealism, Purism, an almost naïf Christian figurative painting, and the quiet survival of spiritual abstraction—the artists proclaimed a particular New Spirit and found a distinct way in which to distance themselves from the prewar aesthetic while developing new visual vocabularies. Still, they often pursued the same deep questions as before, albeit without an occult frame of reference—or, at least, not one that was mentioned overtly.

One of the characteristics of modernist literature after the Great War is the rejection of the objectivist assumption that the objective truth of things can be grasped in a complete manner from a privileged point of view at a particular moment. Denying this deeply held cultural assumption, many postwar novelists and poets highlighted the fragmented, perspectival nature of time and lived experience. The visual artists, however, had already done that, beginning with Cubism in 1908. They had shown fragmented and faceted aspects of reality and then alluded to the cosmological whole in which all of it is situated. They had not forgotten that. They would make it new.

**Dada**

Although the Dada movement of poets and artists continued the avant-garde’s rejection of the positivist, rationalist, objectivist worldview begun in the mid-1880s, in this iteration the effects of the Great War led the Dadaists to declare an end to the “world of systems” that had resulted in the unspeakable horror. They detached themselves as thoroughly as possible from the status quo, which they skewered with aplomb. Yet it is not generally known that several of the key figures in the founding of Dada wrote poignant statements about the spiritual dimension of the new endeavor, as we will see. When such statements are left out of our historical understanding of Dada, it is possible to see the movement solely as a cynical rejection that left room only for alienation and displays of ironic disengagement. Cynicism toward the rationalist, positivist, objectivist mindset that had dragged Europe into hell was certainly evident, however, and some historians assert that cynicism became a permanent characteristic of the art world from that time on—but Dada had more to offer than that.

As an alternative to traditionally “rational” expectations, the Dadaists opted for the “gratuitous” (paradoxical, spontaneous gestures); the nonsense poem; sculptures
not meant to last; the nonchalant creation of disjointed artworks using manufactured objects; the trope of the body-as-a-machine; and a casual replication of artworks, which flummoxes curators and collectors to this day. Dadaists developed several techniques, including cubistic collage, photomontage, and assemblage—and at least two Dada artworks came with a hatchet attached so that viewers could chop them up if they wished. Whimsy, playfulness, and sarcasm were abundantly displayed.

Essentially, the traditional social, cultural, and professional assumptions and expectations that had fed so complacently into the inertial march toward the trenches had now been terminated by the catastrophic War to End All Wars. The Dadaists sought to express that termination as only artists could. Hugo Ball—who, with the poet and performer Emmy Hennings (1885–1948), founded the Cabaret Voltaire in the back room of a tavern in Zurich—explicated the aims of the group in various diary entries that were gathered as Dada Fragments (1916–1917):

What we are celebrating is at once a buffoonery and a requiem mass.... The bankruptcy of ideas having destroyed the concept of humanity to its very innermost strata, the instincts and hereditary backgrounds are now emerging pathologically. Since no art, politics or religious faith seem adequate to dam this torrent, there remain only the joke and the bleeding pose.... Averse to every clever reticence, he [the Dadaist] cultivates the curiosity of one who experiences delight in even the most questionable forms of insubordination. He knows that this world of systems has gone to pieces, and that the age that demanded cash has organized a bargain sale of godless philosophies.... The word and the image are one. Painting and composing poetry belong together. Christ is image and word. The word and the image are crucified.... The new art is sympathetic because in an age of total disruption it has conserved the will-to-the-image.... Perhaps the art that we are seeking is the key to every former art: a Solomonic key that will open all mysteries.7

Fittingly, the origins of the name Dada are not settled. The word is baby talk in French for a hobbyhorse, which reportedly was chosen at random from the dictionary. On the other hand, some point out that Dada was the name of the heroine’s pet ostrich in Jules Verne’s novel The Southern Star in 1884. In the end, Dada was chosen by the founders because it made the least amount of sense of the names being considered. When Duchamp curated an exhibition on “Dada 1916–1923” at a gallery in New York in 1953, he organized it in sections pertaining to the movement’s geographic centers: Zurich (Ball, Henning, Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp, Sophie Täuber, Marcel Janco, Richard Huelsenbeck, Hans Richter, Christian Schad, and others); New York (Duchamp, Picabia, Man Ray, Beatrice Wood, and others); Hannover; Cologne (Max Ernst, Arp, and others); Berlin (Grosz, Hannah Höch, Raoul Hausmann, and others; this group had little interest in spirituality); Paris (Tristan Tzara and others); Amsterdam (Van Doesburg and others); and other centers. The Dadaists held several exhibitions and published several short-lived journals. Despite Ball’s comment about the lack of revolutionary efficacy in Kandinsky’s paintings, the Russian was highly regarded by the Dadaists and was invited to participate in one of their exhibitions, which he did, as did Picasso and Braque.
The Alsatian artist and poet Jean (Hans) Arp (1886–1966) explained Dada as a movement “to destroy the hoaxes of reason and to discover an unreasoned order.” Dada sought to jolt men out of their wretched unconsciousness. Dada detested resignation. Those who describe only the farcical and fantastical side of Dada and do not penetrate into its heart, its transcendent reality, offer only a worthless fragment. Dada was no childish romp. If my memory serves me correctly, Janco said the following just as I would have: He who does not cut himself off from spiritual reality is richly rewarded by it. In the depths, the running sores of rampant reason dissolve without trace.

In 1917 Arp created an abstract wooden relief sculpture in softly curved, organic shapes that is considered by art historians to be the first work of biomorphism, a motif that eventually became widely influential in both art and design. He and several other Dadaists in Zurich joined the New Life group in 1919 and signed their Manifesto of Radical Artists, which declared,

A clear, straightforward gaze must predominate if decisions of great import are to be taken. Spiritually and materially, we demand our right: representatives of an essential part of culture, we, the artists, want to take part in the ideological development of the State; we want to exist in the State and take our full share of responsibilities. The spirit of abstract art represents an enormous extension in man's feeling of freedom. Our faith is fraternal art: art's new mission in society. Art imposes clarity; it should serve as a basis for the new man. He should belong to everyone without class distinction. Our highest aspiration is to realise a spiritual basis of understanding for all men. This is our duty. This work ensures the greatest vitality for all people.

Throughout all the Dada events, performances, exhibitions, and manifestoes, Arp was with Sophie Täuber (1889–1943), a Swiss painter, sculptor, and dancer whom he had met in Zurich several months prior to the formation of the Dada group. Within days they began making abstract art together and realized that they were soulmates. They married in 1922. Täuber-Arp became one of the most important geometric abstractionists of the century. From 1916 through the 1920s, she created graphic and textile works that explore the dynamics between form and color; these are among the earliest Constructivist works, along with those of Mondrian and Malevich. In 1926 she and Arp moved to Meudon-Val Fleury, near Paris, where she designed their modern house. They were both members of Cercle et Carré (Circle and Square), a group of abstract artists in Paris, and the successor group, Abstraction-Création. The Arps were friends with other spiritually oriented artists in Paris: the Delaunays, Kandinsky, Duchamp, and Joan Miró. Täuber-Arp died during World War II in Zurich of accidental carbon monoxide poisoning from a stove in a house where they were staying. Arp fell into a state of profound grief for a long while. He had held Sophie and her art in the highest esteem for 26 years. He wrote of her later, “She lived like a figure in the Book of Hours, intent on her work and on her dreams. To walk with her was supreme happiness. She painted the soul of the dream, the invisible reality.”
Arp was a member of the Surrealist group in Paris during the 1920s, but he broke from that movement in 1931 to cofound the Abstraction-Création group with Theo van Doesburg and others. Rejecting the trend, particularly in Surrealism, toward figurative painting, they championed spiritually engaged abstract art. Members included Kandinsky, Kupka, Mondrian, Täuber-Arp, Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948), Barbara Hepworth (1903–1975), Ben Nicholson (1894–1982), Naum Gabo (1890–1977), Wolfgang Paalen (1905–1959), and others.

Arp called his biomorphic sculptures “concretions,” entities that have mass and have grown. Of his method, he wrote, “I work on it until sufficient of my life has flowed into this object. All of these objects have a spiritual content, but I interpret and name it only when they have been completed.” In his comments for an exhibition catalogue in 1949, he asserted that “art should lead to the spiritual, the real.” When Mondrian surveyed the new generation of artists in 1931, he opined that there was only one pure artist after Neo-Plasticism: it was Arp.

**Surrealism**

In late November 1917, though weakened by a head wound he had received in the war, Apollinaire delivered a lecture in Paris entitled “The New Spirit and the Poets,” which was published a year later, following his death in November 1918 from the influenza epidemic. His text was a manifesto in which he proposed a new realism that is “fully dedicated to the study of internal and external nature” and remains true to “an ardent search for truth” but that involves surprise:

*(Surprise is the greatest new spring. The new spirit, through the element of surprise, because of the importance it attaches to surprise, distinguishes itself from all the artistic and literary movements that preceded it. Here it takes leave of them all and belongs strictly to our time.)*

Also in 1917, while writing a review of the Ballets Russes’ production *Parade*—which featured music by Erik Satie, scenario by Cocteau, sets and costumes by Picasso, choreography and dancing by Léonide Massine—Apollinaire coined the term *Surrealism*. (He had first used the term in the preface to a play he wrote in 1903.)

In Italy, De Chirico interpreted Apollinaire’s call for the element of surprise as a subtle, jarred reality consisting of strange juxtapositions. In France, three writers—André Breton (1896–1966), Louis Aragon (1897–1982), and Phillippe Soupault (1897–1990)—founded the journal *Literature* to feature new works of automatic writing (unpremeditated, free-associated compositions). Breton had studied medicine and psychiatry before the war and had been allowed to do part of his military service at the Saint-Dizier psychiatric hospital, where he was fascinated by the remarkable images drawn by deranged soldiers, without benefit of reason. In 1920 Breton and Soupault coauthored a book of their further experiments in automatism, *The Magnetic Fields*. Around this time, many young writers, dramatists, and artists in Paris began to feel that Dada had only critique to offer. Several of them gravitated to Breton, who was regarded as a visionary guide with a clear sense that automatism
could serve as both a stronger critique and a new path of discovery. As we will see, spiritual concepts and language ran throughout the course of Surrealism.

Breton framed a programmatic statement of a new movement that would include both the visual and the literary arts and cofounded a journal in which to publish it: *The Surrealist Revolution*. In the inaugural issue on December 1, 1924, he denounced Dada in “The Surrealist Manifesto” and defined the new approach as “pure psychic automatism, by which one proposes to express... the real functioning of thought... in the absence of all control exercised by reason, outside of all aesthetic and moral preoccupation.” Moreover, Surrealism was posited in “the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought.” Breton confidently added that Surrealism hereby replaces “all other psychic mechanisms... in solving all the principal problems of life.” It was conceived of as a revolutionary counterforce against both rationalism and capitalism. Thus there was continuity with previous efforts to escape the bounds of a narrowly defined rationalism (that “harridan” has to be killed, as Breton put it15) and to explore the immaterial realm (now called the unconscious), but there is also a shift to a focus on individualist findings, largely through Breton’s interest in Freud’s theory about the unconscious and dreams. At the same time, the Surrealists were interested—solely for the information on how to achieve heightened states of consciousness—in *The Illustrated Anthology of Sorcery, Magic, and Alchemy* by Grillot de Givry and *The History of Magic and the Occult* by Kurt Seligmann.

The prewar artists’ target of “materialism” was narrowed by Breton to a critique of capitalism. This aspect was not emphasized in the first several years of the Surrealist movement, but Breton somehow determined that Rimbaud’s ideas on the transformation of the self (through total derangement of the senses) could be fruitfully combined with Marxist analysis of the political economy. (Breton joined the French Communist Party in 1927 but, not being suited to party discipline, was expelled in 1933.) A related area of critique was the attacks in *The Surrealist Revolution* on various institutions, such as the Catholic Church. In 1936 Breton reframed the movement in this way: “By surrealism we intend to account for nothing less than the manner in which it is possible today to make use of the magnificent and overwhelming spiritual legacy that has been handed down to us” [his italics].16 They had accepted that legacy, he felt, and used it to rout bourgeois, capitalist society.17 Over the years, Breton tightly controlled who would, or would not, be formally invited into the Surrealist group. He excommunicated several artists, and several others resigned because of disagreements with him or because of his controlling nature.

Nonetheless, the Surrealists held largely convivial meetings throughout the 1920s in which they played elaborate drawing games (such as Exquisite Corpse), discussed Freudian dream theory, and considered techniques of automatic drawing and writing. An artist was required to invent an original technique of automatic creativity in order to win the status of membership from Breton. Max Ernst (1891–1976), for instance, had developed *frottage*. Several key concepts framed the Surrealists’ discussions, especially the uncanny, the epiphany, and the omnipotence of desire.

*The uncanny* refers to that which is out of place, or unexpectedly incongruent, with the familiar, especially the home. In Freud’s essay of 1919, “The Uncanny,”
the word he used was *das Unheimliche* (the unfamiliar, literally “unhomey”), which he explained refers not only to a tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar, or between the expected and the unexpected, but also to “all that instills dread and creeping horror.”¹⁸ (The Surrealists were not Freudians because they disagreed with his sense of the normal.)

Imagery that was unexpectedly incongruous was felt by the Surrealists to jolt viewers from mundane consciousness, while imagery that resulted from automatism was regarded as a message from that vast invisible realm, the unconscious. *The epiphany* is a sudden, striking, and enlightening realization, an instant of experiencing a deeper understanding about something. Breton wrote that such fleeting states contain the possibility of a state of grace.¹⁹ An epiphany of revelation that ushers one into an unknown world, or dreamscape, seems to precede several Surrealist paintings, especially those of the late 1930s. Other key concepts were the omnipotence of desire, as Breton put it, the play of chance, and the idea of woman as muse or as temptress. Theory aside, though, women in many Surrealist paintings are stripped bare and are in duress.

At various times the Surrealist group included numerous writers and poets, as well as the visual artists Max Ernst, Giorgio de Chirico, Jean Arp, and Francis Picabia, as well as such younger artists as André Masson (1896–1987), Joan Miró (1893–1983), Luis Buñuel (1900–1983), Yves Tanguy (1900–1955), Salvador Dalí (1904–1989), and Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966). When the art critic Herbert Read surveyed the Surrealist artists, he concluded,

> Perhaps of all the Surrealist artists Arp most deserves the name of Surrealist, for his work reveals those essential modulations of matter due to secret action of natural forces: as water smooths a stone, or the wind moulds a snow-drift, as the pear swells to one kind of perfection and the crystal to another, so Arp has modeled and carved his faultless creations…²¹

In Breton’s view, however, the most Surrealist of the group was the Catalan painter **Joan Miró**. Though born and raised in Barcelona, Miró’s second home was a farm his parents bought in Montroig, which became his spiritual and artistic base in nature and the place to which he returned almost every summer of his life, when possible. In addition to the immersion in nature, he admired the dignity, groundedness, and “primitive” virtues of Catalonia’s agrarian culture. Miró also enjoyed exploring the medieval churches of Catalonia, in which the polychrome statues, the triptychs and altarpieces painted on wood, and the murals with unexpected elements made a deep impression. Throughout childhood, he perceived the dynamic inner presence of objects, rather than their “objective” reality, such that he had difficulty drawing an object’s form unless he first held it in his hands for a few minutes. His first drawing lesson as an adolescent was memorable: “That class was like a religious ceremony for me; I washed my hands carefully before touching the paper and pencils. The implements were like sacred objects, and I worked as though I were performing a religious rite.”²²

In art school and thereafter, Miró detested academic, bourgeois painting and also disapproved of young Catalan painters who made a trip to Paris and came back
mimicking Impressionism. He hoped to create a style someday that could be considered “International Catalanism,” not a provincial idiom but a universally meaningful style that expressed inherently Catalan rhythms and values. He greatly admired Gaudí’s fruitful engagement with the creatures and the organic structure of nature in Catalonia, particularly, his curving and undulating lines, his fascination with the spiral, and the dynamic continuity and organic proliferation of his forms. Another inspiration for Miró was the writings of the Spanish mystics, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. He joined the Artists’ Circle of St. Luke, as had Gaudí some 15 years earlier. He also read, in the Catalan translation, Walt Whitman’s paean to the cosmic self, *Leaves of Grass*.

After exhibiting his early work with some success in Barcelona, Miró did, indeed, make the trip to Paris, in 1920. Beginning in 1922, many of the leading Dada and proto-Surrealist poets and writers gathered frequently at the building on rue Blomet in which Miró and Masson had their studios—and where Masson did the first automatic drawings, in 1923. Although Miró kept to a strict work schedule for himself, he attended the poets’ readings and discussions and became friends with a few of them. Through this exposure, he realized that their techniques were relevant to the problems he had been trying to solve in his paintings: breaking apart traditional syntax, using inverted metaphors, inventing compact images with shifting meanings, and assembling incongruous motifs. Rather than incorporate traditional pictorial conventions, his paintings henceforth, beginning with *The Tilled Field*, present vast fields of a saturated color hosting quirky allusions to figures or objects that float in the dimensionless space—free of perspective, gravity, and volume—sometimes joined in the flow of a stream-of-consciousness or a not-quite-linear narration. What Miró particularly liked about using dream images is that dreaming is common to everyone and that the images arise on the conscious level of the mind through a process that eludes personal choice. The resulting expression is no longer of the self but of the world.

When Breton jumped in front of this emergent parade and organized it as his cultural project in 1924, the vitality ebbed at the rue Blomet gatherings, as a split developed as to which poets would or would not become formal members of Breton’s Surrealist group. Those who joined then moved in a direction that Miró felt was excessively theoretical and intellectual. He himself declined Breton’s invitation of formal membership but attended many of the Surrealists’ meetings and exhibited with them.

In early 1927 Miró moved to a different neighborhood on a street with more painters than poets: his neighbors included Bonnard (an elder he respected), the Arps, and Max Ernst. Throughout these years, Miró painted for six months in Paris and for six months at his family’s farm in Catalonia. In 1932, by then married and with a daughter, he moved with them to his family home in Barcelona. Beginning in 1936, however, he and his family had to move between Spain and France several times because of the Spanish Civil War and then World War II. It was during 1939 and the first half of 1940 that he painted the first ten paintings in the cosmological series entitled *Constellations* while staying in Normandy. The remainder were painted on Majorca during a period of ascetic near-solitude: Miró would go to the cathedral in Palma, gaze at the reflection in a pool of water of the stained glass windows, and
then return home to paint in silence “forms suggested by the reflections” with which he gradually constructed “a compositional balance.”

Throughout his professional life, Miró strove through disciplines of mind and body—as well as Surrealist experiments in trance and self-hypnosis—to attain a state in which he could experience “the absolute of nature,” as he put it in his early years, or “the unreal reality,” as he would later say. He sought to know a more expansive dimension of the world, as had his favorite mystic saints. To further this aim, Miró drew from communion with nature and aspired to a state of “primitive” (agrarian) purity: “Every grain of dust has a wonderful soul, but to understand it, one needs to regain the religious, magic sense of things, the spirit of primitive peoples . . .”

It was in this spirit that he developed a visual vocabulary of birds, stars, fertility and phallic symbols, arrows, and cosmic images—all set within the unbounded world he came to know. Miró viewed humanity’s poetic strivings to achieve deep communion as an utter necessity. He declared in the essay “On the Meaning of Painting” in 1939, “If we do not endeavor to discover the religious essence, the magical significance of things, we shall merely add to the sources of stupefaction, so freely proffered to man in our day.”

The “heroic period” of the Surrealists wound down after 1929, when Breton published “The Second Surrealist Manifesto” in the twelfth and final issue of The Surrealist Revolution. It affirmed that Surrealism was committed to “collective action” as determined by Marxist analysis. Breton subsequently expelled nine members who balked at Surrealism’s being made to line up with the dictates of the French Communist Party; several others left voluntarily. In the 1930s Surrealism became less vital internally but better known to the public through exhibitions, with works by Dalí and René Magritte (1898–1957) becoming the most widely recognized examples of the new art. (Dalí was considered by most of the Surrealists to be more an illustrator of ideas than an explorer of inner terrains; in any event, his spiritual or religious involvement seems to have been solely pictorial.)

With the ranks depleted, Breton admitted a couple of female artists to the meetings and exhibitions, beginning in 1933. The Swiss artist Méret Oppenheim (1913–1985) drifted away after three years, though, and the Italian painter Leonor Fini (1907–1996) never joined formally because she found the group generally misogynist and homophobic. Fini painted a large body of work featuring stately, mysterious female figures, often guardians, in imaginary landscapes. She declared of herself, “I am immanently asocial and am bound to nature more like a sorceress than a priestess.” Max Ernst wrote admiringly that Fini was “clairvoyant in body and soul.”

In the mid-1930s, Breton made an attempt to revitalize the Surrealist group by selecting several younger artists for membership. The first was the Austrian painter Wolfgang Paalen (1905–1959), who developed the technique fumage (involving soot from candle smoke) to create visionary-ephemeral paintings in 1936–1937. Next were added the Chilean painter Roberto Matta Echaurren (1911–2002), the English painter Gordon Onslow Ford (1912–2003), and the Catalan painter Esteban Francés (1913–1976) in 1938. These artists were interested in the new physics and the sense of reality as a vast subatomic field of dynamic interactions. As Paalen stated, they dedicated themselves to making art that complemented the
quantitative knowledge provided by physics with an aesthetic cosmography of qualities. Their paintings were intended to be objects for active mediation, evoking a self-transcending awareness that becomes “an enchanted communion with the inner workings of nature” as well as “an intuitive participation in the formative potentialities of reality.” They particularly admired the inner worlds perceived and depicted in the art of Kandinsky, Klee, Miró, and Tanguy. In an article in 1939, Breton hailed this new direction as “a marked return to automatism” in order to deal with “more ambitious problems” than those addressed by the first-generation Surrealists, meaning cosmology rather than Freudian dream theory.

In 1937 the English painter Leonora Carrington (1917–2011) and the Spanish painter Remedios Varo (1908–1963) each arrived in Paris and were welcomed into the Surrealist circle. Matta, Onslow Ford, Francés, and Varo formed a study group to work through Ouspensky’s writings on the fourth dimension, understood by then as the Einsteinian concept of space-time. Matta developed an other-worldly style of “psychic morphology” in which he painted “the space we are in, where our consciousness awakens and evolves.” Years later he added, “What I do is called painting, but it is actually a state of the soul . . . .” Nearly all the Surrealists, including most of the new additions, had resigned from Breton’s club by 1943.

In a conversation with Gordon Onslow Ford a few years before he died, he told me that Surrealism was “a way of seeing” and “a way of living, a spirit.” In the early phase of Surrealism, he noted, Ernst invented collage to learn about himself, but by the mid-1930s, Surrealist “spontaneity” in painting (a term he preferred to “automatism”) was employed in order to get beyond the individual self and connect deeply with nature and cosmos. The point was not to interrogate nature but “to be worthy of receiving gifts,” such as the meditative access to what he called the Inner Worlds (see figure 10). When I asked him about other Surrealists, he was cool toward those who merely painted illustrations of Surrealist ideas, but when I mentioned Remedios Varo, and later Leonora Carrington, his face lit up, and he said each time, “Ah, she was a Surrealist!”

Actually, neither of those women—and almost none of the other female painters who are widely considered Surrealist—applied that label to their own art. As the American painter and poet Dorothea Tanning (1910–2012)—who was centrally involved with Surrealists during the 1940s with her husband, Max Ernst—put it succinctly when asked in hindsight about women Surrealists, “I tend to think there weren’t any.” More than 5,000 miles away from Breton’s club, though, in Mexico City, Carrington and Varo found that they had all the elements in place to create a new art with woman at the mystical center, not as object but as a naturally powerful agent in the subtle realm. The two artists saw each other daily for years. Along with the Hungarian photographer Kati Horna (1912–2000) and the Swiss photographer Eva Sulzer (1902–1990), they studied and discussed occult traditions of knowledge, such as alchemy, tarot, kabbalah, Theosophy, and the writings of Ouspensky. In addition to those studies, they shared their dreams and stories and invented artistic games. Carrington had a life-long interest in Irish mythology and included a white horse in many of her paintings. Inspired by her friendship with Leonor Fini in Paris, she went further into metaphysical explorations with Varo, creating a range of totemic female figures who function in their own cosmos.
During Varo’s years as a student at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Saint Ferdinand in Madrid, she had often visited the Prado Museum and was drawn to the serene and orderly rooms in Renaissance and Dutch paintings, the ethereal quality of Giotto’s figures, and the other-worldly creatures in Bosch’s panoramas. Much later, sparked by the deep connection with her soul mate in Mexico City, Varo brought together the pictorial elements she loved and created settings for solitary priestess or goddess-like figures who, although almost always enclosed by a room (perhaps alluding to the restrictive culture), are typically performing extraordinary feats of artistic creativity or scientific discovery with utter nonchalance. An example is Creation of the Birds (1957), painted during the last few years of her life, when she had entered, according to her husband, a mystical period.36 Previously, she painted dream-like scenes with several figures, but in most of her late works an elegant, ethereal female figure is the confident, but supremely detached, center of the action. When she died of a heart attack in 1963, her life and work were memorialized in a poem by Octavio Paz.

During and after World War II, Breton welcomed a few younger painters into the largely dispersed Surrealist circle. In 1940 in Marseille, he commissioned Wilfredo Lam (1902–1982), a Cuban painter of Chinese and African-Cuban descent who had been publicly praised by Picasso in Paris, to illustrate the publication of his long poem Fata Morgana. Lam went on to paint many Surrealist-inflected works, such as The Jungle (1943), which incorporate references to Santería and African spiritual practices. In postwar Paris, Paalen, Breton, and Picasso each encouraged the American painter Marie Wilson (b. 1922), who developed a Surrealist style of semi-abstracted, symmetrical totemic works.

**Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity)**

Following the Armistice, the naval blockade of Germany’s ports, which had already reduced food imports by 50 percent during the final year of the Great War, was extended by the Allies for nine more months. Though partially lifted in March, the full blockade was not completely lifted until the Treaty of Versailles was signed by Germany and the other countries in July 1919. This refusal to allow desperately needed shipments of food into Germany resulted in the starvation of hundreds of thousands of civilians and weakened many others who then succumbed to the influenza epidemic. At the same time, the supposedly mighty German state, the Kaiser’s government, collapsed from revolutionary pressure in November 1919, replaced by the weak Weimar democracy—and inflation soared. Moreover, Freud’s theory of human nature was becoming more widely known, including his sense of the human as driven by a dark, instinctually rapacious part of the mind he called the id. This perspective was acted out with a campy but grim determination in the cabarets of Berlin.

In this bleak state of affairs, German painting took a decidedly darker turn. The prewar esoteric fancies seemed distant and irrelevant, if not misleading. The new style that emerged became known die Neue Sachlichkeit, sometimes translated as the New Tangibility but more often as the New Objectivity. Rather than a motif of objects abstracted so as to suggest subtle dynamics of the invisible realm, the preferred motif
was now the human figure as an index of emotion, damage, and perseverance. The most widely known branch of this style, called verism, includes woodcuts by Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945) and paintings by George Grosz (1893–1959), Otto Dix (1891–1965), and Max Beckmann (1884–1950). (In the United States, these post-WWI artists are known as German Expressionists, but in Germany “Expressionist” refers to the pre-WWI art, whether figurative or abstracted.)

It may seem that the dispassionate cynicism of the New Objectivity was a severe turn away from the spiritual, but that was not the position held by its leading practitioners. In an essay entitled “My New Pictures” in 1921, Grosz did indeed disparage the prewar “Expressionistic soul-tapestries” and opted for the clarity of the artist-as-engineer, but as a (temporary) member of the German Communist Party he expressed the hope that one day artists-as-craftsmen would have strong links with the working class: “Then capital’s monopoly of spiritual things will be ended.” Until that day arrived, Grosz—who had changed his name from Georg Gross to protest German nationalism—remained steadfast in satirizing the moral and other corruptions of the army and capitalist postwar society. In an article in 1923, he countered the prewar Expressionist slogan Man is good with the postwar sense that Man is a beast.

Grosz’s friend and fellow veteran Otto Dix created many works depicting the barbarity of war, including his painting The Trench (which was judged too shocking for public exhibition due to its depiction of dismembered and decomposing bodies); his portfolio of etchings entitled The War; and pictures of maimed veterans begging on the streets. His other subject was the exploitation, depravity, and desperation of people involved in Weimar’s scenes of grim carousing. For his two most celebrated works, Metropolis (1928) and Death in the Trenches (1932), Dix used the triptych format found in medieval churches. Even when expressing his ambivalence toward women, Dix revealed the importance of the spiritual in his life, often dividing them, as a fellow painter observed in 1918, into two categories: “spiritual-intellectual and ‘dull and non-spiritual.’” After the next world war, he painted numerous scenes of suffering as Christian allegories, including over 40 studies of the Passion of Christ between 1948 and 1950, and 33 lithographs to illustrate the Gospel According to Matthew (1960).

Max Beckmann had painted religious and mythological allegories before the Great War. He served as a medical volunteer for a year but had a breakdown and was discharged to Frankfurt in 1915 to recuperate. When he resumed painting in late 1916, he abandoned his former style, taking as his inspiration for painting the human figure the spare, fiercely unsentimental religious art of “the four great painters of manly mysticism: Malesskircher, Grünewald, Bruegel, and Van Gogh.”

He worked for two years on a large-scale Resurrection but never completed it. In 1917 he did complete two paintings of scenes from the life of Christ, The Descent from the Cross and Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery. During this period he wrote, “Humility before God is done with . . . . My pictures reproach God for his errors.” In the 1920s, Beckmann painted many pictures about man’s inhumanity to man and many featuring distorted figures in carnival scenes referring to the folly of life. He painted ten triptychs in his lifetime filled with apparently tormented, slightly grotesque figures in chaotic surroundings.
In a talk he gave at a gallery in London in 1938, “On My Painting,” he expressed his orientation to art:

My aim is always to get hold of the magic of reality and to transfer this reality into painting—to make visible the invisible through reality. . . . When spiritual, metaphysical, material or immaterial events come into my life, I can only fix them by way of painting. . . . Sometimes I am helped by the constructive rhythm of the Cabala. . . . In my opinion all important things in art . . . have always originated from the deepest feeling about the mystery of Being. . . .

Beckmann ended the talk by recalling a dream state in which William Blake had appeared to him, waving “friendly greetings to me like a super-terrestrial patriarch” and advising him, “Have faith in objects; do not let yourself be intimidated by the horror of the world.”

The Bauhaus

Undaunted by—or perhaps underestimating—the postwar attacks led by Van Doesburg, Grosz, and other young artists, the architect Walter Gropius proceeded to launch a new type of school of art and design in April 1919 that would be dedicated to reforming social conditions but would be informed by spiritual ideals as well. Its name, the Staatliches Bauhaus (State-sponsored Bauhaus), was derived from the medieval word Bauhütte, which connotes a system of medieval masons, designers, and craftsmen working together in guilds. The school was formed by the merger of two former institutes in Weimar, a school of fine arts and—a more important to Gropius—a school of the Arts and Crafts movement, incorporating the insights and principles of William Morris and John Ruskin. This influence can be seen in the founding goals of the Bauhaus: (1) the Gesamtkunstwerk, the creation of “total works” that incorporate and unite the areas of art, crafts, and architecture, and (2) design that serves the needs of society and encourages the flourishing of a healthy inner life in the midst of the pressures of modernity. The brochure for the Bauhaus featured a cubistic woodcut by the German-American artist Lyonel Feininger (1871–1956) of a stylized Gothic cathedral on the cover and an impassioned manifesto inside by Gropius, which concludes thus:

So let us therefore create a new guild of craftsmen, free of the divisive class pretensions that endeavored to raise a prideful barrier between craftsmen and artists! Let us strive for, conceive, and create the new building of the future that will unite every discipline, architecture and sculpture and painting, and that will one day rise heavenward from the million hands of craftsmen as a clear symbol of a new faith.

Along with Feininger, the Swiss artist Johannes Itten (1888–1967) was among the first faculty members hired by Gropius. Itten developed the influential Preliminary Course in which beginning students were taught basic principles of color and (geometric) form as well as the characteristics of materials; this course has been adopted by art schools around the world. Paul Klee joined the faculty in 1920,
followed two years later by Kandinsky. Gropius eschewed the usual system of professors and students in classrooms, opting instead for courses taught in a workshop format by the masters (professors). Students progressed from *Lehrlinge* (apprentice or trainee) to *Geselle* (journeyman) to *Jungmeister* (young master).

Almost from the beginning, though, the Bauhaus was beset by internal tensions and external critics. Itten was not only a dedicated teacher and theorist of art but also a member of a religious cult called Mazdaznan, which is derived from Zoroastrianism and was founded around 1908. He polarized the student body by strongly encouraging his students to follow Mazdaznan, which included wearing crimson robes, shaving their heads, eating a vegetarian diet, doing prescribed breathing exercises, and performing colonic irrigations. At the same time, Van Doesburg moved to Weimar, took lodgings almost next door to the Bauhaus, and gave talks in which he attacked numerous examples of “morbid Expressionism” and launched a personal attack against Gropius for attempting a syncretic idealism that falsely tried to link the ethos of handwork and machine. In a letter, Van Doesburg described the fruits of his labors as follows: “At Weimar I have radically overturned everything… I have talked to the pupils every evening, and I have infused the poison of the new spirit everywhere.” Many students were won over to his insistence that the model of De Stijl (by then dedicated to industrial design) was far more relevant and dynamic than Gropius’ vision of a postwar Arts and Crafts utopia.

In late 1922 Itten resigned and was replaced the following year by the Hungarian Constructivist artist *Lazlo Moholy-Nagy* (1895–1946), who revised the Preliminary Course by deleting references to metaphysics and shifting to a focus on streamlined industrial design. Soldiering on, Gropius asserted that his resigned turn away from spiritual art and design toward a more rational program of industrial design signaled the achievement of a New Unity. His abandonment of the earlier, spiritual orientation for the Bauhaus was subsequently interpreted approvingly by the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner in his influential book *Pioneers of Modern Design* [1936] as Gropius’s having grown up.

Most importantly, members of the Thuringian state legislature, which funded the Bauhaus, repeatedly raised concerns that the school employed numerous foreigners, some of whom were probably Communists. Funding was gradually reduced, causing Gropius to solicit a few industrial design commissions. In February 1924 the Social Democrats lost their majority in Thuringia, ending the support the Bauhaus had initially received. Gropius then found support from the municipal government of Dessau, allowing him to design and build a new site for the Bauhaus, which operated in that city from 1925 to 1932 and focused on industrial design far more than in the early years. The school was relocated to Berlin in 1932 and 1933, when the architect *Ludwig Mies van der Rohe* (1886–1969) was the director and major financial supporter. The Bauhaus was permanently closed by the Nazis, however, shortly after they took power.

During the Dessau years of the Bauhaus, Kandinsky and Klee became close friends. They lived next door to each other, watered each other’s gardens when needed, played bocce ball, and commiserated over the many contentious and lengthy faculty meetings. Their courses were always electives, rather than part of the required curriculum; Klee also directed the stained glass workshop. Both men were generous
mentors to serious students. In their art work, they sometimes explored the same formal issues, arriving at very different results because their dedication to abstracted, cosmological painting had such different sources. Kandinsky sought to set aside nature in order to focus on the more subtle realms, while Klee studied biological forms intently so as to engage with the “earth-idea” in its innermost realms of universal dynamics, thereby arriving at the transcendent “world-idea.” He considered his love of nature to be “distant and religious,” based on his imaginative access to a “remote starting point of creation.” He felt his creative abilities to be “somewhat closer to the heart of creation than usual but far from close enough.” Commenting on the significance of the work of Klee and Kandinsky, Herbert Read observed in 1968, “Every type of abstract Expressionism that was to be developed between 1914 and the present day has somewhere its prototype in the immense oeuvre of these two masters.”

Born of musical parents, Paul Klee (1879–1940) was a talented violinist, who received an invitation at age 11 to play with the Bern Music Association. He studied art in Munich and experienced a strong response to the works of Goethe (whom Klee considered “the only bearable German”). In particular, Klee was drawn to Goethe’s sense of the parallels between organic growth and the genesis of an artwork. Still, when he reflected several years later on reading a passage in Goethe he particularly enjoyed, he added, “The words are really at quite a remove from the essential mystery; tone and color in themselves are the mystery.” By age 23, Klee developed a sense of how he wanted to function as an artist: “To be anchored in the cosmos, a stranger here, but strong—this, I suppose, will probably be the final goal. But how to reach it?”

After art school, Klee returned to Bern for a few years, where he supported himself as a violinist in the symphony orchestra and as a music critic. He returned to Munich in 1906, married a Bavarian pianist with whom he had a son, and focused in his artwork, mostly on drawings and etchings. Eventually, Klee felt that he had achieved precision in depicting evanescent states “by line alone, line as absolute spirituality without analytical accessories.” When, in 1909, he saw an exhibition of Cézanne’s paintings in Munich, Klee declared him “the teacher par excellence,” noting that he achieved “primitivity out of capacity for reduction” and “chords of color.” During his involvement with the Blue Rider group, Klee traveled to Paris with August Macke in April 1912 to meet with Robert Delaunay, who gave them a copy of one of his articles, “On Light.” Klee translated this text and arranged for it to be published in Der Sturm in January 1913. He was deeply influenced by Delaunay’s sense that movement in nature is a matter of rhythm, which is related to an entity’s internal structure and contains “multiplicity that cannot be constrained.” Delaunay asserted that the task of art is to convey this rhythm, to make it visible.

In April 1914, Klee made on a formative painting trip to Tunisia with Macke and Louis Moilliet. In his journal, Klee wrote, “Color has taken hold of me; no longer do I have to chase after it. I know that it has hold of me forever. That is the significance of this blessed moment. Color and I are one. I am a painter.” From the watercolor paintings he made on the trip and soon afterward, it is clear that he was influenced by Delaunay’s sense of rhythmic contrasts among patches or fields of color, an approach Klee adopted from that point on (see Figure 11). He felt that
each painting was a matter of his gradually creating a generative cosmos within the composition: “Movement is inherent in all becoming, and before the work is it must become, just as the world became . . . .”

While teaching at the Bauhaus, Klee and Kandinsky published several theoretical treatises, including Kandinsky’s *Point and Line to Plane* (1926) and Klee’s *Creative Credo* (1922, originally titled *Graphic Art*), as well as his *Pedagogical Sketchbook* (1925) and several essays. One of those essays, “Ways of Nature Study” (1923), includes a chart on “The Direction of the Spiritual Revolution in the 20th Century.” Klee was adamant that engagement with nature is essential for a painter but that this communion should be conducted in a visionary, “non-optical” manner:

The artist as philosopher . . . must be forgiven is he looks upon the present stage of this . . . phenomenal world as accidently caught in space and time, and if it strikes him as absurdly limited compared to the more profound, more mobile world of his vision and feeling.

He began *Creative Credo* with this statement, “Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible.” In the closing section, Klee added, “Art is a simile of the Creation. Each work of art is an example, just as the terrestrial is an example of the cosmic.”

He became disaffected from the Bauhaus after Gropius resigned, in 1928, and Hannes Meyer (1889–1954) became director. Klee taught at the Düsseldorf Academy of the Fine Arts in 1931–1933, until he was dismissed under pressure from the Nazis. He and his family then moved to Bern, where he died in 1940 after five years of a painful disease, scleroderma. In earlier times, while giving a talk at an exhibition of his work, Klee had reflected on the mission of the Bauhaus:

We still have to search. We have found parts of it but not the whole. We still have not got that final energy, for we are not supported by a people. But we are looking for a people—we started doing so at the Staatliches Bauhaus. We started off there with a community, and we gave it all we had. We cannot do more.

**Purism**

The postwar hope for deliverance through the “pure objectivity” of rational designs created by engineers and architects had its sources not only in Constructivism (now detached from sacred geometry) or De Stijl (now detached from Theosophy) but also from a theoretical analysis that began as a critique of Cubist painting: Purism. It was framed initially by the French painter Amédée Ozenfant (1886–1966) and was developed together with the Swiss architect and painter Le Corbusier (né Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, 1887–1965). Soon after they met in Paris in 1917, they recognized the compatibility of their passionate ideas, organized a Purist exhibition at a gallery, and wrote a manifesto, “After Cubism,” for inclusion in the catalogue. They maintained that Cubism had succeeded for a time in purifying painting but then had declined into mere decoration. Rather than paint a multi-perspectival view of an object, what was required, the Purists asserted, was the precise
clarity of a rigorous representation based on objective principles. Several of the Purist pronouncements about the Golden Section, the symbolic value of the right angle, and their theory of color were influenced by Maurice Denis’ book *Theories 1890–1910*. Le Corbusier had met with Denis in 1913, soon after the book was published.

Le Corbusier and Ozenfant, along with the Belgian poet Paul Dermée (1886–1951), explicated this neo-neoclassical orientation in a journal they founded, *L’Esprit Nouveau* (1920–1925). Purism was a progressive worldview with implications in many fields. The editors not only sought a range of contributors from those fields but also invented names of contributors for articles and letters that the editors actually wrote themselves. In an essay appearing in their fourth issue, Le Corbusier and Ozenfant explained that “the highest delectation of the human mind is the perception of order” so the aim of a work of art should be “to materialize the object in all its generality and invariability.” They praised the beauty of the machine and “Cartesian” clarity as they sought to determine universal principles present in man and nature. Anyone serious about studying the structural designs of nature is not going to end up with Euclidian geometric forms, as Gaudí had been demonstrating for years in Barcelona. Nonetheless, Euclidian premises prevailed in Purism and most modernist design.

Because the Purists detested disorder, they were appalled by Freud’s id-driven theory of humanity and were cool toward the Surrealists, who, in any event, eclipsed them by the mid-1920s. In 1925 Le Corbusier designed a rigidly geometric, light-filled Pavilion of the New Spirit for the International Exposition of modern design held in Paris, after which he dissolved the Purism partnership. He went on to apply Purist principles in his design of several structures, most notably the all-white, variously geometric Villa Savoie (1929–1931).

Is there a spiritual dimension to Le Corbusier’s extremely influential architecture? It seems likely. After all, he theorized about a “spiritual mechanics,” yet it is difficult to determine whether some of the spiritual influences he absorbed were appreciated primarily for their use value with regard to his intensely focused ambition. From a young age, Le Corbusier identified with Neitzsche’s concept of the Superior Man who forcefully leads society beyond its benighted stage of development. Privately, he also considered himself the equal of Phidias (designer of the Parthenon) and Michelangelo. He was born into a Huguenot family in La Chaux-de-Fonds, a prosperous city dense with ateliers of precision watch-making. A central node in the city’s social structure was the Freemasons’ lodge, to which Le Corbusier’s uncle belonged. The Francophone lodges traditionally have been more inclined than the Anglo-American lodges to pursue philosophical and somewhat occult lines of thought, with a wide-reaching eclectic approach. (In addition, they were historically anti-Catholic since the time of the French Revolution, or before.) There is no clear evidence that Le Corbusier was formally initiated as a Freemason, but he seems to have been well versed in their lore and to have cultivated relationships with several of the members from whom he secured architectural commissions. The belief in some Masonic quarters that “there exists an omnipresent, eternal, boundless, and immutable principle that is ineffable and that is reflected by natural law” is not unlike the philosophical premise in Purism, and the Masonic belief that “space is a symbol of divinity and
is unfathomable” is rather like Le Corbusier’s concept of l’espace indicible (ineffable space).61

Because Le Corbusier was adamantly determined to be “unencumbered” when he moved to Paris at age 30, he was always secretive about his early life. Still, it is known that one further influence he carried with him from that period was the model of Ruskin’s inestimable effect on architects, resulting from his perceptive and graceful writings that were grounded in moral concern and spiritual sensibilities. The need to frame idealistic pronouncements from high moral ground is perhaps what Le Corbusier had in mind when he remarked, “To be an architect is nothing, you have to be a poet.” By 1917 he was aware that new construction methods, such as expansive walls of poured concrete, would soon be widely used. Incorporating this structural development, he presented Purist architecture as a high-minded, ascetic reform for the betterment of all. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of his Huguenot respect for spiritual austerity that is evident in Purism.

Years later, he composed The Poem of the Right Angle (1947–1953), a book of commentary along with 19 of his paintings that have numerous references to alchemy and perhaps also to Freemasonry.62 In addition, some elements in his architectural designs, such as the promenade, have been linked with Masonic rituals.63 More concretely, it is known that many of Le Corbusier’s close associates in Paris were Freemasons, including Paul Dermée, Juan Gris (1887–1927), and Jacques Lipchitz (1891–1973).64 (Le Corbusier’s chapel at Ronchamp is discussed in Chapter 6.)

**Postwar Religious Figurative Artists**

Following the trauma of the Great War, it seemed to many people that God’s presence in the world was a fading concept. Violence exhausts spirit—which is to say, during a period of war the perception of the subtle dimensions of life is bludgeoned by the relentless, massively orchestrated exercise of brute force over time. Beginning in the early 1920s, though, even as the new secular culture became normative, a few figurative artists felt compelled to explore a contemporary engagement with divine presence and especially with the sufferings of Christ. Entirely new modes of visual expression were required because the heroic style of triumphalist biblical sagas was now seen as sickeningly irrelevant. The first five artists considered below were all working in the deeply felt aftermath of the Great War: Georges Rouault in France, and four artists sometimes called neo-Romantics in Britain—Stanley Spencer, David Jones, Jacob Epstein, and Cecil Collins. In the United States, far less damaged than Europe by the war, Joseph Stella shocked the art world by turning away from celebrating iconic urban structures to painting organic, folkloric portraits of the Virgin Mary in the late 1920s. In the late 1930s, as the Nazi persecution of the Jews intensified, Marc Chagall painted a Jewish Christ crucified in a background that is the Holocaust.

**Georges Rouault (1871–1958)** was born in a basement when his mother sought refuge during an assault by French troops (the Versaillese) on the remaining hold-outs of the Paris Commune. His mother was a Parisian, whose quiet, ascetic spirituality shaped his own; his father was a Breton cabinetmaker who built pianos. Rouault
grew up in poverty with a lifelong sympathy for the suffering of the downtrodden. From an early age, he was drawn to the art prints by Manet, Courbet, and Daumier that his maternal grandfather collected. At 14 he was apprenticed for five years to a restorer and painter of stained glass. In the course of this work, he came to admire the anonymous masters of the medieval cathedral windows far more than the artists being celebrated in the late 1880s. Rouault also took evening classes at the École des Arts Décoratifs and subsequently was accepted at the École des Beaux-Arts, where he studied, along with Matisse, in the studio of Gustave Moreau. Rouault became Moreau’s star pupil and painted several works with religious subjects, which were not in vogue in academia during the 1890s. One of these, The Dead Christ Mourned by the Female Saints, was exhibited at Péladan’s Salon of the Rose + Cross in 1897.

In 1904 Rouault began a ten-year focus on painting the harsh, demeaned existence of people Christ had called, in the Gospel according to Matthew, “the least of these my brethren”—outcasts, prostitutes, beggars, depressed clowns and other circus performers, and the falsely accused. In a neo-primitive style of portraiture that alludes to medieval stained glass, these paintings convey the ambiance of degraded lives, yet they are never judgmental. That was a response he reserved for skewering the callous role-playing by wielders of power, such as judges in courtroom scenes. Between 1910 and 1913, Rouault also painted landscapes, which he apparently regarded in retrospect as an essential bridge to the powerful graphic work that followed. Late in life he advised his daughter Isabelle, a painter, “You will succeed in doing what is interesting, spiritual, Christian, and imaginative only by studying nature.”

During the Great War, Rouault, then in his mid-40s, set out to create a series of 100 copper engravings that would be entitled War and would be executed in the style of a medieval danse macabre, alluding to both the horrors at hand and the hope of an afterlife. After Amboise Vollard became Rouault’s art dealer in 1917, he suggested that the engravings be published as two books, to accompany two texts that would be written by André Suarès, Miserere (Have Mercy) and Guerre (War). Between 1916 and 1927, Rouault made initial sketches, which he transformed, at Vollard’s insistence, into oil sketches. Rouault then spent years refining the copper plates by experimenting with various techniques. The books were never written, and Vollard kept the 58 completed engravings and plates locked in his vault. They were finally printed as Miserere in a small edition of 450 copies in 1948, nine years after Vollard’s death, after which Rouault had found it necessary to sue the dealer’s estate to recover possession of over 700 of his works. Miserere et Guerre, as it is now known, presents in bold lines a unified realm of suffering and tragedy across apocalyptic landscapes and courts of cruelty for both humanity and Christ—yet the work is informed throughout by an undercurrent of hope, redemption, and the tenderness of brotherly love. Because Rouault not only arrived at new ways to create engravings but also recast modern aesthetics, the art critic John Canaday was not alone in calling him “the most important contributor to printmaking since Goya.” Rouault returned to painting in the late 1920s, developing a method of layering pigments to achieve the effect of patches of light that seem to emanate from the image.

When people tried to discuss sacred art with him, he denied that there is any such thing; there is simply some art made by artists who have faith. His deep sense of Catholic spirituality was somewhat removed from the institutional Church, although...
he situated himself historically in the tradition of Matthias Grünewald and the masters of medieval stained glass. In fact, he once remarked, “I do not feel as if I belong to this modern life . . .; my real life is back in the age of the cathedrals”—in the era before the neoclassical shift “put man at the center of the universe.” Rouault’s art, along with new forms of spiritual expression in philosophy, literature, and music that were created during the 1920s, came to be regarded together as the renouveau catholique (Catholic renewal, or revival), in which modern language and modern aesthetic forms were favored to express the meaning of sacramentalism, the understanding that the sacraments are conduits of divine grace, which are necessary for salvation. From the late 1920s until the mid-1930s, Catholic intellectual and cultural discourse was both fashionable and influential in France.

In 1945 Clement Greenberg published an influential essay attacking Rouault: “That Rouault . . . should be hailed as one of the profoundly religious painters of our time is one of the embarrassments of modernist art” because his paintings of prostitutes done in the early 1900s are actually “pornographic.” Ignoring that opinion, a monograph published by the Museum of Modern Art two years later concluded that “in relation to other living artists, [Rouault] emerges as one of the few major figures in 20th century art.” For his part, Rouault gave the following advice to young artists, which I cite here with some trepidation:

A painter who loves his art must be careful not to see too much of critics and men of letters. These gentlemen, however unconsciously, distort everything, thinking that they are explaining it—the artist’s thought, sensibility, and intentions. They take away his strength, just as Delilah took away Sampson’s. They have no gift for nuances, and they have an instinctive aversion for everything that is beyond their reach and baffles them.

Stanley Spencer (1891–1959) was born into a large, artistic, and musical Anglican family in the prosperous village of Cookham, 30 miles west of London on the Thames. Because Spencer and his siblings were home-schooled, he had little experience of the outside world—that is, the village—and infused his perceptions of it with his imaginative powers and his immersion in biblical stories. For instance, when he was old enough to be allowed to venture out to explore, he would often peer through a chink in a garden wall at what appeared to him to be the “Garden of Eden” and would assume that “a saint or some sort of wonderful person lived there,” which seemed to him a sort of heaven. If he “wasn’t sure of that,” he then “invented and invited biblical characters to take over.” Throughout childhood, Spencer was seized with moments of intense joy when he sighted some simple activity in the village, such as a person sweeping, that seemed to him to be existentially perfect. Such realizations he called “a state of awareness.” In time he came to think of Cookham as the “holy suburb of Heaven” (John Donne’s phrase for a churchyard).

When he became a commuter student at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, Spencer was part of a group of painters known as the Neo-Primitives, who were influenced by Gauguin’s broad, sculptural depiction of Breton peasants, as well as paintings by Giotto and various sculptures from Africa and Mexico. Spencer was given a copy of John Ruskin’s essay “Giotto and His Works at Padua,” in which he
praises the cycle of Giotto’s frescoes in the Arena Chapel for eschewing imitative realism and conveying, instead, suggestions of simple spiritual concepts. While still in art school, Spencer painted his first large canvas with a biblical theme set in Cookham and using his neighbors as models: *The Nativity* (1912). The painting won a prize and caused a professor to declare that Spencer had “the most original mind of anyone we have had at the Slade” as well as “great powers of draughtsmanship.” After graduating, he continued to paint biblical scenes with stylized “primitive” figures set in the gardens of Cookham. He remarked about *Zacharias and Elizabeth* (1913–1914) that it was “an attempt to raise that life round me to what I felt was its true status, meaning and purpose.”

In 1915 Spencer enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corps, serving first at a military hospital in Bristol and volunteering to be posted to the war zone in Macedonia. There he opted the following year to switch to the Berkshire Regiment of the infantry, which suffered heavy losses in action. Toward the end of the war, he was commissioned by the War Artists Advisory Committee to paint a canvas depicting the wounded being brought to a medical field station in Smol, Macedonia. After the war, Spencer was commissioned to paint 19 large works for the Sandram Memorial Chapel in Hampshire, which he completed in 1932. He chose to show not scenes of combat but daily tasks of life and work in a military hospital.

The large, central painting in the Sandram Memorial Chapel, however, depicts the major theme Spencer painted several times after the Great War: the Resurrection. In his vision, no Day of Judgment is involved. Rather, deceased soldiers rise from their graves in a military cemetery (*The Resurrection of the Soldiers*, 1928–1929); deceased residents of Cookham rise from their graves in the churchyard (*The Resurrection, Cookham*, 1924–1927); deceased family members rise from their graves to join their loved ones (*The Resurrection: Reunion of Families*, 1945); Glaswegians climb out of their graves and greet one another, raising their hands in gratitude (*The Resurrection: Port Glasgow*, 1947–1950); and in the biblical scene of Jairus’ daughter, she is resurrected by Christ and welcomed by her family (*The Resurrection with Raising of Jairus’ Daughter*, 1947). All of Spencer’s Resurrection paintings are about the final attaining of peace, joy, and emergence into a perfect world. He was continually trying to regain the prewar days of “beautiful wholeness.” In addition to painting landscapes for income, Spencer continued to paint numerous biblical scenes, such as *Christ carrying the Cross down Cookham High Street*. When *The Resurrection, Cookham* was exhibited in London, *The Times* called it “in all probability...the most important picture painted by an English artist in the present century.”

**David Jones (1895–1974)** was born in southeast London into a family who belonged to a Nonconformist denomination. He began to draw as a young child and realized at age six that he would devote his life to art. At 14 he entered the Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts, where he studied for five years before enlisting as a private in the Royal Welch Fusiliers in 1915, serving on the Western Front for the duration of the war. During his time in the trenches, Jones once observed through a hole in a wall a chaplain celebrating the Mass and gradually felt that he became “inwardly a Catholic” during the war. In 1921, he graduated from the Westminster School of Art and converted to Roman Catholicism. The following year he joined the Guild of St. Joseph and St. Dominic, a religious guild of craftsmen.
in Sussex founded by Eric Gill (1882–1940), who was also a convert to Catholicism and an accomplished calligrapher, letter cutter, and typographic designer. Remaining with the Guild for two years, Jones learned woodblock engraving and also became a Tertiary of the Order of St. Dominic.

Both he and Gill were influenced by the neo-Thomist theologian Jacques Maritain, whose book *Art and Scholasticism* they published in translation at the Guild's St. Dominic Press in 1923. Explicating St. Thomas Aquinas' teachings on beauty, for instance, Maritain wrote that beauty is “a property of being.... And as being is everywhere present and everywhere various, the beautiful likewise is scattered everywhere and everywhere various.” Just so, Jones' ink-and-watercolor paintings consist of layers of graceful, delicately drawn, profuse forms that include touchstones of serene spiritual communion—but that appear to be underlain by a frenzy of near-chaos continuously wrought by growth and change. His art expresses two linked themes: (1) the “tangle” of entwinings, complications, layers and correspondences, and interrelationships—all alluding to a barely suppressed chaos (of war), wild dynamics, and profound suffering that rumbles through the teeming background of his work, and (2) the sacramental view of life, which cherishes all life forms in the Creation and the presence of God therein. As Jones asserted in an essay entitled “Art in Relation to War,” great painting “must make the lion lie by the lamb without anyone noticing.”

Jones believed, “Man is unavoidably a sacramentalist... and his works are sacramental in character.” That is, the sacraments are human responses to the gifts of divine grace instituted by Christ. Jones’s works abound with visual references to the sacraments in the world around us, including subtle allusions to the sacramental quality of water and the structure of trees. He admired Blake, but his own aesthetic was strongly Celtic. Jones painted several biblical themes set in the woods of Wales and was also drawn to Welsh and other Celtic folktales. He admired, he explained, “a certain affection for the intimate creatureliness of things—a care for, and appreciation of the particular genius of place, men, trees, animals, and yet with a pervading sense of metamorphosis and mutability.” In the folk tradition of the “insular Celts,” he experienced a “half-aquatic world” rich in “a feeling of transparency and interpenetration of one element with another....” Even in a seemingly ordinary still-life such as *Glass Chalice with Flowers and Mug*, allusions to a liturgical chalice and altar are deftly invoked, as well as references to the Eucharist in the choice of flowers: the sacred in the quotidian is revealed in a vital field of mutability. From 1943 on, Jones also developed a genre called painted inscription, in which he managed to make lettering look poignant, valiant, and embattled.

David Jones was a talented poet as well. He had long thought of writing something about what had transpired in the trenches, but only after he made a trip in 1928 to Lourdes and Salies-de-Béarn (the area associated with *The Song of Roland*) did he feel he had the distance, the spiritual grounding, and the inspiration to begin working on what became a 126-page epic prose-poem, *In Parenthesis*. The work, which some consider a deconstructed novel, narrates the experiences of a British private, John Ball, who is deployed to the Battle of the Somme. The story incorporates references to Irish and Welsh legends of battle, as well as a mysterious character named Dai Greatcoat, the universal soldier in every battle in history, who at one
point declaims his long lineage of confrontations. It was published in 1937 by Faber & Faber with an introduction by T. S. Eliot, who called the poem “a work of genius.” W. H. Auden considered *In Parenthesis* “a masterpiece,” “the greatest book about the First World War” that he had read. A second book-length poem by Jones, *The Anathemata* (1952), again won high praise from Auden and others.

Still a schoolboy during the Great War, Cecil Collins (1908–1989) came of age during its aftermath. Because of a childhood illness, he was kept out of school for long periods and spent most of his time in the woods near Plymouth, where he perceived “a very special atmosphere of tenderness, of sweetness and yet of very clear formal certainty.” He attended the Royal College of Art, where he met the painter Elizabeth Ramsden (1905–2000), whom he subsequently married. Collins’ work was briefly shown with that of Surrealists in the mid-1930s until it became clear that his subject was not the unconscious but a decidedly conscious “attempt to manifest the Face of the God of Life.” In addition to his deeply Protestant sense of spiritual austerity, he was influenced by Blake, Dante, and an interest in Eastern art. The themes he depicted—usually in a highly simplified composition—include the mystical landscape, the purity of the Fool, the Visionary, the Angelic Intelligences, the Eternal Bride, the theater of the soul, and spiritual illumination through the feminine. Collins, who was considered by some to be the most important mystical painter in England since Blake, once observed, “Rationalism is the suburbia of the universe.”

Jacob Epstein (1880–1959) was an American-born sculptor who studied art in New York and Paris before settling in London, where he became a British citizen in 1911. He was raised in a Jewish Orthodox family and credited that formative experience for “the feeling I have for expressing the human point of view, rather than abstract implications to my work.” In the prewar years, he received several public commissions, in which he often incorporated rugged allusions to “primitive” foundations of culture and religion, whether tribal or sensual—a characteristic that caused him to be considered “notorious.” Several attempts were made to get various works by Epstein removed from public venues, but he received moral support from Gill, Brancusi, Modigliani, Picasso, and some art critics. During the war, friends of Epstein’s were killed, and he himself was conscripted in autumn 1917 as a private in the 38th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers, known as the “Jewish Legion.” Following basic training, however, he suffered a breakdown and was discharged in 1918 before being deployed.

Epstein was one of the pioneers of direct carving of stone, rather than working from a model, and allowing the qualities of the stone to determine the sculpture. However, he also worked in bronze, such as the 7-foot-high sculpture entitled *The Risen Christ* (1917–1920), of which he stated, “It stands and accuses the world for its grossness, inhumanity, cruelty, and beastliness, for the World War and for the new wars . . .” He created several other religious sculptures, including *Madonna and Child* (1927); *Ecce Homo* (1934–1935); and *Jacob and the Angel* (1939–1940). For a time, he acted as a mentor to Henry Moore.

In the United States, the Italian-born painter Joseph Stella (1877–1946) established his reputation with *Battle of Lights, Coney Island, Mardi Gras* (1913–1914), which he painted soon after seeing the Armory Show. He was friends with Duchamp
in New York, was part of the Stieglitz circle, and was a featured artist in the 
Société Anonyme. After the war, he was widely praised for his dramatic paintings 
of urban scenes, especially the Brooklyn Bridge, which he depicted almost as a 
Futurist Madonna with the inner cables forming her gown and the great swoop-
ing cables as her welcoming arms. Indeed, standing on the Brooklyn Bridge at night, 
he had felt “deeply moved, as if on the threshold of a new religion or in the pres-
ence of a new DIVINITY . . . .” He also incorporated visual religious metaphors in 
the five-panel work entitled New York Interpreted (which he called The Voice of the 
City, 1920–1922). These paintings were widely admired as postwar celebrations of 
modernity, and while it is true that Stella conveyed the power of the new age, he was 
equally aware of what was being lost. Beginning in the late 1920s, he shocked the 
modernist critics by painting numerous folkloric and nature-laden portraits of the 
Virgin Mary reminiscent of his home village. Some critics suggested that these serene 
anomalies could possibly be respected as Surrealist, yet that was not enough to save 
his reputation. Regardless, he saw, like Henry Adams before him, that the struggle 
between the orientations of the Virgin and the Dynamo would shape the twentieth 
century.

By the mid-1930s it was apparent that a new horror in Europe was supplanting 
the aftermath of the Great War: the rise of Nazism. In 1938 Marc Chagall (1887– 
1985) painted White Crucifixion as a field of martyrdom, with Christ as the central 
figure—on a large white slab of a Cross that tilts across the picture plane—wearing a tallis (Jewish prayer shawl) as a loincloth and surrounded by scenes of persecution 
of Jewish citizens in Germany, as well as the weeping of the Jewish patriarchs and 
matriarchs, who witness from an upper corner. Chagall painted two more works with 
this theme: The Martyr (1940), depicting Christ tied to a stake, wrapped in a tallis 
loincloth and wearing an Eastern European cap; and Yellow Crucifixion (1943), which 
is dominated by an open Torah scroll presented by a shofar-blowing angel next to the 
crucified Christ, who wears phylacteries and beneath whom are seen buildings and 
buildings burning in the Holocaust. Eventually, in the decades following World War II, 
Chagall was able to paint numerous joyful compositions, which were informed by 
his relationship with the Bible, a work he considered “the greatest source of poetry of 
all time”; “I have searched for its reflection in life and in Art. The Bible is a reflection 
of nature, and this is the secret I have tried to convey.”

The Quiet Survival of Spiritual Abstract Art

As the postwar zeitgeist shifted away from all they held dear, the artists who had 
led the prewar art movements wrote books, took teaching jobs, and otherwise 
found a niche. The 12 articles Mondrian had published in the journal De Stijl 
were gathered in one volume in 1920 entitled Neo-Plasticism. (Mondrian, both-
ered by Van Doesburg’s introduction of diagonals in his grid paintings, broke from 
De Stijl in 1926 when Van Doesburg published a manifesto explicating his new 
orientation, which he called Elementarism.) Kupka wrote Creativity in the Visual 
Arts in 1923. The Bauhaus published both Kandinsky’s book Point and Line to 
Plane (1926), his theory of the compositional elements in a painting and their 
effects on the viewer, as well as Klee’s Pedagogical Sketchbook (1925), based on
his lecture notes. In 1927, Malevich's theory of Suprematism was published, in Germany, as *The Non-Objective World*. Malevich was sanguine about the eclipse of his contributions to modern art, observing that ideas fade but still live on in what comes next.

In 1924 the German artist and art dealer **Galka Emmy Scheyer (1889–1945)** organized a traveling exhibition she named the Blue Four, featuring works by Kandinsky, Klee, Jawlensky, and Feininger. After the initial exhibition in New York the following year, she arranged numerous exhibitions of the Blue Four throughout the 1920s at cities on the West Coast, as well as one in Mexico City; she frequently lectured at these exhibitions. Through her efforts, many Americans, including the composer and artist John Cage in Los Angeles, were first introduced to the Expressionist and abstract art of prewar Germany. Scheyer settled in Los Angeles in a house designed for her by Richard Neutra on a street she named Blue Heights Drive.

In the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, Sonia Turk Delaunay lost the stipend her family had regularly sent her so she found it necessary to create a business with which to support her Parisian family: the Atelier Simultané, which produced “simultaneous textiles” and clothing printed with her Orphic designs. She also designed costumes, furniture, and sets for plays and films in the 1920s, and she had a pavilion at the International Exposition of modern design in 1925. Her studio and boutique were successful until the Depression, at which time she was relieved to close the business and return to painting. Decades later, she became the second living artist, after Braque, to have a retrospective exhibition at the Louvre, in 1964.

In 1935, **Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957)** accepted a commission in Paris from the National League of Gorj Women to create a war memorial to honor the local Romanian militia who had fought off a German invasion of the city of Târgu Jiu in 1916. As the site was in his home region, Oltenia, he was pleased to comply but refused to accept any compensation for the large sculptural ensemble he created. The most critically acclaimed piece—the Endless Column (also called the Column of the Infinite Sacrifice)—is derived, as had been many of his celebrated prewar sculptures, from his simplification of symbolic forms found in Romanian folklore and the visual culture of the Oltenian region, where woodcarving was a strong tradition. The formal suggestion of spiral-cylinder pillars, decorative tops of grave posts, carved bases, altars, chalices, decorative eggs, fish, folk masks, mythical birds were transformed in his hands into an entirely new art. Like other artists in the prewar period, Brancusi had been determined to depict the inner essence of a subject, but unlike his peers, he eschewed copying African forms. Although he does seem to have been inspired in several of his prewar sculptures by Buddhist statues he saw in the Musée Guimet, his primary focus became the Central European “primitive” depths, particularly the Oltenian blend of mystical pagan beliefs rooted in the Neolithic era and blended with an overlay of Christianity.90 He also kept many photos in his studio of Byzantine-style icons from Romania, which he admired for their calm grandeur. Inspired by those two spiritual sources, Brancusi became widely considered the “patriarch of modern sculpture.”

In 1936 a group of prominent artists signed “The Dimensionist Manifesto,” which had been drafted by the Hungarian poet Charles Sirató. It was signed in Paris
by Kandinsky, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Arp, Täuber-Arp, Picabia, and others. When it was published that year in the journal *Revue N+1* (and the following summer in the journal *plastique*), those names were joined by endorsements from artists in other cities, including Duchamp, Miró, Moholy-Nagy, Nicholson, and Alexander Calder. This group statement reframed the earlier fascination with the fourth dimension as a new—yet still spiritual, or somewhat mystical—engagement with the new physics. After citing the theories of Einstein as one of the impetuses for what they called Dimensionism, the manifesto declares:

> Animated by a new conception of the world, the arts in a collective fermentation (their interpenetration) have begun to stir. And each of them has evolved with a new dimension. Each of them has found a form of expression inherent in the next higher dimension, opening the way to the weighty spiritual consequences of this fundamental change. Thus, the Dimensionist tendency has led to (1) literature departing from the line and moving to the plane; (2) painting leaving the plane and occupying space: painting in space, Constructivism, special constructions, multimedia compositions; and (3) sculpture stepping out of closed, immobile, and dead space, that is to say, the three-dimensional space of Euclid...  

This revival in the second half of the 1930s of the necessity to escape from three-dimensional, Euclidean habits of perception was also common to the second generation of Surrealists, as we have seen: Matta, Onslow Ford, and Tanguy, who painted *The Meeting of Parallel Lines* in 1935. In this vein, Max Ernst began a painting in 1942 that he titled *Young Man Intrigued by the Flight of a Non-Euclidean Fly*.

After the Bauhaus was closed in 1933, Kandinsky’s final decade in Paris was productive but not without disappointment. The influential Parisian art dealer Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler pursued Klee and presented his exhibitions with extensive fanfare, but he declined to represent Kandinsky, whom he apparently considered a has-been. Fortunately, Kandinsky had a champion who had the ear of one of the most important art collectors of the twentieth century. The Baroness Hildegard von Rebay (1890–1967, usually known as Hilla Rebay in the United States) was a German artist, a Theosophist, and an ardent supporter of non-objective painting. After moving to New York, she became an advisor to Solomon Guggenheim on collecting contemporary art. As early as 1930, the two of them conceived of the idea of a Temple of Non-Objectivity in which to house his growing collection. In 1937 he founded the Guggenheim Foundation for the purpose of supporting artists and building the Temple.

In rented quarters the Guggenheim Foundation presented its first exhibition in 1939: *Art of Tomorrow*, featuring 415 of the 725 non-objective paintings in the collection. The exhibition catalogue included an essay on non-objective art by Hilla Rebay entitled “The Power of Spiritual Rhythm.” Kandinsky’s work was prominently featured.

A few years later Rebay, as Director of the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, presented a memorial exhibition of Kandinsky’s art, in 1946. It featured 227 of his works and was accompanied by the Guggenheim Foundation’s publication
of a translation of both On the Spiritual in Art and Point and Line to Plane. In the catalogue essay, Rebay channeled the spirit of the prewar heyday of non-objective art:

The sensitive and prophetic artist of our day has refined his senses to receivership of those invisible, spiritual forces which he intuitively expresses. He derives with subtle sensibility his visionary inspiration from the spiritual domain which is indestructible and his very own to whatever degree he has developed his faculty to receive. Thereafter, his creations develop with a wealth of variated beauty, controlled by laws of counterpoint, which make his artistic message as endlessly alive and original as nature itself.

When Guggenheim and Rebay decided that the time was right to construct a building for their Museum of Non-Objective Painting, she selected the site, and they hired Frank Lloyd Wright to design it. Through numerous conversations with the architect, Rebay made clear that the structure was to be a temple of the spirit. Wright was amenable to having a spiritual subtext for his building and predicted that his creation would make the Metropolitan Museum of Art “look like a Protestant barn.” Wright initially envisioned his grand spiral building clad in rose-tone granite, a proposal Rebay nixed with alarm because, according to Theosophy, red is the color of materialism. In 1952 the museum was renamed in honor of its founding patron. Wright’s spiral home for it was completed in 1959.

MYSTICAL LANDSCAPE PAINTING IN NORTH AMERICA

Although more than 116,000 US soldiers were killed during the 19 months of World War I in which American troops were involved, and war memorials were erected in many American cities, the collective mood throughout the 1920s was markedly different from that in Europe, where the suffering had been far greater. The Twenties in the United States were a time of economic expansion and optimism (as well as reckless speculation in the financial sector). To the American avant-garde artists, the sudden postwar rejection of a mystical engagement by most of their European counterparts did not seem compelling or relevant to them. They continued working in the trajectory that Arthur Dove had pioneered when he had first combined the spiritually inflected new styles of art in Paris with an American romance with the land. In Canada, a similar development began in 1920 with the Group of Seven.

THE 291 GROUP

With the establishment of the 291 gallery in New York in 1908, Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946) not only exhibited the works of leading European modernist artists for the first time in the United States but also cultivated a group of young artists around him who were determined to create an American modernism. After Stieglitz closed the 291 gallery in 1917, he curated the “Seven Americans” exhibition and a few others at the Anderson Galleries, then opened the Intimate Gallery (1925–1929), and then established the gallery An American Place (1929 until his death in 1946). He exhibited scores of artists over the years, including many works by Charles
Demuth (1883–1935) and the photographer Paul Strand (1890–1976), but the core group he featured consisted of Arthur Dove (1880–1946), Marsden Hartley (1877–1943), John Marin (1870–1953), and Georgia O’Keeffe (1887–1986).

Stieglitz’s exhibitions often mixed sculpture and two-dimensional works in a serene, meditative atmosphere that suggested deep meaning in the new art. With a background in the Symbolist period, he respected the spiritual currents in Europe that were now informing Expressionism and the increasing dematerialization of the object. Stieglitz was pleased to meet Arthur Dove when the young artist returned from Paris to New York in 1909 and painted some of the first abstract paintings, in 1910. These works, which Dove called “ex Extractions” of the spiritual essence of nature, were exhibited at 291 the same year. Stieglitz subsequently urged Marsden Hartley, a painter whose landscapes he had exhibited, to go to Europe in 1912 and explore the new thinking and the new art. O’Keeffe, who did not travel to the avant-garde circles in Europe, studied at Columbia University Teachers College with someone who had: Arthur Wesley Dow (1857–1922). Dow was among the painters at Pont-Aven in 1885 and 1886, where he had concluded that even someone as overbearing as Gauguin could, indeed, deliver useful talks on the spiritual and aesthetic issues in an emerging art form. Dow was interested in Theosophy and Asian spirituality as well as Japanese aesthetics.

Several art historians have noted the apparently spiritual nature of much of the art by the 291 group, but unfortunately for this study, which is focused on statements by the artists themselves, the 291 group generally avoided making public statements about the subject. That is, when they were asked questions about the meaning of their works—Were they spiritual, Symbolist, synesthetic, other?—they almost always replied that they preferred not to attach words to their art. Still, Dove and Hartley were occasionally forthcoming about the spiritual dimension of their landscapes. O’Keeffe was guarded even in her personal correspondence about any interpretation being put onto her paintings (expressing puzzlement that anyone might find her paintings of flowers to be sensual, for instance). Marin sent Whitmanesque declarations to Stieglitz about wanting to paint works that were “seething with the whole atmosphere of Maine,” and he explained in an interview, “When I am up against a mountain . . . I don’t say I can paint it but ask ‘Mountain, will you allow me to look at you?’” Stieglitz himself was inclined at times to make Whitmanesque declarations: “I am the moment. I am the moment with all of me and anyone is free to be the moment with me.”

Although the 291 group was generally oblique about the spiritual dimension of their art, it is unlikely that Stieglitz would have taken anyone into his inner circle of artists who was utterly uninterested in the ineffable and the influence of spiritual thought on the new aesthetic. His own commitment was such that he was known to sell a work at far below market value if the prospective buyer indicated a deep spiritual response to the art.

A postwar American version of European modernism at 291 might have taken many forms, but it was Dove who pioneered the genre that prevailed. He returned from Paris in 1909 with new ideas about color and form; the possibility of partial and full abstraction; and a spiritual (though not occult or Idealist) perspective. All of this he brought to bear on the experiencing of nature on this continent. The European pioneers of abstraction moved further away from nature, but Dove had spent his
formative years roaming the family farm in Connecticut—as O’Keeffe had done on her family’s farm in Wisconsin and Marin had done on his grandfather’s farm in Delaware. Although Dove, like O’Keeffe, did create some fully abstract paintings, he always felt that nature was his great subject: “Actuality! At that point where mind and matter meet. That is at present where I would like to paint. The spirit is always there. And it will take care of itself.” Accordingly, Dove’s “extractions” from actuality combine exquisite line and unexpected color to create biomorphic auras of light and presence (see Figure 12). “To make it breathe like the rest of nature,” he wrote about his painting, “it must have a basic rhythm.”

When Marsden Hartley was an art student in New York, he developed a spiritual view of art from readings in the Transcendentalist works of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman and from his friendship with Albert Pinkham Ryder (1847–1917). During his first trip to France and Germany, made with Stieglitz’s encouragement and assistance, Hartley studied Kandinsky’s writings and became acquainted with him—though Hartley later turned away from the art of Kandinsky and Marc as too theoretical. Hartley also read Bergson and several Western mystics. On a second trip to Europe, in 1925, he became engrossed with George Santayana’s *Platonism and the Spiritual Life*, accepting Santayana’s assertion that essence is not only distinct from temporal existence but is pure Being in its infinite implications. Hartley depicted “pure forms” within the existence of nature in New England, New Mexico, and the mountains of Bavaria. In a letter in 1939, Hartley related the experience he had had while painting the coast of Maine and especially Mount Katahdin: “I know I have seen God now. The occult connection that is established when one loves nature was complete—and so I felt transported to a visible fourth dimension—and since heaven is inviolably a state of mind I have been there these past ten days.”

**The Group of Seven**

In 1904 Lawren Harris (1885–1970), an aspiring artist from a well-to-do Baptist family in Toronto, traveled to Berlin to study art for four years. There he read Emerson, became interested in Theosophy, and was exposed to the idea of a national art. When he returned to Toronto in 1908, he sought to cultivate a new kind of painting that would partake of the spiritual and aesthetic currents of the new art in Europe but would clearly be Canadian. As a first step, he became a founding member of the Arts and Letters Club, joined in 1911 by J. E. H. MacDonald (1873–1932). The two became friends and developed an affinity with several other artists who worked at a design firm with MacDonald: Arthur Lismer (1885–1969), F. H. Varley (1881–1969), Frank Johnston (1888–1949), Franklin Carmichael (1890–1945), and Tom Thomson (1877–1917). Harris and MacDonald also convinced the young painter A. Y. Jackson (1882–1974) to move from Montreal, bringing his knowledge and experience acquired during studies in Paris. Harris then provided most of the funding for the design and construction of the Studio, a three-story building where several of the men worked and lived. Thomson died in 1917 under mysterious circumstances while on a canoe trip in his favorite wilderness park.

In 1920 Harris led the formation of the Group of Seven and was acknowledged as their spokesman: “We are making the journey that Whitman did, discovering
the essential unity of East and West, thrilling to the opulence of the country, its immensity, its sweeping variety of natural forms, its restfulness and wide-ranging aspirations. Around this time Harris formalized his involvement with Theosophy and became a member of the Toronto Lodge of the International Theosophical Society. Later on, when he moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico in 1938, he co-founded the Transcendental Painting Group, an organization of artists who advocated a spiritual form of abstraction.

The Group of Seven painters made many trips into Canadian wilderness areas over the years to draw or paint *en plein air* in forests, on windswept shores, and in the Arctic. Harris, for instance, became best known for works of spare, streamlined organismic depicting scenes on the north shore of Lake Superior that allude to the spiritual dimensions of the land. He declared of the Group's collective mission:

> We are on the fringe of the great North and its living whiteness, its loneliness and replenishment, its resignations and release, its call and answer, its cleansing rhythms. It seems that the top of the continent is a source of spiritual flow that will ever shed clarity into the growing race of America.

Simultaneously, a young painter in British Columbia, **Emily Carr (1871–1945)** developed a new style of painting to convey the spiritual dimension of the Native American cultures (as she perceived it) and, later in her career, the towering trees of the province's forests. Between age 24 and 39, Carr studied at the San Francisco Art Institute, the Westminster School of Art in London, and the St. Ives art colony in Cornwall. In 1898 Carr made her first sketching and painting trip to the Nuu-chah-nulth settlement on the west coast of Vancouver Island. In 1910 she traveled to Paris to study art at Académie Colarossi, where she learned to adopt far more vibrant colors than she had been using. Though she found it difficult to live in cities and had two breakdowns while in Paris, two of her paintings were exhibited in the Salon d’Automne shortly before she sailed for home. When she returned to Victoria, she announced, “I could not go back to the old dead way of working after I have tasted the joys of the new. The new ideas are big and they fit this land.”

Carr made many arduous journeys to First Nations villages to paint. In 1927, 26 of her paintings were included in an exhibition of West Coast art at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. Also included were works painted in the west by A. Y. Jackson and Lawren Harris. When Carr went east for the opening, she also went to Toronto to visit the Group of Seven. She admired Lismer's and Jackson's work but exclaimed of Harris' paintings, “Oh, God, what have I seen? Where have I been? Something has spoken to the very soul of me, mighty, not of this world.” In turn, when Harris saw Carr's paintings, he declared to her—at a time when women were not welcomed into professional art circles—“You are one of us.” She was invited to exhibit with the Group of Seven many times and did so, though she was never an official member. In 1933 the Group named Carr “the Mother of Modern Art.”

In 1928 the abstract painter Mark Tobey traveled from Seattle to teach a three-month studio course in Carr's studio about the simplification of natural forms to geometric shapes. She resisted, though, the abandonment of the organic vitality she perceived in the woods: “I was not ready for abstraction. I clung to earth and her dear
shapes, her density, her herbage, her juice. I wanted her volume and I wanted to hear her throb.”

When Carr had asked Harris about the source of his inspiration, he sent books on Theosophy. She read them but eventually realized that she found Theosophy’s sense of God to be “beautiful but cold and remote and mysterious.” She returned to her roots in Christianity, now simply as a non-denominational love of Christ and God the Father. Specifically, her sense of the Divine, as she wrote in her journal, was immanent as well as transcendent: “Nature is God revealing himself, expressing his wonders and his love, Nature clothed in God’s beauty of holiness.” Carr then created her most famous works, when she was in her 60s: throughout the 1930s she made numerous dramatic oil paintings of towering trees in the old-growth forests of British Columbia and their vibrating fields of energy.

The interwar years in Europe were dominated by the trauma of the Great War, the rise of fascism in Germany and Italy, and the sufferings of the Great Depression. It did not seem that “The War to End All Wars” was going to be a lasting label for the cataclysm, as private armies marched in the streets declaring a bold new future built on force. The notion that the new art could affect society was buried with the war dead, while the new idealism of purity in design fit conveniently well with industrial commissions. Various spiritual influences, embraced as the New Spirit in diverse forms, were present in the defiant art (Dada, Surrealism, *Neue Sachlichkeit*); the art of silent witness (the Christian figurative painters, Brancusi’s war memorial); the quietly continuing explorations of abstraction; and the non-European mystical engagement with landscape (the 291 Group, the Group of Seven).
Figure 1  William Blake, *Satan Exulting over Eve*, 1795. Graphite, pen, and black ink, and watercolor over color print. The J. Paul Getty Museum’s Open Content Program.
Figure 2: Caspar David Friedrich, *A Walk at Dusk*, ca. 1830–1835. Oil on canvas. The J. Paul Getty Museum's Open Content Program.
Figure 3  Julia Margaret Cameron, *Beatrice*, 1866. Albumen print. The J. Paul Getty Museum’s Open Content Program.
Figure 4  Pierre-Auguste Renoir, La Promenade, 1870. Oil on canvas. The J. Paul Getty Museum’s Open Content Program.
Figure 5 Mary Cassatt, *In the Omnibus*, 1891. Drypoint and aquatint, hand-colored. Library of Congress.
Figure 6  
Figure 7  Vincent Van Gogh, *Irises*, 1889. Oil on canvas. The J. Paul Getty Museum’s Open Content Program.
Figure 8  Franz Marc, *Deer in the Forest I*, 1913. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC.
Figure 9  Kasimir Malevich, *Dynamic Suprematism*, 1916. Graphite on paper. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Bequest of Marcia Simon Weisman. Photo by Don Ross. Courtesy of SFMOMA.
Figure 10 Gordon Onslow Ford, *Loving Cup*, 1980. Acrylic on canvas. Collection of and courtesy of Lucid Art Foundation, Inverness, CA.
Figure 11  Paul Klee, *Joyful Mountain Landscape*, 1929. Oil on board. Yale University Art Gallery’s Public Domain Program.
Figure 14  Richard Tuttle, Deep, in the Snow, 2005. Wall construction with 12 etchings. © Richard Tuttle. Published by and courtesy of Crown Point Press, San Francisco.
If we project concepts onto the ineffable, do we not compromise the very possibility of communing with it? Perhaps all systems of theology and religion—including the esoteric systems as well as the Abrahamic religions and others—distort our engagement with the sacred nature of the more-than-human field of existence. Perhaps we are better off dropping all pretensions of religious know-how and taking a more humble approach to that which exceeds the human reach of perception and cognition. Many people believe we can best approach the spiritual only with subtle gestures, never thinking we have encircled the larger reality in which we exist.

In the orientation I call allusive spirituality, one finds a preference for expressions that allude to the ineffable and that seek to jar our mundane consciousness out of its well-worn tracks into a sense of open-ended, concept-free interrelatedness with the sacred whole. This approach shares some common ground with theological systems that distrust all descriptions of God, insisting that the ineffable can be understood only in terms of what it is not. For example, the Divine is not anything that can be captured by our language systems. That approach is sometimes called negative theology or apophatic theology.

The artists drawn to allusive spirituality present an array of expressions of engagement, most often abstract. The works by these artists are influenced by their interest in Jewish mysticism, Christianity, and various Eastern spiritual traditions, as well as their own sense of the subtle and indescribable nature of the spiritual dimension of life, including the unitive field of flux and formlessness underlying—and, indeed, constituting—material forms. Anyone who accepts the validity of twenty-first-century scientific discoveries about the dynamic interrelatedness of the physical world at very subtle, subatomic levels, for instance, might consider it possible that we humans actually do live our lives embedded dynamically in a vibratory energetic whole, or anima mundi, as thousands of indigenous cultures and numerous ancient traditions in the East and the West have perceived. Such peoples referred to this awe-inducing totality through a multitude of culturally informed responses but always with a respectful sense of proportion: humans are a part of the vast field of interbeing, not the Crown of Creation.
Marcel Duchamp referred to this vast realm as “the labyrinth beyond time and space” when he gave a talk on “The Creative Act” to the American Federation of Arts in 1957. He proposed that “the artist acts like a mediumistic being who, from the labyrinth beyond time and space, seeks his way out to a clearing.” “In the creative act,” he asserted, “the artist goes from intention to realization through a chain of totally subjective reactions...which cannot and must not be fully self-conscious, at least on the aesthetic plane.” He added that a “gap” results between the full intention of the artist and what can actually be realized. Moreover, the artistic offering is in a “raw state” until it is taken in by the viewer, at which time “a transference takes place that is an aesthetic osmosis”: “Through the change from inert matter into a work of art an actual transubstantiation has taken place, and the role of the spectator is to determine the weight of the work on an aesthetic scale.”

In this passage, Duchamp uses metaphors from his formative religious experience (the Catholic term transubstantiation); from the heyday of the pre–World War I avant-garde (séances and mediums); and from the inescapable presence of Freudian theory in New York in the late 1950s (transference). His reference to a state of “not fully self-conscious” thought (attention that is simultaneously focused and diffuse) may be related to his pre–World War I interest in Buddhism.

Many artists drawn to allusive spirituality since 1950 have found Buddhist teachings about the nature of reality and Buddhist practices of meditation to be a fruitful area of exploration. The core teachings express the Buddha’s discoveries about the nature of mind and mental practices that deliver one from unskilful states of mind (such as hatred, greed, and delusion) to the cultivation of wisdom, compassion, and loving kindness. In addition, by proceeding to increasingly subtle levels of awareness, the Buddha arrived at the experiential knowledge that all matter and energy is constituted of vibration and oscillation. It is this aspect of Buddhism that many visual artists find particularly intriguing: that the forms we see around us appear to be solid but are actually constituted at the subtle level by manifestations of energy and mass arising and passing away in nanoseconds; that the world exists not as fixed forms but as a play of creative, dynamic flux; and that engaging with the subtle complexity of physical reality through allusive art is endlessly fascinating.

During the 1970s Tibetan and Theravadan (South Asian) forms of Buddhism were established in the United States. In the 1950s, however, Zen was the version of Buddhism most widely known in this country. This began when many American military personnel who had observed Zen monasteries and practices during the occupation of Japan returned to this country. A curiosity about Zen Buddhism developed, particularly among artists and poets in New York and San Francisco. The poets became intrigued with forms of Japanese poetry, while many practitioners of abstract painting became interested in Zen’s emphasis on the subtle level of formlessness that underlies all form. This relevance is demonstrated in a passage from a talk given in San Francisco by the Zen Buddhist teacher Shunryu Suzuki, author of *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*:

The emptiness we [in Zen] mean is not like the idea you may have... When you see plum blossoms, or hear the sound of a small stone hitting bamboo, that is a letter from the world of emptiness. Besides the world that we can describe, there is another kind of world. All descriptions of reality are limited descriptions of the world of emptiness.
(Translating this Buddhist concept as “emptiness” might misleadingly connote stasis; the concept is also translated as dynamic flux in formlessness.)

The complex history of Buddhist and Taoist influences on American artists began in the 1860s and has been well documented in such recent books as The Third Mind (the catalogue of an exhibition organized by Alexandra Monroe at the Guggenheim Museum in 2009); The Smile of the Buddha (2005) by Jacquelynn Baas; and Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art (2004), edited by Baas and Mary Jane Jacob. Those studies include artists who were influenced both spiritually and artistically by Asian traditions. They also include artists who have stated that they are interested solely in the latter: the formal elements of Asian art and calligraphy. Examples of this are the paintings by Brice Marden (b. 1938) and also the installation works of James Lee Byars (1932-1997). After earning a degree in art and philosophy in Detroit, Byars lived in Kyoto for six years, where he absorbed aesthetic influences of Zen, Noh, and Shintoism. His dramatic sculptural installations and performance works, such as The Perfect Smile and The Death of James Lee Byars, were driven less by personal engagement with Asian spiritual teachings than by a Western philosophical exploration of ontological questions. In this chapter, we will consider representative artists who became spiritually involved with one or more Asian traditions such that it influenced their work.

Art inspired by allusive spirituality is not limited, however, to works influenced by Asian traditions. Numerous celebrated works of art have been inspired by engagement with the pre-cognitive, pre-linguistic awareness that underlies our conscious thoughts and is continuous with the more-than-human cosmological totality of existence. This art partakes of that awareness.

**Abstract Expressionism**

In Paris after World War II, the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles continued the advocacy of abstract painting that had begun with the organization Abstraction-Création, whose periodical ceased publication after 1936. That same year the organization called American Abstract Artists was formed in New York to further public understanding of abstract and non-objective art; it continued through the postwar years and to this day. Even during the war, a cross-pollination began as many Surrealist painters from Paris sought refuge in New York. By 1941 these included Yves Tanguy, Max Ernst, Kurt Seligmann, André Masson, Roberto Matta, Gordon Onslow Ford, Estaban Francés, Marc Chagall, and the founding theorist of Surrealism, André Breton. The works of several of these artists, especially the younger ones, straddled the division between abstract and figurative art: their paintings were extremely abstracted with a few figurative references.

The New School of Social Research provided both a site and an event that furthered the spread of Surrealist ideas and ideals among American painters. First, the New School allotted space and support in fall 1940 for the British artist Stanley William Hayter to reopen the printmaking workshop that he had run in Paris, renamed Atelier 17. There the emphasis was on thinking *in* the medium, that is, experimenting with printmaking’s “automatist possibilities”: the combining of various methods and unconventional techniques to yield chance results and paradoxical effects. Along with the European Surrealists, American artists who created
prints there throughout the 1940s were Adolph Gottlieb, Jackson Pollock, Alexander Calder, Robert Motherwell, and numerous others.

A second catalyst was the series of four lectures on Surrealist painting that were hosted by the New School in January and February 1941. Gordon Onslow Ford, the only native speaker of English who was among the small group anointed by Breton a few years earlier in Paris as the second generation of Surrealist painters, was invited to be the presenter. Each talk was accompanied by an exhibition of Surrealist works. For the first three presentations, Onslow Ford interpreted works by the first generation of Surrealists. For the final talk, he focused on works by his peer group, asserting that these painters are “expressing the desires of the collective unconscious in new ways of looking at the world.”

In sharing their associative processes and, particularly in explicating works by Matta and himself, Onslow Ford noted the attuning of the unconscious to cosmic events, the sense of all time being present in each moment, the replacement of linear perspective for a world of spatial flux, and the trust in subjective thinking. He concluded by declaring that “with the collaboration of the young Americans we hope to make a vital contribution to the transformation of the world.”

Another influence in postwar circles was the book System and Dialectics of Art (1937) by the Polish-Russian painter and theorist John Graham (1886–1961). Graham viewed art as a means of exploring the inner meaning of reality, and he saw “primitive” art as a precursor to modern abstraction. He drew from a range of esoteric sources, including the Hermetic notion of the powers of symbolic images. In addition, because of the interest in visual explorations of mythic thought, many artists attended the large exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1941 entitled Indian Art of the United States.

These influences were central to the development throughout the 1940s of the most prominent of the artists soon to be labeled Abstract Expressionists. Three of them—Mark Rothko (1903–1970), Barnett Newman (1905–1970), and Adolph Gottlieb (1903–1974)—had been acquainted for many years so they sometimes conferred in the 1950s on public statements about the spiritual dimension of their paintings and the error of viewing them simply as formalist exercises. One example was the letter in the New York Times on June 13, 1943, signed by Rothko and Gottlieb in response to a review of their work. The artists explicated the “intrinsic ideas carried within the frames of these pictures”: that “art is an adventure into an unknown world”; that “there is no such thing as a good painting about nothing,” that “the subject is crucial”; and that “we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.” Similarly, Newman explained the new art in “The Plasmic Image” (1945) as “subjective abstraction,” which goes beyond both geometric “pure abstraction” and dream-like Surrealism. Unlike the (first-generation) Surrealists, Newman asserted,

The present painter is concerned not with his own feelings or with the [Freudian] mystery of his own personality but with the penetration into the world mystery. His imagination is, therefore, attempting to dig into metaphysical secrets. To that extent his
art is concerned with the sublime. It is a religious art, which through symbols will catch
the basic truth of life, which is its sense of tragedy.9

Such declarations were exceedingly annoying to Clement Greenberg, who cham-
pioned the Abstract Expressionists on strictly formalist grounds as the culmination of
the history of painting and who loathed any mention of a spiritual dimension. In a
review of Gottlieb’s work in 1947, Greenberg opined that such talk is about as unso-
phisticated and low-brow as a religious revival meeting: “I myself would question the
importance this school attributes to the symbolical or ‘metaphysical’ content of its art;
there is something half-baked and revivalist, in a familiar American way, about it.”10
His aspersions did not dissuade the artists—Gottlieb, for instance, wrote of “art as the
language of the spirit.”11—but they did influence the rest of the New York art world.
Consequently, it was generally shocked when a critic, Robert Rosenblum, applied the
term the Abstract Sublime to this body of art in 1961. Yet Newman had written an
article entitled “The Sublime Is Now” in 1948 and later stated that art should evoke
a “memory of the emotions of an experienced moment of total reality.”12

Rothko, who had formative experiences of studying Judaism during his childhood
in Russia and who spoke of the “inner light” in his paintings,13 commented to a critic,
“The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience
I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say, are moved only by their color
relationships, then you miss the point.”14 He usually batted away public questions
about the spiritual dimension of his work, but in a manuscript he left—writings
entitled The Artist’s Reality (published posthumously in 2004)—Rothko reflected on
what he called “the communal myth” (recognition of the unitive dimension of being),
which struggles in the West since the Renaissance to find a place alongside the myth
of the Autonomous Individual: “In our hope for the heroic, and the knowledge that
art must be heroic, we cannot but wish for the communal myth again. Who would
not rather paint the soul-searching agonies of Giotto than the apples of Chardin, for
all of the love we have for them?”15

Newman, too, was adamant in defending his intentions when two critics reacted
negatively to the religious title on his Stations paintings: “When I call them Stations
of the Cross, I am saying that these paintings mean something beyond their formal
extremes . . . . What I’m saying is that my painting is physical and what I’m saying
also is that my painting is metaphysical . . . .”16 In addition, Newman incorporated
concepts from Jewish mystical teachings of the Kabbalah in several works, including
his “zip” paintings and his large sculpture Zim Zum I. The title refers to tsimtsum
in Hebrew, which holds that God partially withdrew from the universe in order to
create space for humans to emerge, a withdrawal that was followed by a slash of a
divine light that set in motion an infinite cosmic process.

The only prominent Abstract Expressionist to have been exposed to occult tra-
ditions during his formative years was Jackson Pollock (1912–1956) whose art
teacher at the Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles was a member of the
Theosophical Society. He introduced his students to Rosicrucianism, Hinduism,
Buddhism, yoga, reincarnation, karma, and the Jungian sense of the healing power
of images.17 Later, when Pollock sought psychotherapy for his alcoholism, he chose
two Jungian psychologists whom he saw sequentially from 1938 through 1942, one
of whom encouraged him to work with archetypal and totemic figures in his art. In the mid-1940s Pollock painted many spiritually inflected, semi-abstracted works that included such symbols as the sun, moon, bird, woman, and phallus on his way to creating his celebrated “drip paintings” (1947 through 1950). In a related vein, Pollock sought out John Graham after reading his book and an article because, as Pollock later explained, “he knew something about art, and I had to know him. I knocked on his door, told him I had read his article and that he knew.” They began a close association, both sharing an interest in the esoteric idea of the alchemist as dynamic creator. As for Clement Greenberg’s hostility to spirituality, Pollock simply advised other artists not to bother raising the subject with him: “It’s not something you can discuss with Greenberg.”

In an essay for an exhibition in 1946 of the works of Clyfford Still (1904–1980) at Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century gallery, Rothko included him among the “small band of Myth Makers” who had coalesced during the war years. Still was the distance member, then teaching at the school now called the San Francisco Art Institute, though he spent most of the 1950s in New York. He had moved into full abstraction in the early 1940s, creating what the art critic Carter Ratcliff calls his “bleak and strangely gorgeous universe.” The shapes in some of the large paintings suggest stalagmites in dark caves, though Still made clear that he did not paint nature. He said that his paintings present aspects of “the sublime in man’s self” and that the sublime was “a paramount consideration in my studies and work from my earliest student days.” In striving to escape from the “attitudes of power” in all systems, he concluded that “dialectical perversions” such as Cubism and Expressionism reflect “the spiritual debasement of the individual.”

Other prominent Abstract Expressionists were inspired by an engagement with Eastern philosophies and spiritual practices. Ad Reinhardt (1913–1967) was a professor of art history, especially Asian, as well as a painter. He taught his students that a grounding in Asian art and key Asian spiritual texts is essential for a modern artist. In the essay “Timeless in Asia” (1960), he asserted that nothing “irrational, momentary, spontaneous, unconscious, primitive, expressionistic, accidental, or informal” can yield timeless art: what is necessary is “complete awareness” in a mind that is “vacant and spiritual, empty and marvelous.” Reinhardt seems to have been drawn particularly to the Zen emphasis on emptiness and the Taoist teaching that The Tao that can be named [or drawn] is not the true Tao. He emptied most of his canvases of form, except for a barely perceptible cruciform structure, and all color but shades of black. Two art critics who knew him have wondered if “the severity of his moralism” might have come from his Lutheran upbringing: he was an outspoken critic of the art world, and he adamantly denied that the “is-ness” of painting could refer to any concepts whatsoever, including institutional religion.

Sam Francis (1923–1994) was also influenced by Zen Buddhism. In his best-known works, painted between 1948 and 1959, he created a cosmos of organic free-forms in saturated color, which he felt “may expand forever.” He regarded these very large paintings as “a kind of universe or world that seems to have formed by its own laws.”

Robert Motherwell (1915–1991) was both a young painter and a PhD student in philosophy at Columbia University when he came to know the Surrealist émigrés
in the early 1940s and the Abstract Expressionist painters later on. In addition to painting numerous well-received works of Abstract Expressionism, he became a theorist of the movement. In 1944 he delivered a lecture, “The Place of the Spiritual in a World of Property,” at a conference on art at Mt. Holyoke College; it was then published in Paalen’s journal _Dyn I_ under the title “The Modern Painter’s World.” In this text, Motherwell expresses the understanding, common to his circle, of modern art as a spiritual calling with a social role:

The social condition of the modern world which gives every experience its form is the spiritual breakdown which followed the collapse of religion. This condition has led to the isolation of the artist from the rest of society. The modern artist’s social history is that of a spiritual being in a property-loving world. . . . It is true that artists are not always pure, that some times they are concerned with their public standing or their material circumstance. Yet for all that it is the artists who guard the spiritual in the modern world.26

A central figure in Abstract Expressionism was the remarkable painter, theorist, and teacher Hans Hofmann (1880–1966). After a Bavarian childhood, he began art studies in Munich in 1898, at the height of esoteric Symbolism’s influence over the avant-garde. In the early 1900s he joined the shift to Expressionism, and in 1904 he moved to Paris for ten years, where he became acquainted with Matisse, Braque, Picasso, and Léger and where he and his artist-wife, Maria, became good friends with the Delaunays. Hofmann was deeply influenced by Robert Delaunay’s color theory and subsequently developed his own theories of color and form. In 1915 he established an art school in Munich, which attracted students from Europe and the United States. In 1931 he moved to the United States and established an art school in New York two years later, as well as a summer art class in Provincetown. The list of abstract artists who studied with Hofmann is long and impressive; even Greenberg credited Hofmann with having educated him visually. Seeing which way the winds were blowing in the New York art world after 1950, however, few of his former students ever mentioned the spiritual dimension of Hofmann’s instruction.

He taught that fine art “concerns man’s relation to the world as a spiritual being.” Although the “outward meaning” of a work may lose its initial meaning over time, “The life-giving zeal in a work of art is deeply embedded in its qualitative substance. The spirit in a work is synonymous with its quality. The _Real_ in art never dies because its nature is predominantly spiritual.”27 He held that depth of pictorial space is achieved by the formal tensions generated by opposing planes, generating a phenomenon of _push and pull_, and that color tensions, or relationships, produce color harmonics yielding intervals. The techniques he taught were always embedded in a larger context: “The whole world, as we experience it visually, comes to us through the mystic realm of color.”28 On the making of art, Hofmann taught, “The process of creation is based upon two metaphysical factors: (1) upon the power to experience through the power of empathy, and (2) upon the spiritual interpretation of the expression-medium as a result of such powers.” (He defined _empathy_ in visual experience as “the intuitive faculty to sense qualities of formal and spatial relations, or tensions, and to discover the plastic and psychological qualities of form and color.”)29
How does an artist know when a work is finished? “When feeling and perception have resulted in a spiritual synthesis.”

When Hofmann was nearly 70 years old, he retired from teaching and experienced a dazzling burst of creativity throughout the 1950s and early 1960s when he painted the large abstract works—with stacked, overlapping, and seemingly floating rectangles of saturated color—for which he is celebrated. He was one of the four artists chosen in 1960 to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale. (He had become an American citizen in 1941.) In 1963 the Museum of Modern Art presented a retrospective exhibition of Hofmann’s work, referring to him as the “dean of the abstract-expressionist movement.”

**Abstract Representation**

As early as 1935, Mark Tobey (1890–1976) painted vibratory, “all-over” abstract compositions that reflect the inclusiveness of the Baha’i faith, to which he converted at age 28 in New York, after having been raised a Congregationalist in Wisconsin. He wrote in 1934, “I’ve tried to decentralize and interpenetrate so that all parts of a painting are of related value . . . Mine are the Orient, the Occident, science, religion, cities, space, and writing a picture.” During his many travels, he studied Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese calligraphy. It was while he was teaching art at Dartington Hall in England that his “white writing” style emerged, using an interlacing of fine white lines: “White lines in movement symbolize light as a unifying idea which flows through the compartmented units of life bringing a dynamic to men’s minds, ever expanding their energies toward a larger relativity.” (His paintings exhibited in New York in the mid-1940s were closely studied by Jackson Pollock.)

In 1958 Tobey won the International Grand Prize at the Venice Biennale, only the second American to do so since Whistler. Three years later, he became the first American painter ever to exhibit at the Pavillon de Marsan in the Louvre. In a catalogue essay for the Museum of Modern Art, William Seitz stated of Tobey, “He has made line the symbol of spiritual illumination, human communication and migration, natural form and process, and movement between levels of consciousness.” The artist himself said of his oeuvre, “Always in movement—that is how the Greek philosophers saw the essential being of the soul—so I have tried to tear out just a few scraps of that beauty which makes up the miracles of the Cosmos and which is in the multi-factedness of life.”

Two of the second-generation Surrealist painters from prewar Paris—Wolfgang Paalen and Gordon Onslow Ford—reunited first in Mexico and then met up in San Francisco in the late 1940s. The year after Paalen played a large role, along with Duchamp, Man Ray, and Dalí, in designing the International Exhibition of Surrealism in Paris in 1938, he moved to Mexico City. There he organized a Surrealist exhibition, painted, and served as the founding editor of the journal *DYN* (derived from the Greek dynaton, the possible), in which he presented his ideas on totemism, gestalt theory, cave paintings, quantum physics, and the shortcomings of dialectical materialism and other dualistic habits of thought. His paintings were exhibited in New York while he lived in Mexico, and the five issues of *DYN* were influential among the emergent Abstract Expressionists. Onslow Ford had been living...
and painting in an Indian village in Mexico, but he and his wife moved to San Francisco in 1947. There he had many conversations with Alan Watts about Zen, with Haridas Chaudhuri about Hinduism, and with the Japanese Zen monk and calligrapher Hodo Tobe. The two European painters formed a working group called Dynaton with a younger American painter, Lee Mullican (1919–1998), who was from “Indian Territory” in Oklahoma. Inspired by his life-long communion with Native American art, crafts, and culture, Mullican developed a semi-abstract, fine-line style of luminous fields from which a sunburst radiates or mystical figures partially emerge. Each of the three artists—Paalen, Onslow Ford, and Mullican—had a retrospective exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Art in the late 1940s. They then began to meet to create joint explorations, but rather than the Surrealist games of group drawings, they co-created large pictures of the birth and evolution of the cosmos. Dynaton began to exhibit together and was given a group exhibition at SFMOMA in 1951. Soon after, the group dispersed.

In her earliest years, Agnes Martin (1912–2004) experienced the world as endless plains stretching across Saskatchewan. Born of Scots Presbyterian parents, she was closest to her maternal grandfather, under whose influence she read Pilgrim’s Progress and the Bible over and over. As a child in Vancouver, she also did a lot of drawing. As an artist in New York in the late 1950s, she was particularly affected by the works of Rothko, Pollock, and Reinhardt, with whom she developed a friendship and an interest in Asian spiritual teachings. She always considered herself an Abstract Expressionist, though her paintings were sometimes grouped with works by the younger, Minimalist painters. This seemed odd to her because the Minimalists prided themselves on banishing content from their work, a goal that held no interest for her. Nonetheless, in formal terms she influenced several of them.

Martin had moved to New York in 1958 and rented a 100-feet-long, live-in studio in the nineteenth-century shipping lofts at Coenties Slip on the East River. Her neighbors were the artists Ellsworth Kelly (b. 1923), Robert Indiana (b. 1928), Ann Wilson (b. 1931), James Rosenquist (b. 1933), Lenore Tawney (1907–2007), Jack Youngerman (b. 1926), joined later, when Martin moved around the corner, by Jasper Johns (b. 1930) and Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008). They were friendly but did not socialize together. Youngerman recalls “this envelope of private space, with no merging of intimacies”: “We were a group of solitudes . . . . We were all a bunch of Protestants from the hinterlands . . . .” As such, he adds, they felt a sense of sacredness in work.36 (A somewhat eccentric spiritual orientation was held by some, such as Rauschenberg’s having written to his gallerist, Betty Parsons, in the early 1950s that his all-white paintings are GOD and “are a natural response to the current pressures of the faithless and a promoter of intuitional optimism.”37) Kelly remembers Martin from those days as “a very spiritual person, of great sensitivity.”38 After a decade in New York, she moved to a place of far greater solitude, a remote parcel of land in New Mexico on which she built an adobe house and studio.

Martin worked in various genres for 20 years before coming into her mature style around 1960, which involved a canvas in a square format (usually 6 feet by 6 feet) primed with two layers of gesso onto which she applied hand-drawn pencil lines and then thin layers of paint, initially oil, then acrylic, which she preferred because it dried more quickly. When she first made a grid, Martin recalled, she “happened
to be thinking of the innocence of trees, and then a grid came into my mind, and I thought it represented innocence, and I still do, and so I painted it and then I was satisfied. I thought, This is my vision.”39 Innocence, “a quiet, nonobjective happiness,” and the diffuse state of perfection free from clanking thoughts and ideas was the way in which Martin conceived of the unbounded consciousness described in Taoist and Chan Buddhist texts. She stated in 1983, “My greatest spiritual inspiration came from the Chinese spiritual teachers, especially Lao Tzu . . . . My next strongest influence is the Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng . . . . I have also read and been inspired by the other . . . Buddhist masters, and Chuang Tzu . . . who was very wise and very amusing.”40 Martin believed, “The function of art work is . . . the renewal of memories of moments of perfection.”41

The ethereal quality of Martin's paintings results from very subtle luminous patterns formed as the off-white underpainting interacts visually with the delicate grid overlay, which is intentionally imperfect and slightly off-center. She painted her response to “inspiration” such that the viewer is united with “an experience of simple joy . . . the simple, direct going into a field of vision.”42 In 1966, she stated, “My paintings have neither objects nor space nor time nor anything—no forms. They are light, lightness, about merging, about formlessness, breaking down form.”43 In particular, Martin sought to “break down,” or reduce, the “authoritative” nature of the square by using only (numerous, very small) rectangles, which she saw as “more pleasant,” to compose her fine-line grids. She explained that the “formats are square, but the grids are never absolutely square; they are rectangles, a little bit off the square, making a sort of contradiction, a dissonance . . . . When I cover the square surface with rectangles, it lightens the weight of the square, destroys its power,” which she saw as “aggressive” and in need of becoming “a milder thing.”44 When Martin was awarded the Golden Lion Award at the 1997 Venice Biennale, she accepted it, which was an exception to her usual policy of declining awards and honorary degrees on the grounds that “I don’t really think I’m responsible.”45

Often referred to in the media as the most highly acclaimed artist in the world today—whom the art critic Peter Schjeldahl calls “a master, the best alive”—the painter Gerhard Richter (b. 1932) has created an oeuvre over five decades that includes both abstract and figurative works. He was born in Dresden and raised in a religious (Lutheran) family. They moved when he was three years old to a small town for his father’s job offer, thus escaping the fire-bombing of that city in February 1945. After the war he studied art in Dresden, where he was influenced by the works of Caspar David Friedrich, and then in Dusseldorf, where he was inspired by the iconoclastic Fluxus performances of Joseph Beuys and others.

Because Richter came of age in a Communist country and went on to paint “uncompromising” large-scale abstract works, it was generally assumed in the art world that, being a “serious person,” he would, of course, have no interest in religion. In recent years, however, Richter has sought to correct that impression in various interviews: “Art is the pure realization of religious feeling, capacity for faith, longing for God . . . . The ability to believe is our outstanding quality, and only art adequately translates it into reality.”46 He adds,

Art is not a substitute religion: it is a religion (in the true sense of the word: “binding back,” “binding” to the unknowable, transcending reason, transcendent being). But the
church is no longer adequate as a means of affording experience of the transcendental and of making religion real—and so art has been transformed from a means into the sole provider of religion, which means religion itself.47

Richter makes clear that he does not believe in a personified godhead—“I can’t believe in God as such; he’s either too big or too small for me and always incomprehensible.” He emphasizes, however, that he has “always believed” in the spiritual dimension of life: “Even as an atheist, I believe. It’s our culture, Christian history. That’s what formed me.” Moreover, his belief has influenced the creation of his paintings: “Art is the ideal medium for making contact with the transcendental, or at least for getting close to it.”48

The painter and theorist Joseph Nechvatal (b. 1951) believes that the purely abstract art of past decades is “a played out trope” and that “a scientific spirituality has never been sought after in art.”49 He regards the spiritual dimension of existence as “an embedded immanence of nature and materiality” in the “full vibratory spectrum,” which far exceeds the human limits of perception.50 Nechvatal, whose primary influence is Duchamp, is hardly alone in seeing the open-ended qualities of art as an intriguing means of engaging with this situation, but he feels that each historical period must bring its own experience to bear: for our time, he asserts, the exploration by art of the more-than-human reality must combine the biological with the technological. Nechvatal, Peter Campus (b. 1937), Hans Breder (b. 1935), and other digital artists are creating what the art critic Donald Kuspit calls “a new kind of Gesamtkunstwerk, a single work of art which incorporates all the other arts, neither exclusively visual nor verbal nor auditory, neither exclusively spatial nor temporal, but all of these at once,” adding that “the digital work of art has a peculiarly disembodied, ‘transcendental’ status.”51

Nechvatal proposes that a virtual (or viractual, as he prefers) spiritual art may achieve “an ultimate phantasmal integration by dissolving recorded information into its original vibrational and dynamic foundation.”52 To explore this possibility, he creates a complex process that includes drawing, digital photography, painting, written language, and computer code; these elements are mixed and undergo computational manipulations (which include computer viruses) and are then painted with acrylic paint on canvas by means of a robot (see Figure 13). The results are ethereal works of voluptuous patterns, modulated coloration, and a sense of depth derived from layers of near-transparency—a gestalt the art critic Carlo McCormick has called “a hyper-sensory sublime.”53 Paintings by Nechvatal, who lives in New York and Paris, have been collected by major museums in Europe and the United States. He also co-created a music and art performance piece, XS: The Opera Opus (1984–1986), and has written two books: Towards an Immersive Intelligence (2009) on the emergent sensibility he calls viractualism, and Immersion into Noise (2011) on his theory of immersive art-noise consciousness.

**Mixed Media**

The quixotic painter and mixed-media artist Yves Klein (1928–1962) was an influential bridge figure between the pre–World War I esoteric period of modern
art and the conceptual, performance, and Dematerialization of the Art Object movements in art that were to follow him. He was born in Nice to artist parents; his father was Dutch-Indonesian, his mother French. Fortunately, he had a doting maternal aunt who supported him. At age 17 Yves imagined signing his name “on the other side of the sky during a fantastic ‘realistico-imaginary’ journey,” thereby staking out communion with infinity as his life work. At 20, after he had begun painting, he encountered a book of esoterica from the pre–World War I period: The Rosicrucian Cosmo-Conception (1909) by Max Heindel, which presents Rosicrucian perspectives on mystical Christianity and was dedicated to Rudolf Steiner in the first edition. To explicate the book, Klein and a friend sought out an elderly astrologer and spiritual guide to Rosicrucian beliefs, Louis Cadeaux. Klein immersed himself in these studies of the immaterial realm and enrolled by mail in the Rosicrucian Fellowship of Oceanside, California, remaining a member for three years.

He next pursued an interest in judo, traveling to Japan in 1952. He studied at the Kodokan Institute for 15 months, achieving the fourth-degree black-belt level of proficiency. He then returned to France and wrote the book The Foundations of Judo. In September 1955, Klein opened a judo school in Paris in which he hung several of his monochromatic paintings. He wrote, “Judo has helped me to understand that pictorial space is, above all, the product of spiritual exercises. Judo is, in fact, the discovery by the human body of a spiritual space.”

For the first exhibition of his paintings, in 1955, Klein wrote, “I have come to believe that there is a living world of each color and I express these worlds. My paintings, moreover, represent an idea of absolute unity in perfect serenity, an abstract idea represented abstractly . . . .” The following year the critic Pierre Restany wrote in comments entitled “The Minute of Truth” to accompany the exhibition Yves, Propositions Monochromes, “He is finally obliged to grasp the universal without the help of the gesture or the written trace, and then I ask this question: Where, at what degree of sensible evidence, is situated the spiritual in art?” Five years later, in a catalogue essay for a group exhibition in Milan, Restany coined the term Nouveau Réalisme, which subsequently united a group of French and Italian artists, including Klein, Jean Tinguely, Christo, and Niki de Saint Phalle.

At the opening of the 1955 exhibition, Klein met Marcel Barillon de Murat, a Knight of the Order of the Archers of Saint Sebastian, who invited him to become a member. Klein was made a knight of that order in Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs Church in Paris and adopted as his motto “For color! Against the line and drawing!” He stated later, “I espoused the cause of pure color, which has been invaded by guile, occupied and oppressed in cowardly fashion by line and its manifestation: drawing in Art. I aimed to defend and deliver it, and lead it to triumph and final glory.”

In April 1958 Klein made his first pilgrimage to the Basilica of Saint Rita, Patron Saint of the Impossible, in Cascia, Umbria. That same month he presented works from what he called his “pneumatic period” in an exhibition in Paris entitled The Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility, The Void. With his monochromatic paintings—painted with International Klein Blue (a vibrant paint color he developed and patented)—he sought to allude to an immaterial “space of blue sensibility.” Later, he felt compelled to go further into the purity of the immaterial realm with entirely dematerialized works in empty picture
frames, an empty display case, an empty album of his collected works, and the sale of imaginary paintings for pieces of gold leaf, which he then ritually dropped into the Seine in performance. As Klein explained in a lecture he gave at the Sorbonne in 1959 entitled “Art’s Evolution Toward the Immaterial,”

The still very material color sensibility must be reduced to a more pneumatic immaterial sensibility . . . . My walls of fire, my walls of water, like the roofs of air, are materials for the construction of a new architecture. With these three classical elements, fire, air, and water, the city of tomorrow will be constructed, flexible at last, spiritual and immaterial.

In the apartment of a friend who was an occult philosopher, disciple of the spiritual teacher Gurdjieff, and a judo instructor, Klein conducted his painting-as-performance with live classical music and his direction of live (female) bodies-as-brushes, which he called his Anthropometry works. His iconic photomontage *Leap into the Void* was made in 1960. He wrote in *The Chelsea Hotel Manifesto* the following year, “Having rejected nothingness, I discovered the void.” This was the meaning, he explained, of his “immaterial pictorial zones.”

In January 1962 Klein married Rotraut Uecker, his studio assistant and a sculptor, at the Saint-Nicolas-des-Champs church in Paris. He designed every aspect of the highly ritualized ceremony, including Mass cards printed in pink, gold, and International Klein Blue. Five and a half months later, he died of a heart attack at age 34.

Remarkably, Klein is often described by art critics, curators, and historians as a neo-avant-garde artist who rejected “transcendental thought” in favor of the concrete. As his statements show, however, the transcendental was his consuming subject throughout his entire professional life.

When *John Cage* (1912–1992) was a high school student in Los Angeles, he sometimes visited the Theosophical Society in Hollywood and later attended lectures by the spiritual teacher J. Krishnamurti in Ojai. He was mentored by the visionary pianist Richard Buhlig before studying composition with Schoenberg. In Seattle he encountered Buddhism, which he studied after he moved to New York by attending courses on Zen taught by D. T. Suzuki at Columbia University. Cage’s favorite text, however, was from the Chan (Chinese Buddhist) tradition: Huang Po’s *Doctrine of Universal Mind*. As a young composer, Cage was bothered by the notion that the purpose of music was communication:

I found this answer from Gira Sarabhai, an Indian singer and tabla player: The purpose of music is to sober and quiet the mind, thus making it susceptible to divine influences. I also found in the writings of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy that the responsibility of the artist is to imitate nature in her manner of operation. I became less disturbed and went back to work.

All of these Eastern spiritual influences nurtured Cage’s works in two fields, which he saw as entwined: his musical compositions and his watercolors, drawings, and prints. His use of chance for compositional decisions in both areas was guided by his consulting the ancient Chinese book known as the *I Ching*. Only during the last 15
years of his life did Cage make visual art. This began in earnest when Kathan Brown, director of Crown Point Press in San Francisco, invited Cage to come to the studio and work with her staff of skilled printmakers to create some etchings. Between 1978 and his death in 1992, he returned for two weeks of printmaking nearly every year. As Brown recalls, Cage’s sense of chance in his art was not a matter of open-ended possibilities: “He set up parameters of action, then within those parameters cultivated a chance-directed plan. Except within tightly specified situations, he did not tolerate an ‘anything goes’ attitude.” In this, Cage was most likely following the model of the I Ching: unpredictability within structure.

Regarded by many critics and curators as one of the foremost American artists of our time and an influential “artist’s artist,” Richard Tuttle (b. 1941) has been praised for his work’s intimate qualities and a knowing fragility. His drawings have been likened to heavenly doodles, as ethereal as angels’ breath. In addition to works on paper, paintings, and artist books, he uses commonplace materials such as string, wire, rope, twigs, nails, scraps or strips of fiber, cardboard, bubblewrap, and plywood to create sculptures and wall assemblages—all of which seem to exist outside of categories as intriguing, indeterminate, and insistently additions to our sense of reality. Tuttle is regarded as having re-humanized the severe reductionism of Minimalism, beginning in the mid-1960s, but his goal was set beyond reacting to various currents within the art world; his art aspires, he explains, “to account for the invisible.”

The art critic Michael Kimmelman has observed that Tuttle shares with the Luminist painter John Frederick Kensett, a paternal forebear of Tuttle, a refined respect for plain material facts and a fascination with immaterial ones like light, which verges on the spiritual. Other art critics have noted that the mysterious quality of Tuttle’s work amounts to springboards into another realm, or that it suggests fragments of a larger whole, or that it seems like symbols from an alien alphabet whose Rosetta Stone has yet to be discovered. In fact, they are sensing the artist’s profound intention, which he rarely entrusts to language. In an interview for this book, Tuttle revealed—for the first time, he noted—that his entire life work has been informed by three metaphysical experiences he had in childhood and adolescence.

When Richard Tuttle was four years old, he was gripped several times by a visual perception of the world as infinitely perfect, down to the smallest grain imaginable and up to the largest possible accumulation of all those units. He recalls clearly,

That experience gave me tremendous happiness and a sense of truth and fulfillment and purpose. Unfortunately, the experience didn’t last, so one then is left with a kind of life remembering that and trying to live that—but also to possibly do something to have it back, or have such an experience again. One of the characteristics of my work is that every part of it should integrate in a way which feels to me like this perfect state that I experienced. Art for me is very much integrated with living through and living out that experience I had early in life.

The poignant engagement evident in his work—so distinct from the detached probing of time and space common in many other postminimalist works—is simply a result, Tuttle states, of his having felt guided and held throughout his lifework by a second childhood vision he had:
On my left I saw a burning white light, which most people would probably say is “the spiritual,” in which I knew that I could be absorbed or eliminated. On the right was the world, which had an initial attractiveness but in the end was boring. Ahead was a really insurmountable combination of unknown and threatening qualities. Coming back, I found something located between all of these and myself. I felt I had found what I was looking for, in that I could see my whole life ahead of me.

It is relevant that when he was four years old, Tuttle had watched in awe as his grandfather give a drawing lesson to Tuttle’s older brother. The young artist concluded that there is a wondrous intelligence in our hands—or at least in the hands of certain individuals.

Tuttle has stated that most of his work seems “as if willed elsewhere” and that his creative efforts are a matter of submitting to this larger intelligence, or will. Speaking somewhat obliquely about his exploratory engagement with the source of his work, Tuttle observes, “The possibility offered in what-cannot-be-conceptualized is a great discovery . . . The best is always what makes us look further than we want, so we become part of its completeness in life, rather than being made complete in our thought.” In this vein, Tuttle has observed that his art seems to be “the result of a kind of pre-language or deeper reality than normal.”

Ideally, art results, according to Tuttle, “in a product grounded in the concrete that promises all to the eye.” A corollary desire seems to be embedded in Tuttle’s work: that we remember with modesty the tentativeness and frailty of human explorations of the larger context, the sacred whole. Indeed, the combination of confident explorations—or investigations, as he calls them—that are poised so tangentially seem to warn us against the Western preference for attempting to nail down with certainty that which is continuously unfolding.

Tuttle is pleased when this characteristic is perceived in his work because he has been guided since young adulthood by a third vision. Returning to his parents’ home in Roselle, New Jersey, after graduating from Trinity College and pondering the next step, he was lying on his bed one day and suddenly seemed to be flying through the air, where he heard the word SERVE articulated with great intensity:

I landed on my feet and knew I was supposed to go to New York, find a studio, and start doing my artwork. I have the feeling that I know where that voice came from, I know what it means, and I know what to do—but I could never name it. I do know it’s a wonderful life when you follow your inspiration.

Honoring his vision of service, Tuttle has always tried to give more than he receives in professional interactions with institutions and people.

Tuttle makes a distinction between spirituality and institutional religion, but he does not feel alienated from the institutional Protestant tradition of his formative years. Congregationalist, Presbyterian, and Lutheran denominations are part of his family’s heritage. His father’s ancestors arrived in this country with the Puritans; his mother’s family was part of the Moravian Brethren community in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. In 2003 Tuttle gave a talk on appreciating the Calvinist notions of labor and of salvation as a personal responsibility, as well as Luther’s emphasis on an
individual’s direct relationship to God without intermediaries. In addition, Tuttle sometimes uses the metaphor of call-and-response from Protestant worship services when he speaks of working with his materials to create an artwork.

Another touchstone in Tuttle’s adult questing was the cosmological philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead because he recognized in Whitehead a kindred spirit who was drawn to investigate the vast realm of the invisible. Over the years Tuttle has felt artistic and spiritual kinship with the work of Paul Klee, Tony Smith, Joseph Beuys, Julio González, and others—above all, Agnes Martin, with whom he was a close friend until her death in 2004. One of Tuttle’s series of drawings was reviewed as follows: “The effect is somewhat as if Agnes Martin drawings had gone a little haywire, burst their bounds, started talking in tongues.”

Tuttle is revered by many young artists today almost as a shaman. He makes no such claim but asserts, “The job of the artist is to come up with ideas of how the mystic can be accommodated.” He feels that this work is impersonal, being beyond personal identity, and that it is required of him: “I’ll say on occasion that I care that the work gets done, but I don’t much care who does it. In fact, I’d prefer it if someone else did it. But until somebody comes along who will do that, then I have to.” The subject of his art, he emphasizes, is the perfection he witnessed during his primary metaphysical experience in childhood. One of the problems that block us from perceiving reality in its fullness, Tuttle feels, is Western culture’s adoption from Renaissance easel painting of the flat and unified picture plane as our frame of reference for all types of seeing and thinking. Hence he strives to create works that confound and disrupt such limiting habits (see Figure 14).

Regarding his method, he adds, “When I surrender my intellect, when I give up its special child, then I proceed to step into a kind of unknown situation which I find is creative, as opposed to the intellectual.” More cryptically, “If you create the space between appearance and reality, you can do anything.” The process of creating his artwork involves, not surprisingly, a spiritual practice: with regard to his wire pieces, for instance, which have been acclaimed by critics as “utterly fine” and unforgettable, Tuttle comments, “They require me to maintain a kind of purity of soul or I can’t make them.”

Tuttle refers to his entire varied oeuvre as “drawing” and asserts that it resides between calligraphy and architecture. Still, the vital presence in his work seems to call for an organic metaphor, as the art critic Holland Cotter has observed: Tuttle’s art “uses compression, measure and punctuation to create an impression of expansiveness... Mr. Tuttle is a kind of Elysian adept who builds cosmic structures from throwaway details the way birds make a nest.”

The Danish-Icelandic artist Ólafur Eliasson (b. 1974) is a sculptor, photographer, and creator of large-scale installations, working from his studio in Berlin. Because he created a series of Icelandic landscape photographs in 1999 that echo the composition of paintings by Friedrich and Dahl (but with a solitary lighthouse instead of a human figure), he has been called a “techno-romantic.” Eliasson agrees that he finds both Romanticism and mysticism to be “interesting,” yet he is wary of the socially constructed cultural “ism” around each of them. Regarding his installations, which often use light, water, ice, or mist to encourage new perceptual experiences of interconnectedness, Eliasson has stated, “I think that technology has
presented us with a fantastic toolbox to address more complex questions than we have addressed before. I use phenomenology almost like a purifying tool in relating to technology. I use it as a kind of neo-spiritual, autonomous idea. One of Eliasson's best known works is the *Weather Project* (2003), which filled the Turbine Hall in the Tate Modern for six months with a huge, sun-like disc radiating yellow light while a vast mirror on the ceiling reflected the visitors as tiny black shadows against a mass of orange light in the mist-filled space.

In 2007, Eliasson was awarded the first Joan Miró Prize. The art critic Christopher Miles observes, “It is always tricky to use the word spiritual in discussing art, but... Eliasson's work seems undeniably (though in a completely secular sense) spiritual in dimension... Eliasson still dares to aspire to awe.” For some (social) art critics, this is a problem. In 2009, when he was asked the common question by a critic—Your work is often, in the strict sense of the word, sublime. Can you be politically potent as an observer of society and social constructions, even if you are making aesthetically pleasing art?—Eliasson laughed and replied, “I think so, yes. The point is that beauty provides an entrance into the work... Art is not a step out of society; it, rather, marks a step into society.”

Cuban-born Ernesto Pujol (b. 1957) describes himself as a “social choreographer.” Through durational group performances by gracefully slow-moving participants, usually dressed in white, he seeks to reclaim public space from distractions in order to create space for silent reflection, which he sees as critical to democracy. Some of the performance pieces last 24 hours, during which white-clothed participants step into the stately flow of movement and then step away at half-hour intervals, like a slow-motion dance of entities arising and passing away in the cosmic field. Prior to earning an MFA, Pujol spent four years of silence in a monastery of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance (also known as Trappists). More recently he has become interested in the Buddhist practice of meditation known as mindfulness. Pujol’s works have addressed themes of memory, loss, consciousness, the environment, and war. His informing methodology is based on his concept of vulnerability. Distinct from fragility, he views vulnerability is a critical self-knowledge that provides the grounding for the generous listening that is necessary for compassionate creativity, by which he means generous inclusiveness during a project. Pujol states, “I understand the creative process as a completely permeable journey that begins when one is in a state of total receptivity.” Based in New York since 1984, he has written a book of reflections on the body, communities, and landscapes: *Sited Body, Public Visions: silence, stillness & walking as Performance Practice* (2012).

Combining an interest in Zen Buddhism with hip-hop, gospel music, jazz, minstrel tropes, and break dancing (on large abstract forms he paints), Sanford Biggers (b. 1970) creates mixed-media sculptural and performance pieces. In the latter, he is sometimes but often not a performer: “That also goes back to my Buddhist mindset: I am a facilitator, and I think that is inextricable from the work itself. So it is not that important to be focused on my persona.” Though he made a serious study of Zen in Japan for two years, Biggers, an American based in New York, finds that jazz is his primary mode of achieving an expansive state of mind beyond the limits of the self, a way of “going in between the notes... existing in the sonic space.”
In 2011 the exhibition *Oneness* by the Japanese artist **Mariko Mori** (b. 1967) was presented in Rio de Janeiro where it set daily attendance records that placed it among the seven most popular art exhibitions worldwide that year. The artist, who works in video and computer-generated photography, sculpture, and installations, studied art in London and lives in New York and Tokyo, where she was born. Much of her art has explored the interface of Buddhism, Shintoism, Japanese culture and modern Western culture, beginning with large-scale installation works in the 1990s that present a cheery fantasy universe appointed with techno-kitsch and cyber-girls embedded a matrix of pop culture. In her *Primal Visions* series of photographic works in 2007, Mori’s focus shifted from the technosphere to creating photographic works that incorporate sacred sites from around the world. Since then, she has created works that engage with the prehistoric Jomon culture (ca. 14,000–300 BCE) in Japan and the pre-Celtic megaliths of Britain. In 2013 Mori presented new work in two exhibitions simultaneously: *Infinite Renew*, a series of experiential installations that include large-scale spiral sculptures alluding to energy flows, and *Rebirth*, works of abstract images of technospirituality that engage with the theme of birth and death.

**Abstract Sculpture**

When the spiritual teacher J. Krishnamurti came to New York in 1928 to give a talk at Town Hall, **Louise Nevelson** (1898–1988), a daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants, bought an aisle-seat ticket and drank in his advice that individuals should strive to free themselves from self-imposed limitations in order to claim their “total being.” The following year she began studies at the Art Students League and then traveled to Munich to study at Hans Hofmann’s art school. In 1932 she began a practice of eurythmy, the system of expressive movement developed by Rudolf Steiner. She continued working with her eurythmy teacher, Ellen Kearns, for 20 years. Although Nevelson explored several other spiritual orientations in the following decades—including Christian Science, New Thought, the teachings of Meher Baba, the teachings of Gurjieff, and Zen Buddhism—she credited eurythmy with enabling her to manifest and focus the intense energy with which she created new sculptural forms.

Nevelson initially worked in clay but turned, partially for financial reasons, to creating sculptures from discarded pieces of wood she plucked from curbside trash on the streets of Manhattan and collected in a wheelbarrow in the middle of the night, just ahead of the garbage trucks. Descended from a long line of woodworkers, she felt that working with wood enabled her to engage with the Fourth Dimension, which she considered “the Great Beyond,” “a transcendent spiritual place of refuge.” She felt that when you work with pieces of wood rescued from the trash, “you enhance them, you tap them and you hammer them, and you know that you have given them an ultimate life, a spiritual life that surpasses the life they were created for.” In the 1950s, Nevelson created a series of black-painted wooden landscapes. These led to her being included in the *Sixteen Americans* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1959, which featured several prominent young male painters. She was 60 years old and decided to create one of the first large-scale installations: an abstract work in white-painted wood, *Dawn’s Wedding Feast*. It filled a large corner of an exhibition
hall with a wall installation and several freestanding pieces that alluded to a chapel, a bride and groom, attendants, and a wedding cake. This work propelled Nevelson into the public eye. It was, she felt, her own entry into a new dawn.

In the 25 years that followed, her abstract wall installation pieces, painted black or white or gold, appeared in numerous international exhibitions; she created outdoor sculptures as well. On the occasion of a retrospective exhibition in 2004, the art critic Kenneth Baker observed, “Nevelson’s sculpture looks good today because it can support multiple readings, or projections of meaning, not because it successfully resists them.”

Inspired by both the contemplative ambiance of Zen monastery gardens and the ideals of shaping public space that his friend Buckminster Fuller professed, Isamu Noguchi (1904–1988) created gardens in Paris, Jerusalem, and New York as well as outdoor sculptures and environments in 17 other American cities. In addition, he designed a number of children’s playgrounds, perhaps as a healing gesture toward his own unhappy childhood; most were never built, however, leaving him thwarted once again. He was born in Los Angeles of an Irish-American writer and a Japanese poet, who deserted them. Apparently unaware of the conservative nature of Japanese society in 1906, his mother moved with her two-year-old boy to Japan in order to reunite with the father. This did not go well. The artist then suffered through years of torment as a bastard *gaijin* (foreigner) in Japanese schools and then at a Jesuit school. When he was 14, his mother sent him to a progressive Catholic boarding school in Indiana she had heard about. After high school, Noguchi went to New York, ostensibly to study medicine at Columbia University, but he also took sculpting lessons at an art school and soon made art his life’s work.

In 1927 Noguchi was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship that allowed him to travel to Paris, where he worked for four months as an assistant in Brancusi’s studio, polishing bronzes and carving a few bases. Although they had no common language between them, the two got on well. Brancusi was a kind and encouraging mentor who instilled a spiritual respect for the primal nature of stone and wood. Throughout his life, Noguchi spoke often of the almost sacred atmosphere of Brancusi’s studio. He was also inspired by the Surrealists and by Klee. Through his many travels, he developed an appreciation for the cultures of India, Indonesia, and China. Back in New York, Noguchi supported himself doing sculpted portraits, stage sets, and some design work while exhibiting his abstract works in galleries. In 1949 he stated in a magazine: “When an artist seeks a reality beyond actuality, how many depths and how many truths separate the aesthetic and the religious emotions?”

Noguchi had returned to Japan in the early 1930s for a (disappointing) reunion with his father, but he enjoyed a side trip to Kyoto, where he saw Zen gardens and pre-Buddhist haniwa (mortuary figures) and where he made numerous ceramic works. He returned there in 1950 to research a book on “the meaning of form in relation to man and space” by making a study tour, in the company of a Japanese painter, of the celebrated Zen gardens and ancient temples of Nara and Kyoto, absorbing the spiritual context of the aesthetic display. After 1952, Noguchi divided his time between New York and Japan, where he and his work often received a cool reception because the postwar Japanese artists were interested only in becoming modern and dismissed his enthrallment with the ancient strengths of traditional Japanese arts. His
unusual sculpture *Stone of Spiritual Understanding* (1962) may be a reference to these difficulties: it features an artificial ritual rock run through horizontally by a traditional Japanese beam of wood, from which it hangs almost crucified. Still, Noguchi achieved international acclaim for works in many areas and represented the United States at the Venice Biennale in 1986. When he was in his seventies, he spoke of the artist as being “just a conduit.”

The cover of *Time* magazine on October 13, 1967, featured Tony Smith (1912–1980) standing before a plywood and painted mock-up of his massive abstract sculpture *Smoke* (1967), which filled the atrium of the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC. The artist had begun creating sculptures only seven years earlier, but he had been intrigued by form since childhood. Smith preferred to call his three-dimensional works “presences” rather than sculptures: “I was just thinking about form,” he would say to interviewers, explaining, “They just exist. They are just present.” His initial engagement with form occurred during a family trip to the Mesa Verde cliff works when he was a boy, after which he created many small models of Pueblo settlements. He later expressed appreciation for “a kind of intuition toward form” that was integral to all the arts and crafts of Pueblo culture.

Born and raised in South Orange, New Jersey, Smith enjoyed his experience at a Jesuit high school in Manhattan and then two years at Georgetown University. He then left college and went home to open a book shop and took art classes at the Art Students League, where he became friends with Jackson Pollock, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still. He studied architectural design for two years at the New Bauhaus school in Chicago with Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, after which he worked with Frank Lloyd Wright, becoming one of his construction site managers. He was interested in the geometric forms of the Bauhaus, having long been fascinated with the Golden Section. Yet he was also interested in the organic architecture practiced by Wright because he had been influenced in his youth by D’Arcy Thompson’s book *On Growth and Form*.

Back in New York, Smith created architectural designs and paintings that explored both biomorphic and geometric form as a search for essence. Smith always considered himself more an Abstract Expressionist than a Minimalist because he shared with several of them the desire to perceive an underlying universal structure, or dynamic principle. One of them recalled, “Smith was a walking encyclopedia of Jung, shamanism, magic in general, ritual, and the unconscious.” In 1943 Smith wrote an unpublished manuscript, *The Pattern of Organic Life in America*, in which he stated that “all experience—nature, men, their total experience—is the autobiograpy of God” and in which he lamented our “lack of any integrating and unifying element, any myth, any bible by which we can relate and interpret the complexity of our vast experience.” This void, he thought, might be filled by abstraction. Also in the 1940s, Smith wrote as part of a drawing of a diagram with text: “I got the principle from God. I got the form from Christ. I got the function from the Spirit.” Once Smith turned to sculpture, he created celebrated works that seem to transform themselves when viewed from various angles, including *Moondog* (1964), *Die* (1962), and *Light Up* (1971).

Anthony Caro (1924–2013) received some religious education in Judaism as a child growing up near London, but as he recalled to a journalist late in life, it “didn’t
mean that much to me. It just seemed to say ‘praise God’ and I didn’t know quite what that meant.” During his school years, he found that he liked the Christian hymns and prayers, which “seemed more personal.” After earning a degree in engineering at the University of Cambridge and serving in the Navy, Caro earned a degree in art from the Royal Academy Schools. He then worked as an assistant in the studio of Henry Moore (1898–1986), whom Caro found to be a fatherly and instructive mentor. During that period Caro created figurative sculptures that were featured in several exhibitions. In 1959 Clement Greenberg visited his studio in London, and Caro then made a trip to New York, where he met several of the younger Abstract Expressionist painters plus the abstract sculptor David Smith (1906–1965). Caro was thoroughly converted to abstraction and fascinated with Smith’s use of industrial materials. Caro exhibited his first abstract sculpture the following year in London.

In the ensuing decades Caro’s work moved through several inventive phases and was featured in numerous international exhibitions, as he came to be regarded as the finest British sculptor of his generation (though, inexplicably, the Royal Academy elected him a member only in 2004). He often used large pieces of rusted steel in his sculptures, which in situ seem almost organic. In 1999 he surprised many people by accepting a commission to restore and reinvigorate a part of a thirteenth-century Catholic church in Normandy that had been destroyed in World War II. Working over nine years, Caro created what he called the Chapel of Light (2008) by installing several new sculptures and architectural features and creating a baptismal font. The following year, Caro made an abstracted figurative sculpture entitled Goddess (2009). The art critic Michael Glover went so far as to declare that Caro was exhibiting “a wonderful late flowering of creativity and spirituality” (though Caro’s dealer did not encourage such a rash statement). On this subject, the artist remarked simply, “Is art so different from religion? It feeds the spirit, and through it you also try to find this inner part of yourself.”

Minimalist sculpture is generally understood as the emptying out of meaning from three-dimensional form that followed Abstract Expressionism, yet even here we find traces of spiritual influence. Richard Serra (b. 1939) was inspired by Zen gardens on a trip to Japan, and Walter De Maria (1935–2013) was inspired by the hexagrams of the I Ching and by mandalic cosmograms. Carl Andre (b. 1935) was drawn to the work of artists who had been inspired by Asian spiritual traditions—Brancusi, Reinhardt, and Martin. Serra has an interest in what he calls a Taoist sense of calm, which he understands to be “fierce calm, the calm of a fierce kind of attention, a fierce equilibrium.” This sort of fierce bearing down of the mind is not the sort of diffused-yet-focused state taught in Taoist or Buddhist mediation, but as we have seen many times, the influence of Asian thought and practice on modern and contemporary art is often widely interpretative, rather than involving a traditional meditation practice.

During his Quaker boyhood in Pasadena, the installation artist James Turrell (b. 1943) was strongly influenced by his grandmother’s strict religious observances and by her telling him that when they went to a Quaker meeting he should “Go inside and greet the light.” Even before that, as a very young child, he exhibited a fascination with light. In college he earned a degree in perceptual psychology and also took art
courses; he later earned an MA in art. While studying art, Terrell found that, on seeing a painting in an art museum, he missed the luminous quality and scale he had enjoyed when the painting had been projected onto a screen in class. He admires “the emotional freedom of Rothko” and “the strict approach to the sublime that Ad Reinhardt’s work has” and, for his own work, likes “somewhere between those two”—plus “Barnett Newman because, like Monet, he would actually confront you by filling your field of vision with huge paintings.”

When Turrell began “confronting” viewers with large installation works, the Dematerialization of the Art Object movement was influential, which fit well with his interests, such as creating a “ganzfield” effect, the perception of a uniform field of light with no point of focus or depth. Since the late 1960s, he has created several types of light-and-space installation works: skyspaces (an enclosed room, or space, open to the sky through an aperture in the roof); light tunnels and other light projections (creating shapes that seem to have mass and weight but are created solely with light); and his grandest project, Roden Crater, near Flagstaff, Arizona, in which he is constructing an exquisitely formed open-air observatory. About 100 of his skyspaces have been built around the world, and numerous of his works—described as “sublime spatial illusions” by the critic Peter Schjeldahl—have been featured in art museums here and abroad. Turrell was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship in 1984, the first year that a visual artist was selected.

Works by Turrell tend to evoke critical responses not often seen. Reviewing a Turrell installation in a gallery in New York in 2013, for instance, the critic Ken Johnson asserted, “This confounding experience is not only perceptually thrilling; it is also mystically resonant: you may feel you’re looking into the divine light into which you will dissolve after you die.” Of his piece Ronin (1968) reconstructed as part of the exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in 2013, the critic Roberta Smith wrote, “It forms an astoundingly mysterious white light that seems alternately solid or infinite.”

Terrell has referred to himself as “an un-lapsed Quaker” since 2000, when he was invited to design a Quaker Meeting House in Houston. Not one to overstate the case for the spiritual dimension, he has commented, “If you think of the world as a spiritual experience, this doesn’t bother me. Artists have long been doing this. It is in their job description.” However, he feels that the most art can do is gesture toward the spiritual. He adds, “I’m interested in the light within, in the sense that there’s a vision that is fully formed when our eyes are closed.” Regarding his aim “to bring celestial objects like the sun and moon into the spaces that we inhabit,” there is a decidedly modern and humanist cast to this goal: he desires to heighten our sense of interrelatedness with the cosmos by bringing it down to the scale of human-made rooms, rather than our stretching our consciousness in the larger direction, as do most indigenous traditions, for instance. As the artist explains, “I want this universe that we are in to become part of our personal space, part of our lived-in territory. I’m looking for a grandeur that does not belittle you.”

Often described in the media as the most successful sculptor in Britain today, Anish Kapoor (b. 1954) has created numerous sculptures for international exhibitions as well as public spaces, including the 66-feet-long Cloud Gate of polished stainless steel, which he made in 2004 for the Millennium Park in Chicago. Kapoor
was born in Mumbai. His father was Indian, and his mother’s family was part of the Baghdadi Jewish community who had relocated there in 1950. Although he initially studied engineering in India, Kapoor decided while living for a while on a kibbutz in Israel that he would become an artist. He then moved to London for art studies and has remained in that city. After seven years he returned to India temporarily and became interested in Hindu mythology and rituals, particularly the use of red powder, which he used in several early works.

He exhibited throughout the 1980s and was awarded the Turner Prize in 1991. He has also represented Britain in the Venice Biennale and was elected to the Royal Academy. In 2002 he created a massive, dark red abstract sculpture, Marsyas, for the turbine hall of the Tate Modern. In 2011 Kapoor created Leviathan, a gargantuan inflatable structure of four connected orbs, for the Grand Palais in Paris. Visitors entered, sat, and lay in the soaring central chamber, which was bathed in red light and was intended to have a “cathedral-like quality.”

The critic Roberta Smith has observed that Kapoor’s sculpture is “in many ways one long ode to the modernist monochrome and its emphasis on purity and perception”: “It carves, colors and complicates space in different ways, adding interactive aspects and pushing that purity back and forth between votive and technological, East and West.” Among the influences in Kapoor’s “musée imaginaire that I carry around with me” are the Duchamp of the glass paintings and alchemy, Barnett Newman, Jackson Pollock, and Joseph Beuys.

Kapoor has practiced Zen Buddhist mediation at times and is attentive to that which arises unexpectedly into consciousness: “Just as you can’t set out to make something beautiful, you can’t set out to make something spiritual. What you can do is recognize that it may be there. It normally has something to do with not having too much to say.” In this vein, Kapoor has also stated, “To see Barnett Newman in terms of Jewish mysticism for a moment is great—for a moment; then you’ve got to let it go and let the work do what the work does.” Kapoor feels that when we are confronted with something unusual or uncertain our body “demands a kind of adjustment; it demands certainty.” Time then seems to slow as we readjust to the space. Consequently, “The mystical truth of art is time.”

Allusively Spiritual Architecture

In the first three decades following World War II, the International Style of modern architecture was dominant. It had long since left behind the spiritual concerns initially expressed by Le Corbusier’s Purism for a focus on expanses of glass and steel arranged in geometric grids, which sometimes achieved elegance. Yet the field of postwar architecture was not monolithic, even in what was widely perceived as a lock-step era. In Modern Movements in Architecture (1985), for instance, the architectural historian Charles Jencks suggests that at least six distinct movements were operational. In the category he calls Metaphysical, the pioneering figure after the war was clearly Louis Kahn. Although many accomplished architects in recent decades have made a few comments, if pressed, about a spiritual dimension to their work, Kahn wrote and spoke about his vision of a deeply grounded but deftly allusive spiritual engagement through the creation of spaces.
Louis Kahn (1901–1974) arrived in the United States at age four with his Russian Jewish family, who spoke no English, had little money, and remained in poverty, yet 19 years later he graduated from an Ivy League university with a degree in architecture. Writing about Kahn in 1962, the architectural historian Vincent Scully asserted that his achievements of the previous decade had placed Kahn “unquestionably first in professional importance among living American architects.” His status only increased in his remaining 12 years as he continued to create highly influential works, but he was also a theorist and a sage. An exhibition of his works at the Museum of Modern Art in 2000, Kahn’s Modern Monuments, was described in the New York Times as celebrating “the coexistence of spiritual and democratic ideals.”

Scully observed that Kahn had struggled for more than 20 years because a generation raised on the International Style “could hardly hope to perceive Kahn’s quality at once” but that, beginning in the early 1950s after a stay in Rome, Kahn began to “create the forms to which he is instinctively drawn.” Once he “came into his inheritance”—from his Beaux-Arts training in ordered spaces formed by “masonry architecture of palpable mass and weight”—Kahn designed many widely admired buildings, including the Yale University Art Gallery; the Kimball Art Museum in Fort Worth; the Salk Institute in La Jolla, California; and Jatiyo Sangsad Bhaban (National Parliament House) in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Scully was not aware that Kahn also drew upon memories of the brick factory buildings with sliced-off corners and large square windows in his childhood neighborhood in Philadelphia. In addition, he frequently used the geometries that were developed by his colleague Anne Tyng for his design of the Trenton Bath House in 1954. Kahn worked closely with project engineers, achieving numerous technological innovations in his structures. Their primary quality, however, is presence, as noted by numerous viewers and occupants.

Kahn’s approach to architecture was poetic and spiritual. In this, he felt a strong sense of kinship with Le Corbusier, though not with all his design decisions. He also admired Frank Lloyd Wright for remaking architecture, though not with results Kahn could embrace. Kahn believed that art is “the only language of the soul” and that the designs of an architect should convey the beauty of spaces, understood as an offering to the spirit of architecture. He wrote,

Inspiration is the feeling of beginning at the threshold where Silence and Light meet. Silence, the unmeasurable, desire to be, desire to express, the source of new need, meets Light, the measurable, giver of all presence, by will, by law, the measure of things already made, at the threshold which is inspiration, the sanctuary of art, the Treasury of Shadow.

He felt a closer association to architecture of the past that had spiritual influences than he did to contemporary modern architecture and often asked himself, regarding his designs, “How am I doing, Gothic architecture? How am I doing, Greek architecture?”

The role of an architect, Kahn felt, is to discern the Form, the “existence-will” (the essential quality of an entity prior to its physical manifestation), of a building and bring it into the circumstantial world. He held that Form is impersonal and belongs to the building but that Design belongs to the architect. Rather than beginning with
a program of activities from the client, Kahn asked the question “What does this building want to be?” He advised students of architecture, “The spaces that you make must be the seat of a certain offering of a person to the next person. It is not an operational thing.” In short, he rejected entirely the modern, instrumental premise that what modern people need is simply efficient spaces in which to efficiently execute their tasks. Kahn believed, “It is disgraceful not to supply needs . . . but desire is infinitely more important than need.”

The architectural critic Paul Goldberger observed in 2001, “Only a few buildings in our time can be called sublime. Many of them—the Salk Institute, the Kimbell, Dhaka—are Kahn’s.”

This chapter’s survey of art in communion with allusive spirituality began with the juxtaposition of several forthright statements by the leading Abstract Expressionist painters about the spiritual engagement in their work and the stiff-arming of the entire subject by their champion, Clement Greenberg. He was sore perplexed about this incongruity and even went so far as to spell out in Partisan Review that “religion or mysticism” constitute “illegitimate content” for the art of “our period style.” That conviction seems to have been adopted by the majority of art world professionals in his sphere, but the artists featured here, from the 1940s to the present day, felt otherwise and ignored the boundaries entirely. Their open-ended works suggest to the viewer aesthetic modes, without language or familiar forms, of being present to subtle dimensions of existence.
Body and nature—denigrated as lowly matter in idealist philosophies and deplored in some religions as the source of our temptation and toil—are cherished in others as our existential link with our larger context, the grand unfolding of the cosmos in which we are embodied and embedded. Our lineage stretches back to the birth of the universe and is carried in our cells. Our life, our thoughts, our every breath are a dance of relationship with all our kin—animal, vegetable, mineral. The endless field of interrelationships that permeate Earth and cosmos provides the grounding of all that we are, all that we know. Systems of knowledge that are severed from this matrix produce trivial and even dangerous beliefs. Religious orientations that recognize all manifestations of nature, including the human, as expressions of the sacred whole—and, thus, as sites of, or participants in, transcendent presence—proclaim a spirituality of immanence. In this orientation, the path to a perception of transcendence, whether involving a personified godhead or not, is through deep communion with the vast sacral field of interrelatedness we call nature, not by demeaning, demonizing, or ignoring it in a quest to reach “higher” realms.

Spirituality of immanence is the most ancient response to the ineffable and has attracted a large number of prominent contemporary artists. Throughout time and across cultures, numerous people who are not attracted to any religious system have experienced a spiritual dimension of nature when they were able to quiet their mind, immerse themselves in nature’s presence, and open themselves to communion with this larger context. Wonder, awe, and gratitude follow—which are most probably the primal origins of religion in all its diversity.

Artists who perceive spiritual presence as inherent in nature may also be drawn to religious or philosophical traditions that evolved around a core awareness of immanence. These include traditional contemporary indigenous cultures; prehistorical and historical indigenous cultures (including, for instance, pre-Celtic and Celtic); several Asian traditions; Romantic philosophy; and some branches of the Abrahamic religions (mystical Orthodoxy, mystical Judaism, and many aspects of Catholicism, such as Thomistic philosophy and nature-oriented medieval mystics and saints). All
three of the Abrahamic religions agree that the multiplicity of forms in nature is an expression of the ultimate creativity of God.

We have already seen that several prominent artists associated with various movements had, as their own touchstone, communion with the spiritual presence they perceived in nature. Arp, Klee, Miró, and many others made statements to this effect. Here we will consider various expressions of the spirituality of immanence that informed works by post–World War II artists. In general, these artists regard human existence as organically continuous and inherently integrated with the ultimate creativity of our dynamic universe. With a few exceptions, postwar artists did not organize themselves into groups.

### Nature as a Sacral Presence

The sixth son of Methodist parents, Morris Graves (1910–2001) was a self-taught artist who temporarily dropped out of high school in Oregon to sail on merchant ships with his brother. When they arrived in Japan, his response was similar to Van Gogh’s appreciation of the culture and its aesthetic: “There I at once had the feeling that this was the right way to do everything. It was the acceptance of nature, not the resistance to it.”1 In his early twenties, Graves studied Zen Buddhism and began to paint in oils. In 1942, his work was included in the Americas 1942 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art and was featured in an article in Life Magazine in 1954 on “The Mystic Painters of the Northwest,” which also included Mark Tobey. Graves’ mid-career work was strongly influenced by his interests in East Asian philosophy and spirituality, as well as Japanese and Chinese aesthetics, such as ink drawings on thin paper. He often depicted birds, trees, and waves with a delicate line and an ethereal dimension to his subjects. In his later years, Graves’ paintings were somewhat abstract. He also returned to sculpture, which he had practiced while living in Ireland for ten years.

The oeuvre of the most influential artist in postwar West Germany, Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), is thoroughly embedded in the context of German concerns during that period. There was great reluctance to talk about the Nazi era, but a commonly offered explanation of the rise of the Nazis was that a nefarious group had been able to seize political control of Germany by using dangerously problematic elements in German Romanticism. The distinction between the Romantics’ deep communion with nature and the Nazi claims that only German trees, German soil, and German people were sacred was apparently elusive. Particularly in left circles, it was held that the causes of the rise of Nazism were that the nature-based spirituality of German Romanticism is pro-fascist (and, therefore, still dangerous); that fascism is the natural progression of capitalism; and that prewar Germans were overly obedient to authority (consequently, postwar German children were taught not to form lines). Anti-Semitism was rarely cited as a significant factor. After the war, not only was Romanticism tainted with Nazi associations and considered best not mentioned but it was widely felt that numerous German words could no longer be used because the Nazis had used them in such a charged, effective way. Especially among the educated classes, there was a wrenching awareness that the Third Reich’s cooptation of German literary and artistic tradition, as well as the language itself, constituted a
profound rupture in the historical continuity of German culture. Aesthetic and spiritual truth and beauty, the very foundations of the German soul, as they saw it, were now on the far side of a chasm, painfully out of reach.

Joseph Beuys rejected the postwar condemnation of German Romanticism. Through his art he sought to recover for the German people their culture’s traditionally deep connection with nature, creating as his process a shamanic engagement with elemental materials that could restore wholeness. Beginning in 1947, he made lyrical, Romantic watercolor paintings of such subjects as a stag, an elk, a queen bee, several female forms, and a shaman’s house. He studied art from 1947 through 1954 and became a cofounder of the Fluxus group in 1961, contributing to several performance pieces. After his break from Fluxus, Beuys created numerous sculptural installations, which were widely exhibited, including a retrospective exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in 1979. Among the German Romantics, he was drawn especially to the philosopher Schiller and to the poet Novallis. Among contemporary artists, he particularly admired Yves Klein, John Cage, and, more obliquely, Duchamp.

As part of his shamanic mission, Beuys invented fictional aspects of his biography, most notably his story of having been a pilot in the Luftwaffe who was shot down near the Caucasus and rescued from the snow by nomadic Tatars who smeared fat over his body and wrapped him in felt to keep him warm while he recovered. Beuys used felt, fat, and other primal elements in several sculptural works and in his own clothing, seemingly as a result of his experiences—but the events he cited repeatedly had never happened. (He was a radio operator and aerial gunner whose plane was shot down, but he was quickly rescued by German forces and taken to a field hospital.) When confronted in his later years about these deceptions, Beuys would nonchalantly observe that his invented Romantic adventure with a people close to nature was needed by the German people in the post-Nazi period.

Although raised Catholic, his primary spiritual orientation as an adult was Anthroposophy, especially Rudolf Steiner’s teachings about an ideal social structure, known as Social Threefolding. This theoretical work grew from the general belief, common among the avant-garde artists who attended Steiner’s talks in the pre–World War I years, that a thorough transformation of society could result from advances in occult and other spiritually grounded means of perception and cognition. Beuys’ *Aktionen* (Actions) were performance pieces that drew from Steiner’s teachings on eurythmy, an expressive practice of measured gestures and movement. Similarly, his blackboard talks were inspired by Steiner’s. Drawing from Anthroposophy’s Social Threefolding, Beuys developed a theory of Social Sculpture, which was an enlarged understanding of art that could bring about a redesign of society. In that sense, Beuys saw language and thinking as sculptural processes: “This transcendent character of information, in an invisible world, gives us at the same time the proof and a clear knowledge that we are not only biological beings, material beings, but first spiritual beings... only partly existing on this planet.” In the late 1970s, Beuys and some of his students founded the Organization for Direct Democracy, which framed ecological principles that contributed to the formation of the German Green Party as they sought to create a new kind of politics.
Predictably, Beuys was attacked by German-left art critics who found his championing of spiritual Romanticism to be proto-fascist. Far more reasonably, he was also criticized by an international range of art critics for choosing as his subject the healing of the German soul while expressing no interest in the other looming task for postwar Germans: coming to grips morally with the Holocaust and the devastation visited on the rest of Europe when Germany decided to expand its *Lebensraum*. Except for a design he submitted in a competition in 1958 for a memorial at Auschwitz-Birkenau, the subject of the Holocaust did not seem to engage Beuys. In fact, when he was told in New York in 1983 that many American viewers of his installation works assumed that they allude to collective culpability, Beuys clarified that his works have nothing to do with guilt: “The enemy suffers, too.”

In northern Italy from 1967 to 1972, the artists of the Arte Povera movement created a new art of modest, rustic, and often organic materials that stood as poetic metaphors for the primordial life-force and for spiritual energies that have the potential to transform rigid structures of the status quo. This group of artists—including Pier Paolo Calzolari (b. 1943), Luciano Fabro (1936–2007), Jannis Kounellis (b. 1936), Mario Merz (1925–2003), Marisa Merz (b. 1926), and Michelangelo Pistoletto (b. 1933)—often expressed a fascination with deep time, energy, alchemy, and the deep strata of Italian identity as sources of sacral power to create a new future. In 2013 Marisa Merz was awarded the Golden Lion Award for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale.

The German artist Wolfgang Laib (b. 1950) is best known for luminous sculptural installations made of bee pollen, which he creates by sifting the pollen directly onto the floors or low platforms in art museums around the world, forming glowing squares or rectangles. His largest work to date (18 foot by 21 foot) was made for the floor of the atrium in the Museum of Modern Art in early 2013. The installation, *Pollen from Hazelnut*, was described by the art critic Ken Johnson as “a fuzzy-edged rectangle of bright, mustard-hued stuff on a low, concrete-gray platform. The color is so radiant that you might think for a second that it is a projection of pure yellow light from above.” Laib emphasizes that the pollen itself is the art, which he simply displays for people to view, to enter into its ritual presence, and to arrive in a new dimension of sensuous-spiritual experience. All of the pollen for his works—hazelnut, pine, dandelion, and other—comes solely from the area around his home in the Swabian area of southwest Germany, where he gathers it every spring and early summer and stores it in glass jars. Besides the pollen, which seems to glow from within, he uses such natural materials as beeswax, milk, rice, marble, granite, and Burmese thitsi lacquer. Since 1988 he has also created beeswax structures and chambers (small rooms lined with tiles coated with golden beeswax).

Laib was raised Protestant but has stated that he experienced its teachings primarily as a system of rules for the rigorous control of human desires and emotions, compounded by a denial of beauty and a denigration of the senses. During his adolescence, he traveled with his parents to several Middle Eastern and Asian countries, including an annual trip to a village in south India where his father, a physician, offered his services and support. Gradually, the Laib family removed the furniture from their modern home in the Swabian countryside, traded their beds for futons, and ate vegetarian meals while seated on a carpet on the floor. Laib attended medical
school at the University of Tübingen (while also studying Buddhism and Jainism on his own) and graduated in 1974, but he immediately left medicine behind to work exclusively as an artist. He felt that modern medicine is focused on too narrow a sense of the body—denying the spiritual dimension of life—and that it seeks only restrictive, never expansive, solutions.

Laib incorporates into his art and the making of it several characteristics he has long admired in the village life of south India, where he keeps a studio: the simplicity and economy of daily life with its pervasive spirituality, the measured gestures, the ritual patterns of activity, the reverence for sensuality and beauty, and the close bond with nature. He is not a member of any religion or sect and declines labels for his quiet ritual practice of gathering pollen in nature each spring, which he experiences as being “even beyond spiritual practice.”

From the beginning, Laib has maintained a belief in the transformative power of art, as indicated by such titles as You Will Go Somewhere Else (1995). He was inspired early on by the works of Brancusi and then by Beuys. His own works seem to arise out of participatory consciousness and to honor the immanent spiritual presence in natural materials:

The pollen, the milk, the beeswax—they have a beauty that is incredible, that is beyond imagination. It's something you cannot believe is a reality—and it is the most real. I could not create it myself, but I can participate in it. Trying to create it yourself is only a tragedy; participating in it is a big opportunity.

More than any other prominent contemporary artist, Andy Goldsworthy (b. 1956) has created an oeuvre of embodied participatory consciousness. His desire to know nature deeply and his talent for aesthetic response have been graced, gradually over the years, by the revelation of nature's ways. The artist felt drawn to apprentice himself to nature even while he was still in art school in Lancashire, creating his sculptural projects with rocks at nearby Morecambe Bay. In the decades that followed, he has patiently become apprised of unexpected qualities and capabilities contained within the natural materials from which he constructs site-specific outdoor sculptures. Who knew that rocks could balance vertically on their pointed tips, or that ropes of ice could spiral in the air around the trunks of saplings, or that horse chestnut twigs could rise from water in an intricate web-like wall of connections? We learn hidden dimensions of nature by viewing Goldsworthy's work, but it is his eye for line, form, and color that make the results transporting. Remarkably, nearly all his outdoor sculptural constructions were made without machine-made tools, using only natural materials, such as joining thousands of birch or elm leaves by using their stems as affixing pins. (In some of his permanent sculptures in recent years, he has used machine tools.)

Although his father was a professor of applied mathematics at the University of Leeds, Goldsworthy spent much of his adolescence as a laborer on the neighboring farms, where he realized that he loved working outdoors at the rhythmic, repetitive tasks that had sculptural or other aesthetic outcomes: "Plowing a field is drawing lines on the land, painting the fields—it's incredibly visual." Goldsworthy had known since childhood that he would be an artist, but his experience with farm
work showed him that he had the endurance to immerse himself in nature for long hours in uncomfortable conditions, as well as a sustaining sense of aesthetic discovery and wonder. He credits his work ethic to his parents, who were strict Methodists.

Initially, Goldsworthy’s attraction to creating sculpture in and with nature began as a reaction against the geometric aesthetic. He was also inspired by a slide presentation given by Richard Long at his art school. After college Goldsworthy created many site-specific works in the countryside of north England—including works of balanced rocks (a genre of land art he invented); sculptural sheepfolds (short walls of dry-rock masonry); and artful cairns. He eventually moved to Scotland because its more liberal laws of trespass allow for free roaming, which he has done nearly every day for decades, except when he travels to sites around the world to create commissioned works in sculpture parks and gallery settings. Sometimes these commissioned works span the indoor and outdoor realms, such as large arches of rocks or other sculptural forms that are situated partially on either side of a glass wall.

Goldsworthy has remarked, “I’m not an artist born full of things I want to express. I’m empty, hungry, wanting to know more.” He feels that his voice is a visual one that has grown strong through his personal relationship with the land around his Scottish village in Dumfriesshire, where his works also take on a social dimension, which he enjoys. His approach is one of deep attentiveness:

At its most successful, my “touch” looks into the heart of nature; most days I don’t even get close. These things are all part of a transient process that I cannot understand unless my touch is also transient—all in this way can the cycle remain unbroken and the process be complete. I cannot explain the importance to me of being part of a place, its seasons and changes.

He admits that working with “flowers and leaves and petals” is a bit dicey for an artist today: “But I have to: I can’t edit the materials I work with. My remit is to work with nature as a whole.”

Although Goldsworthy laughs when the label Druid or mystic have been applied to him, he has said this much about coming to understand a place: “Although it is often a practical and physical art, it is also an intensely spiritual affair that I have with nature: a relationship.” Moreover, he suggested to a journalist that his work involves a kind of revelatory experience: “Everything has the energy of its making inside it. There is no doubt that the internal space of a rock or a tree is important to me. But when I get beneath the surface of things, these are not moments of mystery—they are moments of extraordinary clarity.”

Because so many of Goldsworthy’s works are ephemeral, his documenting them through photographs is a second stage of the work. In this regard, he notes that Brancusi was an inspiration: “He has helped me not only in the sculpture that he made but in his relationship between photography and his sculpture. He once said something like, ‘Why talk about sculpture when I can photograph it?’… and he would photograph his works at different times of the day.” Photography, Goldsworthy feels, is “a perfect way for a sculptor to talk about time and space and place.” His photographs of his works have been gathered in several books, including
Stone, Wood, Passage, Enclosure, and Time. A documentary film about his work and his process, Rivers and Tides, was made in 2001.

When Matthew Ritchie (b. 1964) was in art school in London in the mid-1980s, minimalism was regarded as the emptying out of content and postmodernism as the response. Yet he did not find the postmodernists’ “filling the void with all their knickknacks” to be satisfying.\(^\text{17}\) He chose, instead, to reflect on the meaning of minimalism and what had been left out. Eventually, the subject that presented itself and grew increasingly compelling was the idea of looking at the entire universe at once—maximalism, one might say. Ritchie then became interested in cosmology—both scientific and cultural, including mythological, visual, philosophical, and religious responses. He concluded that these various approaches are “bridging devices” between the scientific and the spiritual: “I would make the argument that our perception of the universe is inherently spiritual on whatever level it is conducted. By the same token, that focuses the meaning of the word spirituality on our participation in the generation of meaning.”

Since the mid-1990s Ritchie has developed his interest in systems and cosmology across multiple forms of narrative, both personal and site-specific, which he expresses through paintings, drawings, sculptures, wall paintings, digital and performance-based works. These dynamic works, which not only fill walls but sometimes continue across the floor and into space, have been shown in numerous exhibitions internationally (see figure 15). He has also written a cycle of stories to accompany some of his installations, such as The Fast Set (2000) and The Slow Tide (2001). His largest work to date, The Morning Line (2008), is a collaborative enterprise, a vast travelling architectural structure whose geometry is based on the structure of the universe and that contains over 40 algorithmic musical compositions. In 2009 he collaborated with a physicist and a composer to create Hypermusic, a projective opera that premiered at the Centre Pompidou. He has also co-written and directed a multimedia song cycle, The Long Count, which premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2009.

Integration has always fascinated Ritchie. He loves painting specifically because it allows for “simultaneous appreciation of all the spiritual (or whatever you want to call them) dimensions passing through a single frame of the universe.” He adds,

The wonderful thing about painting, or art-making in general, is that its utility is still a mystery to us. We’re still evolving its usefulness so it has a fantastic quality of catching everything in its net. Artists are tangential incidents within the universe, but through their individual gestures they can contribute to a third structure, a collaborative interaction with the universe that is both shared and still uniquely personal. This creates an incredible moment, which potentially can include absolutely anything from the dimensional cosmological matrix.

The German artist Sigmar Polke (1941–2010) was internationally acclaimed for his “wildly experimental paintings and prints,” which often layered painting and found images and which influenced the direction of painting in the 1980s.\(^\text{18}\) When he accepted a commission to create windows in the Grossmünster cathedral in Zurich in 2006–2009, he brought to bear his own sensibility—“I can accept the power of nature as religious”—by setting thin slices of colorful agate to form abstract, organic
stained-glass mosaics. Polke, who was deeply interested in astrology and paranormal phenomena," considered the pigments and materials he used to be "poetic intensifications of the 'mothering' substance—the materia—of the universe.\textsuperscript{19,20}

The painter and printmaker \textbf{Janis Provisor (b. 1946)}, who lives and works in New York, creates works that engage with nature through abstracted and layered natural forms and through a blend of spatial scales. She was inspired, beginning in the late 1970s, by certain types of Chinese scroll paintings and also some Qing dynasty paintings in which the depiction of the landscape is not "hierarchical" with a fixed vanishing point of perspective and in which size and distance are abstracted, yielding an engaging field of psychological or spiritual import. She recalls:

I have always had a longing or desire to find a spiritual center, and as a child was attracted to the ritual in religion. I suppose the ritualistic aspect served as a gateway, allowing me to pass through on my search for that illusive spot of greater meaning. And that was a large part of why I got involved with art, too, because I felt it had a kind of meaning for me that was mysterious and that I had no other way of expressing.\textsuperscript{21}

\section*{The Body as Sacral Presence}

A pioneer of modern sculpture, both slightly abstracted figures and fully abstract forms, \textbf{Henry Moore (1898–1986)} was the most widely acclaimed sculptor in the world at the time of his death. While still in art school, he found himself attracted to African sculptures for the expression of inner presence that the semi-abstracted forms achieved. He expanded his exploration by making many visits to the ethnographic collections at the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum, as well as subsequent trips to Paris, where he saw works by Arp, Brancusi, and others. Later, in 1934, he wrote an essay entitled "The Sculptor's Aims," in which he delineated his primary criterion for significant art:

For me a work must first have a vitality of its own . . . a pent-up energy, an intense life of its own, independent of the object it may represent . . . Between beauty of expression and power of expression there is a difference of function. The first aims at pleasing the senses, the second has a spiritual vitality which for me is more moving and goes deeper than the senses.\textsuperscript{22}

Moore was the seventh of eight children born to a coal miner and his wife in Yorkshire. He enjoyed drawing and carving as a child and determined at age 11—when pictures of Michelangelo's sculptures were shown during a catechism class at the family's Catholic church—that he would become a sculptor. The preponderance in Moore's oeuvre of substantial female figures with a broad back dates from a childhood experience as well: he would rub liniment into his mother's back when she was pained by rheumatism. "My mother's back means a lot to me," he recalled.\textsuperscript{23} More than half of his works have as their subject a substantial female form, reclining or seated with a young child.

Herbert Read, who knew Moore well, observed, "Henry Moore, in common with artists of his type throughout the ages, believes that behind the appearance of things
there is some kind of spiritual essence, a force of immanent being which is only partially revealed in actual living forms.” Moore himself, speaking in the period after World War II, when many people in the art world considered modernist art to have broken free of both tradition and religion, was not swayed by these currents: “Religion no longer seems to provide inspiration or impetus for many artists. And yet all art is religious in a sense that no artist would work unless he believed that there was something in life worth glorifying. That is what art is about.”

In 1959 Nathan Oliveira (1928–2010), the son of Portuguese immigrants to California, was the youngest artist to be included in the exhibition New Images of Man at the Museum of Modern Art, curated by Peter Selz. His paintings of solitary, semi-abstracted human forms were exhibited among figurative works by De Kooning, Giacometti, Bacon, Dubuffet, and others. Yet he always stood apart from groups and trends, feeling, “I do not look at modern art as a linear experience, continually in competition with itself, devouring itself—a game for popular society to play. I, rather, believe in art that layers time upon time, that art that simply reaffirms our presence and the depth of our existence on this earth, our planet in the universe.”

The figures in his works often emerge from luminous backgrounds and stand in mysterious resonance. When he was working on his Stelae series in the early 1990s, Oliveira wrote to a colleague: “These late paintings of mine are hopefully more spiritual. I’ve reached a point where I don’t want the isolation of the early expressionist painters who influenced me. I want to make a spiritual contribution.” Several years later he observed, “The act of making a painting is an experience; one is not making or seeking an object. It is almost a sacred experience.” Oliveira also worked in printmaking and was considered, as one curator stated, “among the top two or three most brilliant practitioners of the monotype.”

In the 1970s Oliveira began his Windhover series of abstract paintings alluding to the wing of a falcon in flight, named for the poem “The Windhover” by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Reflecting on these large paintings in an audiotaped presentation at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, he stated, “The concept of these paintings was always very spiritual, very contemplative.” Toward the end of their lives, Oliveira and his wife conceived the idea of a meditation center that might be built in the hills of Stanford University, where the artist, a professor emeritus, had a studio and loved to watch the kestrels and red-tailed hawks float on thermal currents of air. Three years after Oliveira’s death, Stanford constructed the Windhover Contemplative Center, composed of three rooms that house five of his Windhover paintings. On following the suggestions Oliveira left for this building, one of the architects commented, “The opportunity is to unify art, architecture, landscape, and spirituality in one environment.”

Reflecting on the fate of the human body in modern sculpture, the art historian and museum director Peter Selz has observed:

Ever since Auguste Rodin, evoking the damaged sculpture of antiquity, presented his partial, yet muscular and erotic figures, the fractured human form has been endemic to modern sculpture. The human torso was a dominant theme in the work of artists as diverse as Maillol and Brancusi, Henry Moore and Antoine Pevsner. Giacometti pared
the standing woman and the striding man to the bare essentials of existence. But only in the “Abakans,” the poignant headless figures by Magdalena Abakanowicz, and in De Staebler’s sculpted images does the fragmented figure assume a symbolic function of human incompleteness and yearning for wholeness.31

Born into a Polish-Russian family, Magdalena Abakanowicz (b. 1930) grew up immersed in nature as she roamed the large estate of her mother’s family, who were descended from knights of the early medieval Polish gentry. Her father’s family were Russian aristocrats descended from the twelfth-century conqueror Abaka-Khan (or Abaqa) and were killed in the Russian Revolution. When she was 14, her family had to flee their estate because the Soviet army was approaching from the east. This wrenching exile from her idyllic home made her feel “hollow,”32 but she volunteered to help as a nurse in a make-shift hospital for the streams of terrorized refugees, where she saw many people with missing limbs and burnt skin. In addition, a Nazi soldier shot off one of her mother’s arms.

Eventually, Abakanowicz and her parents resettled near Gdansk. She studied art there and then at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. She later became a professor of art and an internationally acclaimed sculptor and fiber artist, beginning in the 1960s with her Abakans—suspended, abstract, woven fiber sculptures that are often 13 feet tall—and later with her imposing groupings of oversized, hollowed-out, semi-abstracted figures made of darkened, stiffened burlap bonded with resin that are missing heads and/or limbs. She has also created groups of figures from cast iron and from bronze.

Living under the Soviet regime in Poland for 45 years, Abakanowicz had to keep her aristocratic background hidden and refrain from attaching any spiritual meaning to any of her works. In 1980, though, she revealed her lineage and alluded to the religious, poetic, nature-loving Polish culture from which her work emerges: she included in her book Portrait x 20 several photographs of roadside shrines and crosses, peasant cottages, manor houses, and the land. In the subsequent decades she has spoken freely of her role as a shaman who feels the need to spend a month every year in nature for replenishment. “Everything I do is about the human condition,” she has stated. “I’m interested in the different beliefs of man, his mythology, the science he makes, as well as his rituals and his religions.”33

In the 1980s someone gave Abakanowicz a translation of an essay by the literary critic Denis Donoghue, “Of Art and Mystery,” in which he argues, “The typical mark of modern critics is that they are zealots of explanation; they want to deny the arts their mystery, and to degrade mystery to a succession of problems. But their effort is perverse.”34 Although Abakanowicz has spoken of her work as early as 1976 as “the mystery which can never be fully revealed,”35 Donoghue’s call to “reinstate mystery and distinguish it from mere bewilderment or mystification” became a touchstone for her. Henceforth she repeated to numerous art journalists that her work is about mystery, “a whole which embraces us.”36 Rather than being explained through words, her works can be grasped, she suggests, only in an intuitive or spiritual way.37 The idea that art is informed by a spiritual, or metaphysical, sense of mystery would have particular resonance with both Donoghue and Abakanowicz because of their formative experience in Catholicism.
Looking back on childhood summers spent at his grandparents’ farm in the unglaciated hill country of southern Indiana, the sculptor Stephen De Staebler (1933–2011) mused, “I sometimes think that my impulses were all formed as a child there.” He was nurtured by nature and by art—beginning art classes at age eight in St. Louis—but was disappointed by the family’s Protestant church, where he felt that formal religious practice in liturgical services presents “hurdles to an essential experience.” While studying religion, archaeology, and art history at Princeton, he took a summer course with Ben Shahn at Black Mountain College and subsequently earned a master’s degree in studio art at the University of California at Berkeley, where Peter Voulkos taught him to regard clay as a fine arts material. In time, De Staebler arrived at the following perspective on art and religion:

The obsessive quality of art is an attempt to reconcile opposites and keep an equilibrium, and, as in religion, this is art’s validity. If you strip away the dogmas and doctrines, religion becomes a very precarious relationship between a frail and finite reality and a sense of all-present infinite reality; and it is such a strange disequilibrium that this struggle to create an equilibrium creates religion.38

The art critic Donald Kuspit has observed of De Staebler’s relationship to the body:

He wants to disinter it from its modernity—the sense of its purely functional significance, of its ideal existence as that of a happy machine—and recover a sense of its flesh as morbidly immediate if also cosmic in import, linked to the strange tumult of raw matter in formation.

Kuspit adds that the artist strives “to create a modern religious art, utilizing archaic forms for an ‘archaic’ purpose: the articulation and remediation of suffering.”39 Indeed, De Staebler’s semi-abstracted, androgynous, and disjointed human forms allude to a lifetime of suffering, yet their simultaneous solidity and vulnerability present a totemic presence of “churning baroque complexity,” as Selz notes.40 Doug Adams, a scholar of art and religion, suggests that De Staebler’s winged figures, for instance, are not only compelling but haunting visual metaphors because the works’ incompleteness, seeming damage, and repeated use of concave space call out for our response and bring us into relationship.41

Mimmo Paladino (b. 1948) is a painter, sculptor, and printmaker who was associated in the late 1970s and the 1980s with the Italian neo-expressionist movement called Transavanguardia, which rejected conceptual art in favor of reclaiming figurative painting, especially works that exude a joie de vivre. Paladino’s oeuvre incorporates religious and primordial imagery, often forming tableaux of totemic forms inspired by Egyptian, Greco-Roman, Italic, Etruscan, medieval, and North African iconography. His suite of linocut prints entitled Terra Tonda Africana (1986), for instance, depicts a mythic tale of spiritual regeneration. Paladino’s seemingly archaic sculptures of the male body echo Etruscan forms, while some of his paintings, such as Guerriero Occidenttale (1999), allude to the art of cave paintings. His works have been shown internationally in numerous retrospectives and biennial exhibitions.
Since the 1960s, **Carolee Schneeman (b. 1939)** has produced an oeuvre of visual explorations of sexuality, gender, shamanic spirituality, and taboos. One of her areas of interest was the burst of feminist research in the late 1970s and early 1980s into pre-Christian religious history. In a letter to *Art Forum* in 1983 written in response to an article by Thomas McEvilley on shamanic performance art, “Art in the Dark,” Schneeman supplied a feminist perspective on the sacred body, which was shared by several artists during that period:

> The shamanistic performances of women usually relate to a historic tradition that is pre-Greek, pre-Christian in its inspiration . . . . Shamanistic mythology in women’s performance art must be acknowledged as what lies behind and is obscured by Greek mythology. Our performance of taboo acts is linked with an identification of our bodies with nature, with the celebration of the cosmic and the sacredness of the ordinary and the lived experience . . . . Our use of the body in ritual inculcates not male mysteries but female or communal ones, aligned with intuitions of ancient Goddess presence and investigating those integrations of body and spirit which masculist culture and mythos have torn asunder.42

**Nancy Spero (1926–2009)** was another artist who was intrigued by archeological discoveries of thousands of ritualized female figurines from the neolithic era. They inspired her to create a pictographic language of body gestures and motion—that is, a bodily hieroglyphics of spindly, energetic, expressive female forms. Using this visual language, she depicted the diversity of representations of women from prehistory to the present in *Notes in Time on Women* (painted on a 20 inches by 210 feet paper scroll) and elaborated as *The First Language* (a 20 inches by 190 feet scroll), which presented an irregular rhythm of painted, hand-printed, and collaged figures. In 1988 Spero created wall installations by extending the picture plane of the scrolls and the printed figures directly onto the walls of museums and public spaces. She also painted several series on panels and designed a long wall of glass mosaic for the 66th Street subway station in New York: *Artemis, Acrobat, Divas, and Dancers* (2001), which features a goddess, several priestesses, and more. A favorite and recurring image in several of Spero’s works was the flashing Sheela-na-gig from Celtic mythology.

During her childhood in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles, **Betye Saar (b. 1927)** was fascinated by the ongoing construction of the Watts Towers, as Simon Rodia gradually added steel pipes and rods, which he wrapped with wire mesh, coated with mortar, and decorated with found objects. After seeing an exhibition in 1968 of the altar-like assemblage works by **Joseph Cornell (1903–1972)**, Saar was inspired to draw from both of these influences, along with her interest in occult charts and symbols, to create boxed assemblages of found objects and sculpted bodies that refer to her African, Native American, and Irish heritage. She initially created a series of protest works that addressed stereotypes of African Americans, such as *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972). She then created a series of intimate assemblages that incorporated family memorabilia and engaged with issues of time, memory, and loss. From there, Saar developed room-size, site-specific installations, often involving altar-like shrines and drawing symbolic references from several religions, such as cosmograms from the Kongo culture in the Republic of Congo. Saar has stated that a thread
runs through all her works: “That thread is a curiosity about the mystical.”⁴³ Two of her daughters are also established artists whose work is influenced by spiritual interests: the sculptor Alison Saar (b. 1956) and the mixed-media artist Lezley Saar (b. 1953).

Since 1974 Marina Abramović (b. 1946) has focused on long-duration performance art involving various sorts of physical discipline, such as not moving for six hours. As the website for her institute states, she “has withstood pain, exhaustion, and danger in the quest for emotional transformation.” Her subject is the body; her approach is “ritualizing the simple actions of everyday life”; and her goal is to manifest “a heightened state of consciousness” in both herself and the audience.⁴⁴ Speaking to an audience at Harvard University in March 2013, Abramović asserted, “Art should be disturbing. Art has to have the power to open the eyes of the viewer. And art has to be spiritual.”⁴⁵ She is interested in Tibetan Buddhism and shamanism but does not have a specific spiritual practice in any tradition. Her performance pieces include Works with Ulay, Seven Easy Pieces, and The Artist Is Present. Abramović studied art in Belgrade and Zagreb, before moving to Amsterdam and then New York. She credits her formation in discipline to her parents, who were both leaders in the Partisan militia during World War II, and to her grandmother’s strict adherence to the spiritual practices of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

It is difficult to place the work of Matthew Barney (b. 1967) into a category—or to know if he feels a sense of spiritual communion with the metaphysical symbols and themes he used in his visually dramatic five-film epic, Cremaster (1994–2002). Based on that work, the art critic Michael Kimmelman pronounced Barney “the most important American artist of his generation”⁴⁶ (although other critics, such as Peter Schjeldahl and Jed Perl, were underwhelmed). Because of space limitations here, I refer readers to the detailed explication of the spiritual, metaphysical, and Celtic mythological themes and visual references in the Cremaster cycle that is presented in Mark C. Taylor’s book Refiguring the Spiritual (2011). Taylor, a scholar of religion, considers Barney “the most spiritual and perhaps even most religious artist working today” and makes a strong case for the centrality of that dimension in the five body-centric films.⁴⁷ Other critics have also noted spiritual content in Barney’s Drawing Restraint series of works (1987 to the present).

The 21 life-size paintings of the human body by Alex Grey (b. 1953), which he calls Sacred Mirrors, clearly have spiritual content—but several other oeuvres straddle the categories of either spirituality or ontology. Consider the haunting photographs by Francesca Woodman (1958–1981), which present the slender body of a young woman as an ephemeral form materializing out of the peeling wallpaper of an old house, as a Christ-like figure hanging limply from a domestic door frame, or seated in a posture of resignation, nude but for white knee socks and Mary Janes, while she inhales the scent of a white lily on a plant next to her. Woodman did not label her work “spiritual,” but she did sometimes use religious symbols and allusions to a sacrificial fate. Consider also the gigantic, colorful, dancing Nana sculptures made by Niki de Saint Phalle (1930–2002), beginning in 1964 in the context of Pop Art. They seem to express spiritual exuberance in their role as “happy, freed women and harbingers of a new matriarchic age,” according to her posthumous website. The large-scale installation piece The Dinner Party (1979) by Judy Chicago (b. 1939)
combines a ritual setting—her allusion to a feminist Last Supper—with poetically embodied memorial sculptures honoring 39 notable women from history as the guests.  

**The Sacral Body-in-Nature**

Two of the three main formal qualities of the dramatic self-portraits by **Frida Kahlo** (1907–1954) are derived from religious tradition. The first is the folk art of the Mexican Catholic retablo ex voto, a naïve painting that usually depicts illness or other physical suffering followed by a miraculous recovery. It is painted, with an explanatory inscription below, and hung on the interior wall of a shrine or a church in order to give thanks for the intervention of a saint or God. The second influence is the spiritual perception among the indigenous peoples of Mexico that they exist embedded in the sacred vitality of nature. The third, and most striking, quality of her works is the intense presence of the artist, staring defiantly at the viewer, surrounded by the ritual presence of nature. These fierce works have made her “one of the most important artists of the 20th century.”

Kahlo, as a Marxist, had no connection with the Catholic Church, but she felt drawn to the mixed Indian and Spanish lineage that flowed into her from her mother. (Her father was German.) She was the first among her modernist circle in Mexico City to collect pre-Columbian and traditional pottery and display it in her home as art. She also preferred to wear peasant styles of clothing and jewelry, with bright flowers in her hair. This connection with the ancient, nature-honoring traditions of Mexico was apparently experienced as empowering, for she built her identity around it. Many of her paintings show her ensconced in lush vegetation and accompanied by friendly totemic animals, all of which help to sustain her through the painful physical ordeals she depicts or alludes to. She had suffered from polio as a child and at age 18 received multiple severe injuries—including being run through by a metal railing—when the trolley in which she was riding collided with a bus. During her long recovery and following numerous surgical operations over the years, she painted a new kind of self-portrait, using a specially constructed easel that fit over her bed. Pain was always with her.

Working in multiple media, **Mary Beth Edelson** (b. 1933) was a pioneer in the feminist art of the 1970s that challenged the modern severance of female subjectivity from its deep connections with the origins of religion and the roots of culture. As the art critic Donald Kuspit noted in an essay for an exhibition of her paintings, “The result is a synergistic art—an efflorescence of ritual acts, primitivizing drawings with secret intellectual intention and sophistication, and ‘grand machines,’ not always in scale but in the ambition of their message.” In addition to site-specific outdoor sculptural works and installation works in galleries, Edelson’s photographic works include several collages; the **Body Works** series; the **Nature of Balancing** series shot on the coast of Maine; several photographs of woman-in-nature that were shot in Montauk, Long Island; and **Grapeve Neolithic Cave**, shot in a cave on the Croatian island of Hvar in which neolithic Goddess figurines had been excavated. According to the *The Grove Encyclopedia of American Art*, “By helping to create a new feminist aesthetic, Edelson has contributed to the transformation of art history...”
series, her cloaked body is staged in nature and negotiates both spiritual and political aims in these surroundings."51

In the late 1980s, Edelson’s work was targeted by young feminist art critics schooled during the most aggressive days of deconstructionist postmodernism. They considered her interest in spirituality to be repugnant, but they focused mainly on castigating her during public panel discussions in New York for choosing to make art about the subject of women-and-nature, which, according to their dualistic ideology of extreme social determinism, removes women from the possibility of being agents of culture. During a talk given in fall 1988 in Chicago, the art critic Thomas McEvilley surprisingly accepted these ideological charges—asserting that Edelson’s and others’ “Goddess-related feminist art of the ’70s had unintentionally been complicit” with the “male conspiracy” to keep women out of culture. Edelson happened to be in the audience and responded with an informative article in *New Art Examiner* about the art and artists under discussion, “An Open Letter to Thomas McEvilley.”52 In recent years, retrospective exhibitions of Edelson’s work have been mounted in European art museums.

Born into an upper-middle-class family in Havana, Ana Mendieta (1948–1985) and her sister were among the children airlifted out of Cuba through Operation Peter Pan after Castro came to power. At ages 12 and 14, the girls were moved to various refugee camps in the United States and finally relocated to a Catholic orphanage in Iowa and later placed in foster homes. Mendieta earned three degrees in art at the University of Iowa, where she studied with Hans Breder. One of the visiting artists she met was Mary Beth Edelson, who taught a workshop on her sculptural work that combined land art, body art, and ritual elements. After Mendieta moved to New York in 1978, Edelson and Nancy Spero sponsored her application to become a member of the AIR Gallery, a collective gallery of feminist artists.

As one of the artists in the 1970s pioneering a new genre that combined land art and body art, Mendieta often focused on a spiritual connection between her body, the earth, and a female sense of the Divine:

> My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source. Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth…. I become an extension of nature, and nature becomes an extension of my body. This obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth is really the reactivation of primeval beliefs… [in] an omnipresent female force, the after-image of being encompassed within a womb, is a manifestation of my thirst for being.53

In various works, she incorporated references to Santería, the African-Caribbean religion that combines Yoruban and Catholic elements, because, as she explained, her art contained “a lot of healing imagery.”54 She is known for her *Tree of Life* series, her *Fetish* series, and her *Silueta* series, as well as numerous individual works.

In 1983 Mendieta was awarded the Rome Prize from the American Academy in Rome, where she worked for nearly a year in the studio provided. In 1985, during what neighbors described later as a violent-sounding argument with her husband of eight months, the minimalist sculptor Carl Andre, Mendieta’s petite body traveled...
through an open window of their high-rise apartment building, crashing through an awning 33 stories below. She was 36.

**Huma Bhabha (b. 1962)** is a New York-based sculptor from Pakistan who uses the traditional materials of sculptural molding plus found materials to create structural assemblages of somewhat abstracted primal figures that exude a fragile totemic presence. These figures suggest the possibility of a contemporary primitivism arising from cultural refuse. They populated her mid-career exhibition, *Unnatural Histories*. Bhabha feels that the level of interest in spirituality that was prevalent among the pre–World War I artists in Europe has “definitely gone underground... rarely discussed in the art world and often avoided” but remains “a profound component” in the artist’s process: “In my own studio practice, I try to maintain a state of mind that balances concentration, confidence, humility, etc.—the enlightened artisan state of mind, which encourages self-awareness and naturally connects to spirituality on a very direct and practical level.” She perceives a “kind of radical irony that also functions on a spiritual level” infusing the work of Duchamp, Rauschenberg, Johns, and Warhol, “up to the gravel piles of Robert Smithson,” but she feels that many artists today merely hide behind irony, producing works devoid of spiritual content. Still, Bhabha holds that in the contemporary moment “the spiritual might just find it an ideal time to come out of its hiding in artists’ studios and regain centrality in the ongoing discourse of contemporary art.”

Like many artists working with video, **Bill Viola (b. 1951)** considers the advent of moving images to be one of the most momentous events of the past 150 years, giving images life, behavior, and “an existence in step with the time of our own thoughts and imaginings.” Over four decades, he has become, according to curators at the Grand Palais in Paris in 2014, “without doubt the most celebrated exponent of video art.” His striking body of work can be seen as explorations of the spirituality of immanence. In many of his most deeply affecting works, Viola has conveyed a sacramental relationship with water in particular, with bodies in water or near water (see figure 16). He is also drawn to late medieval and early Renaissance paintings—which inform his cycle of works entitled *The Passions* (2003)—and to the art and spirituality of the East, having traveled in Asia and practiced Zen Buddhist meditation in Japan. That experience gives his work a quality of is-ness, a concentrated focus, and resonant presence. In 1993 the Swiss curator Jean-Christophe Ammann stated, “Whatever video may be, Bill Viola has given the medium its dignity, just as painters once promoted perspective or others—one thinks of Seurat—conferred autonomy on color.”

In 1989 Viola was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship. He was selected to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale in 1995, for which he created *Buried Secrets*, a series of five installation works. In 1997 the Whitney Museum of American Art organized *Bill Viola: A 25-Year Survey*, which included over 35 installations and videotapes and traveled for two years to six museums here and in Europe. In 2002 Viola completed a five-part projected digital “fresco” cycle entitled *Going Forth by Day*, which depicts stages of the human life cycle. The following year he debuted *The Passions* at the Getty Museum. Since then he has created numerous new works, which are shown in international venues. In 2004 Viola created four hours of video for a new production of Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde* directed by Peter Sellars, which
debuted in Los Angeles and was later fully staged in Paris. In 2014 a major retrospective of Viola’s work was presented at the Grand Palais. His creative collaborator on all works since 1979 has been Kira Perov, his wife.

Viola’s relationship with water apparently has roots in a dramatic encounter. When he was about six years old, on a family fishing trip, he fell off a float and went straight to the bottom of the lake, from which he observed “this extraordinarily beautiful world with light filtering down” and swaying plants: “I had no fear... It was like paradise. I didn’t even know I was drowning... For a moment there was absolute bliss.” He soon felt his uncle’s hands around his trunk bringing him to the surface, but the impression stayed with him of a profound beauty in nature that we do not usually see. In addition to using water frequently in his videos, he often slows time, which functions almost as a meditative practice for the viewers and the artist alike.

Viola has a long-standing interest in the mystics, which began in his dissatisfaction with the refusal of classic texts on art history to address “the essence of the artist’s vision, the connection to the deeper levels of human life that I felt the great artists I was coming to admire spoke to.” Their various styles were secondary, he felt, to their true “great work”:

When I began to focus on this aspect of the work, I saw that what at first appeared to be independent shining lights, bursts of transcendent inspiration on a dull field, became linked by something unconsciously sensed below the familiar surface. I started to follow these lights, and the rest didn’t matter, making my own alternative “history,” an anti-history, really, since one of the primary qualities of what I was pursuing seemed to exist beyond historical time. I thought it was something that couldn’t be described, that existed without precedent or models. Then I became aware of the existence of an established, parallel, alternative history running through the history of religion, with very elaborate descriptions and prescriptions for these creative states I was trying to understand. I became drawn to the work of the mystics, East and West, and people such as Jallaludin Rumi, Chuang Tzu, St. John of the Cross, and Meister Eckhart began to embody for me the qualities and the true nature of the work of the artist... In 1983 Viola created the installation piece Room for St. John of the Cross for an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Santa Fe. The sound track that accompanies one of the video elements includes the recitation in Spanish of several poems by St. John of the Cross. Viola used repetition to enhance “the beauty of the sacred text”:

One of the things that has diminished our sense of the sacred is the dominance of a communication model in which language and images are seen to be communicating “messages,” as if they are dump trucks literally transporting something to you. So you never experience what it means to inhabit something and go deeper into it. For us, repetition is like a “hold,” but when you repeat something, it achieves realness. It gets solidified. It then evokes an incredible set of root structures that are behind those words, once you hear them repeated.

The subsequent grumblings of some New York critics about this overtly religious work did not deter Viola. In fact, he felt freed and self-directed to move more deeply
in this direction. Inspired by Pontormo’s Mannerist painting *Visitation* (1628–1629), Viola created a video/sound installation in 1995 entitled *The Greeting*, which was installed in the sanctuary of San Francisco’s Grace Cathedral as an off-site component of his mid-career retrospective exhibition when it traveled to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1999. Viola, who was raised as an Episcopalian, was invited to deliver a Sunday sermon in Grace Cathedral, during which he explored “what can’t we see” and mentioned that working with video has taught him to let go of *taking* a picture and to, instead, *receive* an image. During a radio broadcast a few days later, Viola observed, “Artists make the invisible visible while still allowing it to remain invisible.” This aspect of the work was perceived by the art critic Kenneth Baker when he reviewed Viola’s retrospective for the *San Francisco Chronicle*:

He tries to rediscover through sound and image technology a personal but shareable sense of ultimate things, a rare effort in a modern culture that prides itself on being demystified. Viola drives us toward levels of response and reflection that most contemporary art does not try to reach. These works…define a video poetics that, a generation ago, no one thought possible.

“In my early work,” Viola recalls, “I was always pointing my camera outward to find traces of our inner life out in the world, in the landscape—whether it was a misty forest at dawn in Japan, or mirages in the Sahara Desert, or a human figure sinking in the water. I was driven by my own…beyond-emotions exploration in the spiritual domain.” Since 1999 Viola has created numerous works in which “traces of our inner life” are manifested, works he calls peopled “arcs of event and emotion without the narrative.” Early on in this process, though, he found himself grappling with questions about artificiality and theatricality. Resolution came through Giotto, whom Viola considers one of his key sources of inspiration: “I realized that what he was doing really was dealing with the *divine drama* and that the stuff of the Earth is somewhat of a façade of the deeper realities.” Viola has concluded that, since he wants to explore things that exist in very special, rarified moments, “the only way to evoke them is to stage them, to create the conditions here on Earth through artificial means for these things to happen and to be here.”

St. Paul’s Cathedral in London invited Viola to create two works on themes related to the Virgin Mary and the Christian martyrs, to be semi-permanently installed on either side of the American Memorial Chapel. *The Martyrs* was completed and installed in 2014. When asked by a British journalist for *The Art Newspaper* in 2010 about this project and the seeming disjunction between the technological realm and his “almost medieval sense of a spiritual universe,” Viola replied, “The two are actually very close. I see the digital age as the joining of the material and the spiritual into a yet-to-be-determined whole.”

**Making Indigenous Influences Central**

All art that engages with the perception of transcendence-in-immanence is a descendant of the sensibilities of myriad prehistorical and, later, historical indigenous cultures, many of which live on today and all of which recognize the profound
embeddedness of humans in the grand cosmological totality. This is our most ancient spiritual lineage, the orientation that shaped our evolution into cultural and societal beings. Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, a number of artists have explicitly moved the foundational presence of indigenous spiritual perceptions to the foreground of their work. In doing so, they both refute the modern, mechanistic denials of our profound interrelatedness with all life and honor a specific nonmodern culture.

**Maya Deren (1917–1961)**, widely considered the most prominent creator of experimental art films in the late 1940s and the 1950s, was born in Kiev as Eleanora Derenkowsky, named for the mystical Italian actress Eleanora Duse. Her Russian-Jewish parents immigrated to Syracuse, New York, when she was a child. As an adult, Deren developed new genres of lyrical, time-bending, and dream-like art films, which were influenced by her fascination with the Vodou spirituality of Haiti. Her best-known work, widely acknowledged as a visual masterpiece, is the short film *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), which she made with assistance from Alexander Hammid at her small bungalow in the Hollywood Hills. Deren called expanded, or transcendent, states of mind “depersonalization” (i.e., beyond the personal ego) and often built her films around the notion of a (female) bodymind in an altered state of diffused consciousness or entrancement, perhaps moved by unseen forces. Though also a writer and a poet, she loved working with film because she found that no translation was necessary between her visual imagination and the art form.

She first traveled to Haiti as secretary to the dancer Katherine Dunham. Both were deeply involved in studying and participating in Vodou rituals and spiritual states beyond mundane consciousness. Back in the United States, Deren made several films, including *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946). She did all the filmmaking jobs involved, including acting, with help from only one other person, a camerawoman. In 1946 Deren was awarded the first grant from the Guggenheim Foundation for a filmmaker, which she used to finance several trips to Haiti. She shot extensive footage for a documentary film entitled *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*, which she did not finish (though her husband edited and released it after her death). She used that title, however, for a book published in 1953 in a series edited by Joseph Campbell, which won wide acclaim for her poetic narration of the history and philosophy of Haitian Vodou as well as her exactingly recorded observations and her experiential knowledge. She died at 44 of a cerebral hemorrhage.

The large-scale fantastical collages on Mylar by **Wangechi Mutu (b. 1972)** reflect her studies in anthropology as well as her degrees in sculpting and painting, including an MFA from Yale. Her visually startling critiques of oppressive situations regarding gender, race, identity, and the modern alienation from nature often incorporate references to Kenyan culture and spirituality. In some of her works, a powerful female, whose nude body is blended with plants or an animal, leaps from the center of a teeming field with a sprung energy that appears somewhat menacing but is always intriguing. Even when her organically infused female figures are not in motion, they are entirely dynamic and exist in an elegance all their own. Mutu has observed, “Females carry the marks, language and nuances of their culture more than the male. Anything that is desired or despised is always placed on the female body.”67
In 2013 she created a short film entitled *The End of Eating Everything*, which features animation and also acting by the singer-songwriter Santigold.

At the opening of the Cuban pavilion in the 2013 Venice Biennale, a performance piece by *María Magdalena Campos-Pons (b. 1959)* served to “inject a jolt of surprise” into the staid proceedings, according to the art critic Holland Cotter:

She appeared unannounced in Piazza San Marco dressed in a fantastic neo-Byzantine costume combining elements of Chinese, Spanish and Afro-Caribbean attire. Like a kind of global goddess, she led an angel-band of Cuban musicians, Los Hermanos Arango, whose call-and-response music, based on traditional Yoruba chants, reverberated off the walls of St. Mark’s Basilica.68

A “visual souvenir” of the performance in Venice was exhibited in a gallery in New York a few months later: the multipanel, photo-based piece entitled *The Flag, Color Code Venice 13*.

Campos-Pons was raised in rural Cuba and earned art degrees in Havana. She is descended from Nigerian/Yoruban, Chinese, and Hispanic ancestors, whose spiritual presence she calls forth in her installation works and performance pieces by incorporating various practices of her multiethnic heritage. Her works involve a creative melding of photography (usually color-saturated large-format polaroids); video; sculpture; dance; and song, sound, and instrumental music. She sometimes incorporates African beads, plants, and soil. She has made several works about her relationship with her mother, such as the ritual installation piece *Spoken Softly with Mama* and *Replenishing* (in which her mother is dressed in blue, the color associated with the Yoruban mother Goddess of the sea, Yemajá). Other subject matter has included the effects of exile, Cuba, and the sugar plantations and slave trade in her home province, Matanzas. All of these are explored within a sphere of spiritual relationships that shape and infuse the expansive possibilities she creates. Campos-Pons has set her course: “I am very interested in engaging the ancestral, even the tribal.”69

Numerous Native American artists have earned degrees in art and produced modern works that can be seen in galleries and museums. *Sara Bates (b. 1944)*, however, creates mandala-like paintings and also sculptures on the floors of art museums that bring into that modern space the ritual presence of natural materials, placed in shapes and patterns that are informed by Cherokee spiritual practices. In a curatorial essay on an exhibition of her work, it is described as “extra-ordinary figurativeness”: “Sara believes that the integration of various forms produces new forms, and when a matrix of these forms is visible, the artist may have provided us with a sense of where we belong within the general scheme of existence.”70 When Bates takes her floor sculptures apart after an exhibition, she saves all the natural materials to use in new works or, in some cases, to return to the place where she gathered it. She states, “For me, it’s important to spend time with each gathered material in order to hear its voice. This experience creates knowledge and tells me about the next new form.”71
Architecture in Communion with Nature

The implicit spiritual underpinning of organic architecture was articulated by Louis Sullivan (1856–1924) and further developed by his younger colleague Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1969). Lewis Mumford called Sullivan “the Whitman of American architecture” because they shared a passionate vision of democracy, cosmology (or nature), and the unbounded potential of an American society that would evolve new and deeply wise ways of doing things. When Sullivan was 30, in fact, he wrote a letter to Whitman that included this passage:

To a man who can resolve himself into subtle unison with Nature and Humanity as you have done, who can blend the soul harmoniously with materials, who sees good in all and overflows in sympathy toward all things, enfolding them with his spirit: to such a man I joyfully give the name of Poet—the most precious of all names.72

Whitman relished this letter. It may have reminded him of the adulation that he himself had expressed as a young man in a letter to Emerson.73

In his own architectural practice at the firm of Adler and Sullivan in Chicago and in numerous articles, lectures, and books (including Kindergarten Chats and Other Writings and A System of Architectural Ornament According with a Philosophy of Man’s Powers), Sullivan framed the design aesthetic he called organic architecture. He was inspired by Ruskin’s poetic explication of Gothic Naturalism and his attention to the ways in which symbolic organic ornamentation becomes transformed to serve the structural needs of architecture. It was Sullivan who pronounced the credo of modern architecture—Form follows function—but he meant that as a concentrated reference to a richly complex vision, adding that the “function of all functions is the Infinite Creative Spirit.” He once told a colleague, “With me, architecture is not an art but a religion, and that religion but part of democracy.”74

To Frank Lloyd Wright, Sullivan was not only a mentor (“our great native genius”75) but a spiritual father figure. Wright carried forth Sullivan’s vision of organic architecture, adding his own emphasis on organic as meaning integral and attentive to the principles of nature, rather than its forms. His theorizing drew from his formative immersion in nature when he spent summers working on an uncle’s farm in the Wisconsin River Valley, from the values of the Arts and Crafts movement in Britain and the United States, and from the spiritual influences of Transcendentalism and his maternal Welsh roots. A further spiritual influence may have been the Gurdjieffian practices in which his third wife was deeply involved. As for the matter of immanence, Wright could not have been more clear, stating that the way he spells God is NATURE.76

If you could see a visual presentation of works by all the artists in this chapter, it might well break your heart. How did modern Western culture drift so far from an intimately felt connection with the rest of the Earth Community? How did we lose the sense of our own bodymind as continuous with the rest of life on Earth and the entire cosmos? Why did we opt for religions that, in practice, seem to care
so little about the dynamic web of life beyond humans, as if nature were merely a backdrop for human endeavors, whether salvific or otherwise? We experience our modern selves as set apart from the rest of life, our bodies as puzzling sacks of skin, and nature as a problem to be fought or exploited. It does not appear that we can reason our way out of this diminished sense of existence. Yet for artists graced with a sensitivity toward the immanence of body-and-nature, other imaginative possibilities emerge and become their art. Needing no reason, this art shows us wisdom.
Carlos Fuentes observed that one of the common characteristics of life in the twentieth century was “religious temperament” that is not necessarily accompanied by “religious faith.” To relate to, enjoy, and even cultivate spiritual sensibilities long after one has parted company with organized religion is a widespread phenomenon within the modern condition. Hence it is puzzling that so many art world professionals maintain that spiritual content could not be present in modern art not only because the modern project is about the escape from religion but also because the great artists of the modern era were not, in general, church-goers. In order to assess the abundant evidence of the spiritual in modern art, it is necessary to keep in mind the distinction between personal spiritual engagement and formal membership in a religious institution.

Most of the prominent figures in modern art since 1800 were raised in one of the three branches of Abrahamic religion: most had a Christian childhood; some had a Jewish childhood; and a few had an Islamic childhood. Children often respond deeply to orientations that are holistic, vital, and nourishing. In addition, artistic children usually register the sights, sounds, scents, ritual drama, and core concepts of religion with an associative cast of mind that forms indelible impressions. Even though few prominent artists of the modern era remained in institutional religion after their adolescence, many of those whose formative experiences transpired within a spiritual-aesthetic gestalt found that it had a diffuse but lingering influence on their life and their art.

Arp observed, “Creative artists cannot be orthodox believers, who are never at a loss for an answer.” He added,

Inside them there is the quickening of their mothers’ movements, of Goethe’s verses:

... Formation, transformation,  
Eternal Mind’s eternal conversation,  
Wreathed with all floating forms of what may be . . . .

This should be the most fundamental thesis of the artist and his art.
Fr. Couturier's Commissions

Following service in World War I, Pierre-Charles-Marie Couturier enrolled in an art school in Paris and worked for five years in the Ateliers d'Art Sacré, which had been cofounded by Maurice Denis. In 1923 Denis and Couturier created the first abstract stained glass windows, for a new church in Le Raincy, an eastern suburb of Paris. In 1925 Couturier decided to become a priest and joined the Dominican Order, taking the name Marie-Alain Couturier, O. P. Beginning in late 1936, he served as coeditor, with Fr. Pie-Raymond Régamey, of the journal *L'Art Sacré*, writing a passionate article in their first issue denouncing what he considered the deplorable state of visual culture in the contemporary Church. This dispiriting condition had resulted, he held, from the nineteenth-century opposition to and withdrawal from modernity, such that mediocre talents had been enlisted to build new churches for a century. Couturier and Régamey advocated a modern ecclesial aesthetic to be created by some of the finest artists of the day. This effort was subsequently advanced by the publication in 1953 of Joseph Pichard's *Modern Sacred Art*, which traces the Catholic renewal movement in the arts from 1890 to 1914 and its revival after the Great War. A similar campaign was conducted in Austria by Fr. Otto Mauer.

In the years following World War II, Fr. Couturier initiated or encouraged, through many personal conversations with prominent artists, the following projects: Matisse designed the interior of the Chapel of the Rosary in Vence (commissioned directly by his friend Sr. Jacques-Marie, a Dominican nun); Le Corbusier designed the Chapel of Notre Dame du Haut at Ronchamp; and Braque, Matisse, Bonnard, Rouault, Léger, Chagall, Lipchitz, and others contributed to the Church of Notre Dame de Tout Grâce du Plateau d'Assy. Two additional projects were executed after Fr. Couturier's death in 1954: Léger designed the stained glass windows for the Church of Sacré Cœur d'Audincourt (which Alfred Barr considered Léger's masterpiece), and Le Corbusier designed the Dominican convent Sainte Marie de la Tourette. In addition, Fr. Couturier's many conversations with Dominique de Menil influenced the direction of her collecting and contributed to her eventual decision to commission the Rothko Chapel. These artworks might be considered of secondary importance by some art historians because they were installed in churches instead of galleries, but the fact that so many renowned artists were quite willing to create spiritual art for postwar churches indicates that the received narrative in which the great rebels of modern art are de facto positioned in opposition to religion might well be reconsidered.

So confident was Fr. Couturier of the elevating presence of modern art of “aesthetic intensity” that he maintained that a designer of these projects need not even be a believer, let alone a Catholic. On the other hand, it seems odd—and perhaps narcissistic—that he readily assumed that non-Catholic artists would be interested in designing Catholic churches. Le Corbusier, for instance, was hesitant to accept a commission until Fr. Couturier assured him that his not being Catholic freed him of the tendency to create “copies of an ancient church.” What to make, though, of the Catholic church that was designed by a Huguenot with Masonic interests? The chapel of Notre-Dame-du-Haut, a white sculptural work in concrete set on a hilltop near Ronchamp, is indeed visually striking and is generally considered to be Le
Corbusier’s masterpiece. Yet as numerous Catholics have observed, the interior design is nearly incoherent with regard to the Catholic liturgy. Indeed, Le Corbusier wrote that “the requirements of religion have little effect on the design.” Moreover, he eschewed the usual innermost placement for the medieval statue of the Virgin Mary, putting it instead in a niche with a glass window as if she were a doll in a department store. He placed her on a small lazy-susan so that she could be turned to face inward or outward, which he felt was more efficient for special days of pilgrimage than moving the statue outdoors in a traditional procession. The architect also painted three female figures on a wall, giving equal placement to the Virgin Mary, his mother, and his wife. (He expected “storms ... wickedness, low blows” from Rome in response to his chapel, which did not occur.)

These decisions might seem to be Protestant “corrections” of the Catholic “error” of honoring Mary too much. Such an interpretation, though, would overlook Le Corbusier’s commitment to helping move society beyond religions to a better state: “The [correctly conceived] spiritual would incite in the peasant family an urge to become a thinking entity in the heart of modern society.” Moreover, he included in his design a few symbolic references to nature for “primitive” gravitas; the shell of a crab was his inspiration for the shape of the shrine. At Ronchamp, Le Corbusier sought to create a new kind of temple for a new spiritual initiation, free of peasant-like medieval traditions, free to be purely modern.

The interior of the Chapel of the Rosary at Vence was designed by Henri Matisse (1869–1954). He was raised Catholic in the town of Bohain-en-Vermontois, a center of textile manufacture in northern France near the Belgian border. As an adult, he was adamant that he and his wife marry before a priest and that their children receive the sacraments, though he himself did not attend church. Whether he felt there was spiritual presence in the bodies and nature scenes he painted is not known. According to a few statements he made, though, he did seem to think in spiritual terms in relation to his work. For instance, when he donated the painting Three Bathers by Cézanne to the Museum of the City of Paris in 1936, he stated in the accompanying letter that it had “sustained me spiritually in the critical moments of my career as an artist.” This seems to indicate a linkage in his mind between spiritual well-being and one of Cézanne’s “mystical” paintings. Similarly, he wrote to a curator in 1948: “If drawing proceeds from the Spirit and color from the senses, one must draw in order to cultivate the Spirit and to be capable of guiding color into the paths of the Spirit ... .”

While Matisse was working on the chapel in 1948, he was visited by Fr. Couturier, who recorded that Matisse said to him “my whole oeuvre is religious” and, further, “It is always God guiding my hand; I am not in control.” (Matisse made a similar statement in a book of his prints entitled Jazz [1947].) When Fr. Couturier visited Matisse the following year at his home, the artist told him about Picasso’s angry confrontation with him while Matisse was working on the chapel. Picasso had demanded to know why Matisse had accepted a commission from the Catholic Church when they both had spent their entire lives in the cause of the progressive, the modern, the secular. (Although Picasso made clear throughout his life that he had no interest in spirituality, he did make a painting of the Crucifixion in 1930, as well as some related drawings, in the wake of seeing a reproduction of the dramatic imagery in
Grünewald’s sixteenth-century Isenheim altarpiece. Picasso sarcastically wondered aloud if his old rival had even taken up praying. Matisse repeated for Couturier his response: “I told Picasso, I told him, ‘Yes, I pray and so do you, and you know it! When everything is going wrong, we throw ourselves into prayer to breathe again the air of our First Communion—and you do it, too.’ He did not say no.” Picasso was accompanied that day by his paramour Françoise Gilot, who related the exchange years later to a biographer as follows: Matisse replied to Picasso, “You are like me: what we are all looking for in art is to rediscover the atmosphere of our First Communion Day.” As a further note on Matisse’s sense of spiritual depth in art, he wrote to Bonnard when they were both elderly that “Giotto is the summit of my desires.”

The Formative Catholic Gesamtkunstwerk

Nearly all the nineteenth- and twentieth-century French and Spanish artists in this book were born into Roman Catholic families and raised Catholic. This is also true of a surprising number of the historical and contemporary artists from the United States, Germany, and even Britain. For those born in any decade prior to 1960, their formative years in the Catholic Church would have included the following teachings: that the entire world is filled with divine grace; that the glory of God is reflected in the magnificence of the Creation; that every sentient being co-creates with God as it unfolds in its own form; that the members of the Church were all held in the loving embrace of the Virgin Mary, who understands our pain because she herself experienced profound human suffering; and that they were all members of the mystical Body of Christ on Earth. These artists grew up in a world alive with divine grace, albeit one in which the dangers of sin were warned against repeatedly. Moreover, the spiritual culture in which these impressionable, aesthetically inclined children were raised was centered on a heady Gesamtkunstwerk that was the traditional Catholic Mass, which incorporated visual, poetic, musical, ritual, and aromatic arts. The Mass itself was part of a larger gestalt, the entire immersive experience of living in, and being an expression of, a vast Gesamtkunstwerk of spiritual depth and beauty.

In effect, this aesthetically rich spiritual formation in childhood provided a feeder system for the arts. As eight internationally prominent artists relate in the following profiles, certain formative experiences often resulted in a lingering fascination with one or two particular concepts. It might have been the notion of the Fall, Resurrection, Confession, Revelation, the Creation, the state of being incarnate, or the cumulative effects of repetitive prayer. With one exception, these artists do not use direct symbols from the Catholic faith in their art, nor do they create Catholic art. Rather, they often find that one or more of the religious concepts that particularly intrigued them as children tend to have a presence in some, or all, of their artworks.

In accord with many other art critics, Arthur Danto stated that the name Sean Scully (b. 1945) belongs on the shortest of short lists of the major painters of our time. The art critic Kelly Grovier, writing in The Times of London in 2013 about his selections for the book 100 Works of Art That Will Define Our Age, for instance, named Scully’s Doric series as the “stand-out work from the crowd of superlatives.” His abstract paintings and prints have been described as emotionally convincing,
even tragic works that mysteriously convey “a living, intense current of pictorial eloquence” that reaches deep into the core of one’s sensibility. His layered colors have a muted quality as if their vitality is compromised in struggle with the darker tones. Because the structure of the paintings is composed of geometric forms—blocks, wide stripes, and intriguingly irregular grids—critics often praise Scully for his rigor and discipline.

Lest his paintings be regarded solely as formal achievements, though, the artist has alluded during interviews in recent years to the formative spiritual event of his personal and creative life. At this point, the art journalists abruptly change the subject. Here follows the story as he related it in an interview for this book.

Sean Scully was born in Dublin during the final weeks of World War II, but bleak postwar economic conditions forced his family to emigrate to “an Irish ghetto” in London (north Islington) shortly before his fourth birthday. They lived in a house rented by his grandmother that was filled with relatives plus a few boarders. Uprooted from their past and struggling in a city that looked down on them, the families of the neighborhood were linked and sustained in a hostile culture by membership in their parish church. At age six, Scully was enrolled in the local convent school. A sensitive child, he resonated deeply with the spiritual ambiance, the communal prayers, the rituals and songs of the Mass, and the teachings about God’s love for the world: the Creation filled with divine grace. Scully remembers being completely happy in the “religious world,” held in the nurturing embrace of the Church and the Blessed Mother. As his first artistic project, he bought rubber molds of the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, and a rabbit so that he could make plaster statues, paint them, and imagine friendships among them.

Scully’s father was a barber who had to work seven days a week to make ends meet. Accompanied by his wife, he went door to door on Sundays to give haircuts to working men on the only day they were at home. Eventually, the nuns at Scully’s school found out that his parents routinely violated the Commandment to “keep holy the Sabbath.” With unforgiving rigidity, the priests and nuns involved declared that the situation was intolerable and made it impossible for Scully to remain in the Catholic school. Thus he was suddenly expelled into a second and far more wrenching exile. The public school into which he was placed was “full of emptiness and violence.” The rich, imaginative realm he had cherished was replaced by a system focused solely on what could be seen. He found “the banality of it crushing and the shock profoundly disturbing.” Yet his initial, formative experience of aesthetic imagination turned out to be his mooring: “Taking all those things into account, at some early moment in my life I decided I was going to be an artist.”

His family subsequently moved to a rough section of southeast London inhabited by various immigrant groups, an area Scully recalls as dismal and “soul-destroying.” When he was about ten years of age, Scully initiated the possibility of a rapprochement with the Roman Catholic Church. As it happened, the route between Scully’s public elementary school and his home took him past a Catholic church. One day he went inside and found himself standing alone in the familiar atmosphere, at once resonant of his earlier Eden and his tribulation of banishment. As his eyes moved around the sanctuary, he saw a white candle, 18 inches tall and a few inches in diameter. He took it. Concealing the candle under his sweater, Scully walked out of the church and did not stop until he reached his own backyard, where he buried his treasure. He
repeated this modus operandi on several other days, adding secretly to the liturgical stash carefully interred behind his home. In retrospect, one can see that his poetic logic of loss and reengagement, his expressive gesture, and his patient accretion of effect are all characteristics of the paintings that lay ahead.

One afternoon a priest knocked at Scully’s door. “Do you have something that belongs to God?” he asked the boy. Scully shook his head. “Because if you do have something that belongs to God,” the priest continued kindly, “and you give it to me, I could take it back to God’s house, and you would be forgiven.” Scully silently weighed the options and then led the priest to the backyard and the tomb of the snow-white candles. Once they were dug up and wiped off, the priest took them and left, leaving Scully set apart, once again, from his spiritual home. In theological terms, the priest, although gentle in the execution of his mission, was guilty of a sin of omission, for he did not bother to delve beneath the surface by asking why the boy felt a need to have something from the sanctuary secretly ensconced at his home—and why he selected those pure white candles, which allow a soft light to bathe the sanctuary. The priest had taken a solemn vow to minister to people’s spiritual needs, but he probably told himself, for the sake of his own convenience, that a child’s mind is a frivolous thing—when, in fact, this child’s mind was subtle, tender, and yearning for the Church to redeem itself in order to save them both.

Religious expulsion, like any other trauma, might result in a psyche skewed by bitterness—or in sensitivity to the tragic dimension of life. Scully, while still a child, established a small animal hospital for healing wounded neighborhood pets. In his adolescence he discovered Rhythm and Blues, particularly the music of John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, and Sunny Boy Williams. For a while he ran an R&B club in which he played hard-to-get records from the United States. For a shorter while, Scully, his brother, and a friend formed an R&B band. “I’m not interested any longer in organized religion, but I’m very interested in the issue of spirituality—and soul in art,” he explains. “R&B is soul music…. It comes out of a sense of loss, but it has a life-affirming beat that runs all the way through it. My paintings have the same thing, this relentless taut musical quality. When you have these lines [in the paintings], they’re almost like guitar strings—in space. And they’re vibrative.”

Formally, Scully considers his antecedents to lie in post-Impressionism, particularly Cézanne, while “abstract expressionism and minimalism give my work its flavor, its emblematic quality.” If one is aware of Scully’s formative spiritual trauma, however, it is impossible to miss it reverberating without end in the formal qualities of his art. He creates his irregular grids by painting the various panels, blocks, or sections separately, sometimes in different rooms and sometimes separated by a considerable interval of time. He then composes the painting by putting the panels, “each with its own spirit,” into an arrangement of “seemingly simple geometric divisions using horizontals and verticals, the architectonic language of the contemporary world.”

He notes,

I put things in competition with each other. I paint the areas and put them together, and that makes a relationship…. But the relationships are not completely controlled or completely articulated…. I keep the areas separate, and I bang them together. So this involves a certain kind of violence or abruptness, and it can also imply the possibility that relationships can be broken….
Regarding the use of geometric structure and counterpoint in his paintings, he explains, “Art is fundamentally spiritual and deeply emotional . . . . Even though my work is geometric, it is made with a personal energy. I want the emotion to overcome the geometry and humanize it.”24 As for color, Scully arrives at his poignant and freighted colors through layers of overpainting. Not designed to manipulate the viewer, they merely respond to emotions he is feeling.25 He observes that white represents “spiritual life, lightness” but that his own whites are a tragedy, being “never white . . . kind of dirty.”26 The ever-present black areas—the only pure, absolute color—connote the oppressive, authoritarian, wounding, and bullying forces of the world. “The light in my paintings is almost always sad and melancholic,” he adds, “but the surfaces are vital and sensual” (see Figure 17).27

Scully likes his paintings to be hung low because he doesn’t want the viewer to have to look up to them: “They’re not meant to be about a demonstration of power. They are questioning power relationships and the mystery of that.”28 Although he notes that his paintings contain “a lot of melancholia” and “a sense of loss,” he points out that they have “a pronounced, built-in sense of morality.”29 “It’s interesting,” he adds, “that something small can stand up and be in competition, dynamically, and have to deal with something much bigger . . . .”30 The emotional expressiveness in his paintings is held in “a certain kind of austerity,” which he also finds in the works of Masaccio, Piero della Francesca, Duccio, Cimabue, Velázquez, Mondrian, Rothko, and, Matisse—in their most austere works. Scully sees himself as paraphrasing and maintaining a line of belief that includes those artists, as well as Titian, Courbet, Van Gogh, and Klee.31 Primarily, the painters he admires show restraint, pathos, and uncertainty.32 His goal is to create art that has “eternal truth in it as well as modern truth.”33

Scully’s oeuvre with its intriguing materiality and compelling presence can be seen as both a monumental *via dolorosa* and an insistent declaration on behalf of that which is vital, luminous, and pure of heart. His sense of the spiritual involves the practice of empathy and “creating a zone of conscience and poetic feelings that can stand up to our awesome technological power.” He feels that “the architecture of our spirituality is in ruins”34 and that, as the world has become more technological, a human need for mystery and the individually authentic experience has become more desperate:

Painting, because it’s outside the technological evolutionary loop, can deal with that . . . . It almost has the nature of nature. It provides us with the kinds of experience that we can’t dominate . . . . We’ve lost our relationship with the world as a sacred place, and that has enormous influence on what I make.35

The art critic Donald Kuspit has stated, “Scully’s work is the next step—one might even say ‘advance’—in abstract painting, all the more emotionally convincing, even tragic, than the elegant abstractions of Rothko or, for that matter, of Agnes Martin.”36

The impulse to “re-present things” of this world has led Cornelia Parker (b. 1956) to create some of the most strikingly original installation arts of our time. Profiled by BBC Four in June 2013 as “a world-renowned sculptor and installation artist,” she first came to the attention of the art world in the late 1980s with works
that involve the seeming suspension in thin air of numerous entities that were transfigured from their earlier life and brought into new relationship. In 1988, Parker hired a steamroller to crush a long array of silver-plated objects she had purchased in flea markets. She then took them to an art gallery where, as she explains, “they were formalized into thirty separate pools, with every piece suspended to hover a few inches above the ground, resurrecting the objects and somehow replacing their lost volume.”37 The pieces are suspended from the ceiling by thin metal wires, which look en masse almost like a drawing. The result is Thirty Pieces of Silver, in which “All the pieces were united in one death,” the artist notes, and then “the debris” became a shining field of circles that hover as if on water, “so the piece became like a natural object.”38 In 1989 Parker created Matter and What It Means, using hundreds of defaced coins suspended by fine wire to form two human figures floating above the stone floor in a darkened gallery and lit from the side.

Her formidable Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View (1991) “must be regarded,” asserts Iwona Blazwick, director of the Whitechapel Gallery in London, “as one of the most important installations of the late twentieth century.”39 It is representative of much of her work by virtue of its playful ironies, its forceful mode of creation, and its striking aesthetics. Parker began with the construction within a gallery space of a garden shed (widely used in British working- and middle-class homes as the man’s retreat), furnished with a hanging bare light bulb in the center and with the usual accumulation of tools and cast-off items relegated to storage. She photographed the shed and then had it transported to an open field, where she engaged the British Army to blow it up. In terms of direct agency, the artist herself blew up the shed, as she was invited to suppress the plunger of the explosive mechanism. Assisted by several soldiers, Parker then gathered up all the shards and surviving items from the explosion and transported them back to the gallery, where she suspended them from fine wire such that the shape of the exploding shed was suggestively reconstructed, as it might look a fraction of a second after the impact. A small doll and other poignant survivors hang amid the debris, now all joined in a visually arresting assemblage that is enveloped by dramatic shadows on the walls cast by the bare light bulb at the center. The artist recalls from the initial installation, “As the objects were suspended one by one, they began to lose their aura of death and appear reanimated, in limbo.”40 This work is on long-term display at the Tate Modern, ever responsive to subtle currents of air that stir it.

Parker subsequently used charred pieces of wood left after fires—one caused by lightening, the other by arson—to create two elegantly abstracted, suspended reconstructions of burned churches: Mass (Colder Darker Matter) (1997) and Anti-Mass (2005), which is the cover art for this book. She also created a suspended work involving broken and discarded silver-plated brass-band instruments, which she had crushed flat in a large press and then artfully arranged in a visual fanfare: Perpetual Canon (2004). Parker has worked with a wide range of materials over the past 30 years, drawn to each of them by her fascination with transmuting the disregarded, the neglected, and the degraded into the remarkable. In 2010 she was elected to the Royal Academy of Arts.

Cornelia Parker was raised on a farm in Cheshire, the middle of three daughters. Every Sunday she and her sisters were dispatched via a long public bus ride to attend
Mass and receive religious instruction in a catechism class afterward. (Parker’s father was English Protestant; her mother was German Catholic.) She recalls:

I got enough of the visual richness of Catholicism without paying too much attention to the dogma. We went to the 90-minute Mass, the High Mass, which is quite a long time when you are a kid. Of course, it was in Latin, and even though you had a Missal to guide you, really, your imagination took over. There was definitely drama—and when it was time for Communion, there were three layers of transformation: the wafer was made of rice paper, which was supposed to be bread, which was supposed to be the Body of Christ—and the wine was transformed to being the Blood of Christ.41

Although the liturgy intrigued the young artist, the theology of sin was trying:

There was the idea that you start out with a white soul and then it gets dirty as it gradually gets covered with black marks. This was something very vivid. I had it in my mind’s eye throughout childhood that I had sinned and had got these dirty marks on my clean white soul. I’d go to Confession, but I thought my sins were so great that I’d lie and make up lesser sins instead. I’d be told to say only a few “Our Father”的s and a few “Hail, Mary”的s for penance—but, really, I’d end up having an even blacker soul, which would compound the problem. So I felt I had this blackened white environment in my body, which is my soul.

This image sometimes shows up in her work, she notes, when you see “the little black dots dancing around [on wire] in front of your eyes.” Her attraction to tarnished items may be related to this experience as well:

I choose things that are not perfect, things that have been damaged and are then redeemed. And I don’t know if that’s something done consciously throughout my work, but I think that throughout your formative years you have this playing on your mind. I’m sure it must inform what you do . . . . I prefer things that are damaged to things that are too perfect. Her attraction to compromised or discarded materials, such as the items she’s drawn to at flea markets, is embedded in an impulse to create resurrection: “the idea that damaged materials or materials that have gone through some kind of death, as it were, are not to be rejected: they are elevated and become art.”

Of her suspended artworks, Parker observes,

When you have to take the work down, it kind of becomes dormant or gets killed off again, and then you resurrect it every time you put it up. It will have a different feeling when you put it up in a different place because, on the microscopic level, it will be very different. It will never be like the fixed bronze or the carved marble.

At university, Parker was surprised to find how many of her fellow art students were Catholic, much higher a proportion than had been the case in her public secondary school. Moreover, she remembers, “You could always tell by people’s work whether they were Catholic or Protestant.” She later went on to earn an MFA, but in developing her fascination with the potential of materials and with moving sculpture
beyond “the lump,” she was inspired less by school than by the Art Povera movement and the Dematerialization of the Art Object movement, as well as Duchamp’s “non-retinal” art and works by Bruce Nauman, Walter de Maria, Gordon Matta-Clark, Christo, and Claes Oldenburg. She observes, “My work is consistently unstable, in flux; leant against a wall, hovering, or so fragile it might collapse. Perhaps that is what I feel about my own relationship to the world. It is a universal condition, that of vulnerability.”

Like all visual artists, Parker prefers to keep the meaning of her works and their titles open-ended. She relegates any political orientations to the background, to a state of “hovering.” Still, she had a sense when she was starting out that being an artist was itself “a political act”: “It is a decision you make, and although it is not exactly like joining the priesthood, it is something that may or may not be useful to society and is a philosophical path . . . . I feel that anything I want to do in life can fit under its umbrella.” Not exactly like joining the priesthood—more like founding a religious order of one, with a strong moral code that rewards resilience with resurrection, that elevates the downtrodden and the crushed to unimagined formations of aesthetic glory, and that reminds us all, with her every work of art, that the entire material plane is full of possibilities.

Children raised in Germany during the years following World War II generally heard very little about the Nazi era from their parents or other adults. No one wanted to talk about it. So when Anselm Kiefer (b. 1945) exhibited photographs of himself in 1969 wearing a Nazi uniform and giving the Nazi salute in front of monuments and tourist attractions in German and other European cities, the response from the German public was outrage. Undaunted, Kiefer—now referred to in the press as “a titan of world art”—went on to paint large canvases featuring the walls of stone buildings recalling Nazi architecture, or crematoriums, or wooden barracks in concentration camps; some featured grim landscapes of barren furrowed fields in snow or old railway tracks leading to oblivion. The notion of Confession as a saving sacrament seems to loom insistently over much of Kiefer’s early work: nothing can shift in a situation, either internally or externally, until one names what was done.

Kiefer was born at home a few months before the end of the war, and their house was bombed that very night. Later he served as an altar boy and notes that he can still recite the Latin Mass. At one point he considered becoming an archbishop. He recalls,

I was interested in transcendence from a very early age. I was interested in what was over there, what was behind life. So when I had my First Communion I was very disappointed. I had expected something amazing and surprising and spiritual. Instead, all I got was a bicycle. That wasn’t what I was after at all.

Although disappointed on First Communion Day, Kiefer has stated in an interview that he received a visitation from the Virgin Mary when he was seven or eight years old:

Mary appeared to me one morning. It was not in a dream, I was already awake. The vision took place in the room where I slept. I cannot tell you precisely what Mary was
wearing, but she had on a light beige and blue dress. She looked exactly like a Pre-Raphaelite or Nazarene painting. Today I would say she looked kitsch. Mary did not speak to me; she smiled.46

After earning an art degree in Freiburg, Kiefer studied informally with Joseph Beuys at the Düsseldorf Kunstkademie in the early 1970s. Although he was inspired by Beuys’ shamanic art-making, Kiefer chose a different subject: bearing witness to the Nazi genocide and attempted conquest of Europe—as well as addressing the Nazis’ damage to German culture and its historical communion with nature, which was Beuys’ focus. In the eyes of the art world, this highly charged work is regarded as Beuys’ and Kiefer’s “managing to make a new legitimate Romantic art” after the Nazi rupture of German cultural history.47 Kiefer, though, had dual emphases: foremost, the Nazis’ genocide but also the Nazis’ damage to the German people and their culture. This was his main focus until the mid-1980s, when he shifted from national subjects to a larger scope of rebirth and regeneration embedded in theology, occult symbolism, mysticism, and myth.

Kiefer’s paintings have been inflected with his interest in the Kabbalah, alchemy, the poetry of Paul Celan and Ingeborg Bachmann, the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Jewish mystic Isaac Luria, the Gnostic Valencius, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, the Book of Exodus, Manichaeism, and Teutonic and Greek mythology. After several trips to Middle Eastern cultures, cosmology infused his extremely large canvases, especially from 1995 to 2001, as did the insertion of dried weeds, straw, ash, and other materials. His works are set within a mythic space of death, rebirth, transcendence, and a cyclical sense of history. “Art,” Kiefer observes, “cannot live on itself. It has to draw on a broader knowledge. It needs to bear the scars of the world, the wounds of life.”48 In 1999 the Japan Art Association awarded him the Praemium Imperiale for lifetime achievement, praising his uncommon sense of art’s duty to engage the past and the ethical questions of the present.

In 2007, Kiefer became the first living artist invited to create an installation for permanent display at the Louvre since Georges Braque in 1953. Offered the stairwell linking the Egyptian and the Sumerian halls, Kiefer produced a monumental textured painting (roughly 30 feet high and 15 feet wide) of a naked man lying on his back under a starry nighttime sky, connected to the constellations above by a faint beam of light that falls upon his solar plexus. Kiefer has explained that the painting is a self-portrait “in the universe,” which he named *Athanor*, for the alchemical furnace that transforms base metal to gold and mortality to immortality. He also created a pair of sculptures for the two facing niches at the top of the stairs. One is an earth-like mound with sunflowers, which he has likened to the hill on which Christ was crucified—although the piece is entitled *Hortus Conclusus*. Across from it is *Danaë*, in which a giant blackened sunflower, bereft of petals, emerges from a pile of lead books. A scattering of gold-dipped seeds at the base of the sculpture alludes to the Immaculate Conception.49

In 2007–2008 Kiefer created a cycle of work entitled *Mary Walks amid the Thorn*, which is the title of a German hymn sung during Advent and at Christmas. The cycle presents dramatic, expressionistic interpretations of events in the life of the Virgin Mary through one sculpture and 30 paintings, some of which were begun in the 1970s and finished with the artist’s sedimenting technique in the months prior
to the exhibition. Regarding the Catholic dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary and the Virgin Birth of Christ, Kiefer has commented:

I always thought it audacious of the Catholic Church to proclaim such a dogma. It is such a challenge to common sense. Making an assertion that is completely untenable is somewhat artistic. The absolute power that can be experienced by an artist at work must be seen parallel to the Church that claims Mary was a virgin three times, prior to the visitation, while, and after giving birth. That has always fascinated me. I would almost call it a kind of Dadaism. It’s crazy.50

A comment Kiefer made elsewhere about art seems to hold as well for his experience of Catholicism: “All painting is always about walking around something that cannot be said.”51

On encountering one of the massive abstract sculptures of carved and layered cedar created by Ursula von Rydingsvard (b. 1942), it feels as if you are suddenly in the presence of a powerfully embodied force of nature, yet its irregular curves and surfaces gouged with myriad small cuts suggest an almost animate being that has survived untold difficulties and wouldn’t mind if you approached it and put a hand on it. Her sculptures present intensely freighted paradoxes and evoke a jumble of visceral responses, often beginning with a slight sense of shock at seeing the massive proportions and then taking in more of the organic gestalt until it seems almost like a comforting, or at least intriguing, presence. Von Rydingsvard, who has been called “one of the most significant sculptors of her generation,”52 succeeds in expressing something raw and elemental with remarkable sophistication and grace,” as the curator Helaine Posner has observed.53 The art critic Avis Berman has analyzed the effect of the work in this way: “Much of its impact derives from the authority and intensity of feeling, but each piece is enriched as well by the contrast between a monolithic scale and an intimacy of detail. This commanding fusion of austerity, spirituality and emotional force grabs you at once.”54

These massive and compelling creations are made by a woman who, for the first two and a half years of her life, was a tiny speck trapped in the vast Nazi war machine: her father had been conscripted from the family farm in Poland to work in a Nazi agricultural forced-labor camp in north-central Germany under strict disciplinary controls. His wife and children were permitted to join him. The future artist, their fifth child, was born Ursula Karoliszyn in 1942 in the camp. She was named for the saint, yes, but also carries the ancient name of the great mythological she-bear. After the war, the family was put through five difficult years of being moved to eight refugee camps for Polish-speaking people who found themselves, along with millions of others, in the postwar category known as Displaced Persons.

These refugee camps were usually located in barren former military bases with the families housed in barracks that lacked insulation and were composed of “raw wooden floors, raw wooden walls, raw wooden ceilings.” The living conditions were relentlessly trying, and the only respite, in the child’s mind, came on Sunday and various Holy Days of Obligation when everyone attended Mass in a barrack that was larger than the others and had a cross on it. Von Rydingsvard recalls,
The church was extremely important. Inside it was clean, and a tremendous effort was made to make it feel special, as though there were something of great consequence in there. It was the only place where you saw white linen, with a little bit of embroidery around it. Soft candlelight illuminated the wooden rafters. Incense filled the air. Hearing the entire congregation respond in unison always had a powerful effect on me. It was the only place where you saw clean clothes: the vestments that the priest and altar boys wore. And people’s movements were so elegant and serene in the Mass. I remember being very attentive to the part when the priest would hold the chalice, put a little cloth-covered, square board on top, and then drape it with a beautifully clean, white, folded, ironed, cloth napkin. When the priest opened the tabernacle, you would see the almost silk-like materials that puffed out and lined its walls, making certain for me as a child that Christ lived in it. It all had a profound effect on me. Outside the church, everything in the camp was . . . rough.

The Karoliszyn family was finally able to immigrate to the United States in 1950. With the aid of relocation services and a Polish-American organization, they were settled in Plainville, Connecticut. The artist-to-be continued to moor her existence, now fraught with a new set of challenges, in the religious sphere in which she had taken shelter during the refugee years, a time when “really, except for my family there was nothing else to embrace, and it might have even been a matter of life or death for me to do that.” She sought to be always in a state of grace, sang in the church choir, and announced when she was 11 years old her intention to become a nun. By the time she finished high school, though, von Rydingsvard’s focus had shifted from religion to art, a field in which she earned three degrees, including an MFA in sculpture from Columbia University.

In 1980 von Rydingsvard made a study trip to Italy and was particularly moved by the frescoes at Assisi. She adds, “There’s a Madonna and Child by Giotto that I can look at for only a few moments; then I have to turn away because it is so full of spirituality.” When she made a “roots trip” to Poland and Ukraine (home of her Polish-speaking father) in 1985, she discovered the cultural inflections of spiritual art:

The icons represent the Ukraine that had deep religious feelings, that translated their spirituality into icons that are oddly hunky and meaty. These bodies have weight—there’s almost a fleshy sexuality to them . . . . These figures are tuned into reality. They never forget. Giotto forgets, seals himself off, puts himself into a realm of spiritual euphoria. Well, these icons are also spiritual, but it’s a different type of spirituality.

She might well be describing her own works, many of which allude to common tools and utensils of Central European agrarian culture, made and used for centuries by people who knew the ways of nature intimately, who aligned their spiritual lives with the Church, who persevered and survived. Von Rydingsvard implicitly feels herself to be rooted in a long lineage of people who fashioned earth and wood, one extending back much further than the historical rural cultures of Central Europe. Yet she is adamant about not focusing on the suffering in the history of her family or her forebears: “One of the things I would be most ashamed of is to have any pathos in my work. Or to have blatant pain, like the kind that Francis Bacon put into his painting. I want this kind of packed pride, this containment of emotions—like Giotto.”
Although von Rydingsvard has worked in various media, most often she creates her sculptures from 12–18 feet long 4 inches by 4 inches beams of precision-milled cedar from British Columbia. She prefers cedar simply because it has almost no grain so is neutral, “like paper,” with the right solidity and the right amount of give. She never draws her sculptures before building them. Rather, she begins by drawing a shape in chalk on the studio floor and then cuts pencil-marked cedar beams to fit within the shape. Myriad small cuts are made in the surface of each cut beam. She then places the beams inside the drawn shape, which becomes the first level. She builds upward, layer by layer, finding the form as she goes, “groping” with the wood to find out how far it will meet her intentions, a “very vulnerable” process of confrontation and creation. Next, the shaped, textured, and layered beams are laminated with glue. Finally, she rubs powered graphite into the textured surface. The result is, as one critic put it, “work of such mind-boggling intricacy that Nature herself might be envious.”

Von Rydingsvard credits her lineage in “a long line of Polish peasant farmers” for her facility with wood: “There is a familiarity, a feeling of comfort and grace. And because of the familiarity, I can really push it around.” Still, it is the originality of the work that has won so much praise, as the art critic Grace Glueck observed, “Standing on its own, shunning the influence of Minimalism and other sculptural trends of the last three decades, putting emphasis on the handmade and the associative, Ms. von Rydingsvard’s work has made an important place for itself.”

Although the artist always found minimalist sculpture to be too controlled and sterile, she has avoided mimicking nature, preferring to make sculpture “look a little as though nature might have brushed through it.” Martin Friedman, director emeritus of the Walker Art Center, has stated of von Rydingsvard, “She is in the front rank of sculptors today, bringing intense energy and gravitas to sculpture. She is also a key figure in restoring to sculpture its sense of craft. In her work, labor has been elevated to a sacred process.”

Her first mature works were named for saints, though she intends the titles she chooses to be merely allusive: Song of a Saint (Saint Eulalia) (1979); Saint Martin’s Dream (1980); and Stations for Santa Clara (1982). In 1991 she created Iggy’s Pride, which appears to grow from a hillside at the Oliver Ranch collection in California, suggesting a geological formation. In 2002 she created a five-story high, ethereal and translucent sculpture of co-polyethylene that is suspended from the 40 feet by 40 feet skylight of the Queens County Family Courthouse in New York City: “I used the work to offer that atrium, which is the heart of the courthouse, something that felt spiritual in the context of whatever the people are about to face.” In 2005 von Rydingsvard was commissioned to create a sculpture for the ground floor of the Bloomberg Building in New York. As a reaction to the minimalist, right-angled space, she installed an 88-feet-long “voluptuous procession” entitled Berwici Pici Pa (see Figure 18): “I wanted something primitive, something sensuous that wandered from the wall, up the lobby, and then back down the lobby.” For a commission in Madison Square Park in New York in 2006–2007, she created a 33-feet-high sheltering form made of light-filtering polyurethane resin, Damski Czepek; it was so alluring that 12 couples got married in it. In 2013 she created a public sculpture for the area in front of the Barclay Center in Brooklyn. With a rare touch of irony, von
Rydingsvard gave this 19.5-feet-high bronze sculpture, weighing 12,000 pounds and towering over the entry way of a major sports arena, the name *Ona (She)*. The following year she received the 2014 Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Sculpture Center.

Asked if the “inner resonance” a critic identified in her works has a spiritual dimension, the artist replied, “I think there is probably a close relationship between the spiritual and the aesthetic. I would be the last one, though, to define it.”

The prominent sculptor, printmaker, and installation artist **Kiki Smith** (b. 1954)—named for the Irish saint Ciara—began her career at a young age by selecting scrap materials from the studio of her father, the abstract sculptor Tony Smith, in order to construct small shrines to the Virgin Mary and other saints in the backyard of the family home in New Jersey. She also scavenged materials to make dolls, her very own statues. In 2003, when she was featured in the PBS series *Art 21*, she observed,

> It’s one of my loose theories that Catholicism and art have gone well together because both believe in the physical manifestation of the spiritual world—that it’s through the physical world that you have spiritual life, that you have to be here physically in a body. You have all this interaction with objects—with rosaries and medals. It believes in the physical world. It’s a thing culture. It’s also about storytelling, in that sense, about reiterating over and over and over again these mythological stories, about saints and other deities that can come and intervene for you on your behalf. All the saints have attributes that are attached to them, and you recognize them through their iconography. And it’s about transcendence and transmigration—something moving always from one state to another. And art is in a sense like a proof: it’s something that moves from your insides into the physical world, and at the same time it’s just a representation of your insides. It doesn’t rob you of your insides, and it’s always different, but in a different form from your spirit.

Two years later, for a 25-year retrospective exhibition of her work, Smith added,

> I was very influenced by the lives of the saints when I was a kid—you have a body with attributes and artifacts evoked by a sort of magic. Catholicism has these ideas of the host, of eating the body, drinking the body, ingesting a soul or spirit; and then the reliquary, like a chop shop of bodies. Catholicism is always involved in physical manifestation of physical [spiritual?] conditions, always taking inanimate objects and attributing meaning to them. In that way, it’s compatible with art.

Smith is best known for her figurative sculptures—in which the (usually female) body is a site of pain, dignity, resilience, and wisdom. These include striking depictions of Lilith, the Virgin Mary, and Mary Magdalene but also her *Crescent Moon* sculpture (Figure 19). She is also celebrated for her images of animals, her expressions of cosmology, and her uses of the art of printmaking. She states, “Prints mimic what we are as humans: we are all the same, and yet every one is different. I think there’s a spiritual power in repetition, a devotional quality, like saying rosaries.”

Smith fabricates her art in her apartment, explaining, “I want to have an opulent interior life and a spare existence.”
In June 2003 the Museum of Modern Art invited her to be part of a ritual procession in the opening festivities to mark the temporary relocation of their exhibition space to Queens during remodeling. Hundreds of celebrants walked in procession across the Queensboro Bridge, including six men in white peasant shirts carrying a palanquin bearing Kiki Smith, chosen as “a living icon.” With her long, wavy grey hair, a black dress, and her regal bearing, she looked to many like a medieval queen, or a great pagan seer, or perhaps a potent statue come to life.

Within the Gesamtkunstwerk that is the traditional Catholic Mass, embedded in the descending light tinted by stained glass and the thousand-year-old music, encircling the sacrament of the Eucharist, are the ritual words. No part of the Mass could come alive without the Latin words, which reverberated within the sacred space, a language apart from the chatter of one’s interior monologue and the modern clatter, a bridge to that which can only be suggested by phrases, chants, and responses. The words had their own vitality. Saying them, singing them, hearing them bestowed an embodied sense of communion with the sacred.

An internationally renowned creator of word paintings and drawings, Ed Ruscha (b. 1937) recalls his Catholic boyhood in Oklahoma City as “an altar-boy wannabe”: “I kind of spring from Catholicism. I felt like I had this perspective from the Church and going to Mass that was an early childhood base for a lot of my thinking. Some of my work comes out of a quasi-religious thing.” His mother pulled him out of Catholic school after one year because a nun had rapped his knuckles with a pencil, but the family’s sense of Catholicism was richly nourishing for Ruscha and his siblings throughout their formative years.

In addition to a childhood spirituality steeped in the mystical power of certain words, two other influences shaped Ruscha’s art. He moved to Los Angeles and studied not only painting but also graphic art and worked for a time as a graphic artist. However, it was when he encountered Jasper Johns’ flag paintings, works by Robert Rauschenburg, and the Readymades by Marcel Duchamp (whom he met at an art opening in Pasadena in 1963) that Ruscha became inspired to use the popular vernacular in a new kind of art. He would paint words or everyday entities, such as gas stations along Route 66, elevated from their usual associations and considered simply for their particular existence. Ruscha has said that he paints words the way some artists paint flowers, choosing one word over another the way a painter might choose a daisy over a rose. He hopes that viewers can detach the subjects from their common associations and enjoy, or appreciate, their qualities in a fresh way.

“Ed’s interested in the non-discursive aspects of language,” observes the art critic Dave Hickey. Commenting on Ruscha’s “art-intense trip to Europe” in 1961, Hickey writes,

Over the length of his career ... Ruscha has found so much in the past to use that ignoring his artistic precedents diminishes our experience of his paintings ... Having been raised a Roman Catholic, Ruscha had already received his great Italian bequest in the mystery of the Eucharist (Wonder Bread, 1962), in the (Standard) Stations of the Cross and the doctrine of the Incarnate Word that is made modern and manifest in Ruscha’s work.
In 1964 Ruscha created his first screenprint, *Standard Station*, based on his earlier *Standard Station* paintings with their gradations of color in the background. One critic described this dramatic depiction of a gas station as “a modern cathedral where Americans worshipped the god of mobility and speed.” In addition, some saw, as did Hickey, a resonance with the Stations of the Cross. The artist himself, however, makes a distinction between any direct use of symbols and his formative immersion in the visual world of the Catholic Church:

If my work reveals metaphors or symbolism of Catholic tradition, it is only by coincidence. The Church has, throughout history, presented us with a rich tradition of imagery, and this imagery has had a lasting affect on how I proceed to make an object of art. Icons and their presentation, religious tableaux, incense pendulums, chalices, holy cards, stigmata and rays of light, vestments, the Stations of the Cross, symmetry, and framing all combine to be part of my thinking. These icons and emblems were always more elaborate and deeper in history than the Protestant ones. They enrich my approach to the world and are things I don’t want to or need to escape.

In 1973 Ruscha made his first series of large paintings that each featured an image of a single word (*Faith*, *Mercy*, *Pity*, *Hope*, and *Purity*); three small paintings (*Faith*, *Hope*, and *Pity*); and three drawings entitled *Mercy*. Christopher Knight, art critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, considers Ruscha “the visual poet laureate of spiritual displacement and psychological homelessness”—but Ruscha himself observes simply, “I’ve always had a deep respect for things that cannot be explained.”

The phrase *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam* (To the Greater Glory of God) is the motto of the Jesuit order and is commonly abbreviated as A. M. D. G. These are the initials given to the sculptor Antony Gormley (b. 1950) as an infant. There followed years of family prayers, serving as an altar boy, communing with the spiritual presence of the Virgin Mary (represented by a statue in his bedroom), plus six years in a Benedictine boarding school, where his talent for art was encouraged. He left the Church during his university years at Cambridge but wrote his final-year thesis in art history on the Christian paintings of Stanley Spencer. Gormley then traveled for three years in India and Sri Lanka in the early 1970s, learning vipassana (mindfulness) meditation from S. N. Goenka, which he considers “the single most important experience of my life.” He came to know experientially through meditation that the bodymind is more a site of flux, energy, and dynamic boundaries than a fixed entity. He decided to become a sculptor and returned to London, where he studied at three art schools sequentially.

Influenced both by Catholicism’s aesthetic uses of the body to convey profound concepts and by vipassana’s demonstration of the body as a node of memories, emergence, and interrelatedness, Gormley began in the 1980s to make body-cast sculptures, always beginning with a plaster cast of his own body in various postures and then fabricating the statue in lead, iron, steel, or fiberglass. This set him against the current trends, but he has long felt that the body is “the lost subject of modern art.” He has installed scores of these nearly faceless sculptures in nature (including tidal areas), on rooftops in cities, and in galleries—always in the hope that viewers
will respond to the figures with feelings of empathy and the communion of attention and shared space. His 66-feet-tall Angel of the North sculpture, with geometric wings spanning 166 feet, made him the best-known sculptor in England when it was installed in 1998 overlooking a freeway near Newcastle upon Tyne.

Gormley continues to create these dramatic and somewhat Catholic-inflected statues, but he has also become intrigued with taking the body-as-art beyond a unitary form. Since 2000 he has created ephemeral, allusive figurative sculptures that suggest energy fields and that “relate precisely to the experience of vipassana,”\(^80\) such as Domain Field and his Quantum Cloud pieces. Gormley was awarded the Turner Prize in 1994 and was elected to the Royal Academy of Art in 2003. Although he isadamant that his works are not attached to any religion, he has stated that the “idea of the contemplative icon” is central to his art, all of which arises “out of deep relationalism.”\(^81\)

The concept of landscape, as distinct from the land, denotes a human perception or interpretation of nature. The landscape paintings of April Gornik (b. 1953) are haunting vistas in which eerie forms of light “push the space around,” as she puts it,\(^82\) so as to create an intriguing phenomenological locus, which is her true subject. Her mystical, imaginary play of light and water, often combined with trees and suggestively erotic landforms, has been hailed by the art critic Donald Kuspit as “the grand climax of two centuries of modern landscape painting.”\(^83\) Her formative years were shaped by two entities of great complexity: the Roman Catholic Church and the proximity of a vast inland sea called Lake Erie, which casts its reflected light, its storms, and its calm over the artist’s native city, Cleveland. Of her childhood encounter with the Church, she recalls,

I saw the world of full of grace, but Catholicism was also a world full of mystery, fear, and repressed sexuality. The whole snarl of effect—the mystery, the pain of Christ on the Cross, the sensuality, the excitement, the colorfulness—is a rich mix for a child.

I don’t think you grow up understanding it. You grow up with it as a mystery.\(^84\)

Gornik studied at the Cleveland Institute of Art and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, then one of the foremost centers of conceptual and postminimalist art. Gornik was an eager adherent, but after she graduated in 1976 the tenets of “tough-minded” conceptualism lost their grip. To her surprise, she was seized with a vision one day of a vertical composition with poles and a water-like expanse behind them. She quickly grabbed some scraps of wood from the floor of her studio, glued them together, and painted on the surface. With some trepidation that she was moving backwards in the trajectory of art she had been taught, Gornik continued to paint light-filled landscapes, moving onto plywood and eventually canvas. After she moved to New York, in 1978, she became interested in works by the American Luminists and other landscape artists who seek to paint, through “special effects,” the experience of landscape, “the sensation, the spiritual essence of the landscape.”\(^85\) She is also drawn to Vermeer’s luminous waterfront in View of Delft and to the interpretative landscapes of Arthur Dove, Charles Burchfield, and the animistic Emily Carr. Looking back on her childhood orientation, Gornik observes, “My willingness to
consider that a landscape could contain something that was significant—spiritually, psychically, psychologically, and emotionally—was helped by all that emphasis on the world as a reflection of God.86

She usually bases her paintings on a photograph or other image of a landscape that strikes a chord with her. She then begins the process of “horsing around” with the elements in the image, usually by means of a computer, before she begins to paint in oil, distributing trees, rocks, and other formations across the picture in ways that create an abstract world. The light she creates has been described by a critic as “sunlight that does not seem to be reflected on water but rather to have gone around the earth and come up underneath it.”87 Gornik’s atmospheres always contain inseparably “the whole snarl”: power, fear, sensuality, spirituality, an expansive but somewhat ominous and empty space, and a beauty both vulnerable and resilient—all held in the presence of the mystical light that she suffuses throughout the scene. She seeks to create “a shallow-deep space” that is “the way a person could feel in an interior space rather than an exterior space.”88 Of the ambiguous perspective in her paintings, Gornik explains, “I’m apt to leave the viewer at what I think of as a ‘disadvantage’ point. . . . It’s often difficult to tell if you are standing on land, in water, or hovering above water.”89

The spiritual aspect of her paintings has always been “profoundly important” to Gornik, for whom it is essentially about connecting and often involves a deep struggle. While she hopes that her work is “contemplatively stimulating” for the viewer, Gornik claims only that her landscapes are “personally spiritualized, personally fictionalized.”90

Many more examples could be added to this group, certainly including Bruce Conner (1933–2008), whose vast retrospective of intriguing works in the exhibition 2000 BC at the De Young Museum in San Francisco in 2000 included many references to his Catholic formative experience in Kansas.

As we have seen in other areas of modern and contemporary art, the reality described by the artists themselves is commonly denied or held at arm’s length by most of the professional art world. For example, the press release for a contemporary art exhibition at a prominent gallery in New York—Three Catholics: Andy Warhol, Edward Ruscha and Robert Mapplethorpe—repeats the standard narrative of the origins of modern art (that modern art was born largely as a rebellion against religion, especially the Catholic Church, so any spiritual content in the art is, therefore, all but unthinkable) and expresses “surprise” that anyone raised Catholic could grow up to make significant modern art, suggesting that the three featured artists are anomalies:

Modernism was in large part formed by its move away from the Church, organized religion; by its secular nature. Not unlike children rebelling and separating from their parents, modern artists steered very clearly away from the influence and context of the church. This led to a modernist formalism that eschewed not only spiritual content but eventually any referentiality beyond the artwork itself. It is surprising to realize then that three significant postwar artists: Andy Warhol, Edward Ruscha and Robert Mapplethorpe have in common a strict Catholic upbringing and made art that very much reflects and reacts against that.91
It is actually not all that “surprising” if one considers the extensive evidence of spirituality in modern art.

The artists profiled in this section, and many more from their demographic group, constitute the end of the feeder system of artists and writers that was the pre–Vatican II Catholic spiritual formation in childhood. This orientation ended when the Roman Catholic Church met in Rome in 1962–1965 to modernize itself and become more rational in the eyes of the modern world. Although numerous constructive, wise, and long overdue reforms were made at the Second Vatican Council, it also resulted in the abrupt discontinuation of aesthetic formative experiences that had produced so many outstanding modern artists. The emphasis was shifted to a greater focus on the biblical text and away from imagery and other cognitively expansive, aesthetic modes of spiritual communion with the ineffable. Most American Catholics under age 50 have no experiential knowledge of the gestalt described by the artists in this section. It is, at this point, merely a matter of cultural history—but it is a relevant piece in the history of modern and contemporary art. Young artists from a Catholic background will continue to enter the professional art world, of course, but it should be understood by anyone interested in spiritual influences in modern art that those born after the late 1950s are coming from a background significantly different from that experienced by their predecessors—and the portion they constitute in the body of professional artists as a whole may well be smaller than in the past.

**Expressions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam**

Many prominent artists of the post–World War II period incorporated into their work various symbols or other references to the Abrahamic religion in which they had passed their formative years. This act of engagement was often religious as well as aesthetic, sometimes taking place in the artists’ later years, after their reputation was well established. For a few, creating new visual expressions of a religious orientation was a life-long practice.

### Judaism in Post-World War II Art

Raised in an immigrant Orthodox family in Brooklyn, **Ben Shahn (1898–1969)** studied art in Paris in the 1920s and created lyrical works of Social Realism in the 1930s, for which he is best known. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, however, he became passionately committed to creating modern visual expressions of the depth and beauty of Judaism. For the rest of his professional life, he produced elegant, semi-abstracted figurative works, sometimes about political issues but mostly about Judaism, often with Hebrew lettering floating across the canvas. Undaunted by a damming review of his exhibition in 1947 at the Museum of Modern Art by Clement Greenberg, the relentless champion of Abstract Expressionism,92 Shahn went on to create, for instance, lyrical illustrations for the book *The Alphabet of Creation* (1954), a legend from the Zohar about the relationship between Hebrew letters and divinity. As the Jewish Museum in New York has observed,
From the Jewish school of Vilkomir to an acculturated, secular life in Brooklyn to a resurgence of Jewish feeling and heritage in his later years, Ben Shahn's dedication to humanitarian causes and his belief in the regenerative powers of art offer a fascinating example of the paradigmatic path taken in the life of an immigrant American Jewish artist.93

Wallace Berman (1926–1976) was a pioneer of assemblage art. In the 1950s he was part of the group of Beat poets and artists in San Francisco who engaged in what Allen Ginsberg called “Bop Kabbalah.” Berman was fascinated with Hebrew letters and incorporated them throughout his work, not to form literal words but to allude to the flexibility and mysterious qualities of sacred text.

R. B. Kitaj (1932–2007) was raised in a secular Jewish home near Cleveland, where he took art classes in childhood. He later continued his studies in New York, Vienna, Oxford, and London. A prominent figurative painter in London for decades, he was elected to the Royal Academy of Art in 1991, the only American inducted since John Singer Sargent nearly 100 years earlier. After the mid-1970s, Kitaj explored, through many acclaimed works such as The Wedding (1989–1993), what he called his “reversionist instincts toward a Jewishness.”94 He called his style Diasporist, which he explicated in First Diasporic Manifesto (1989) and Second Diasporic Manifesto (2007). In reviewing the exhibition Obsessions, a critic wrote of Kitaj that his “sense of flux and drama, of Jewish history as a kind of mesmerising, hallucinatory theatre, is utterly compelling.”95 The artist returned to the United States in 1997, settling in Los Angeles, where he committed suicide a decade later. He had stated earlier, “I hope my art will look like a Midrash on my life.”96

Tobi Kahn (b. 1952) is a painter and sculptor who was raised in an Orthodox family in New York and has dedicated his professional life to exploring what he refers to as “the redemptive possibilities of art.”97 One of nine artists featured in the Guggenheim Museum’s New Horizons in American Art in 1985, he has worked in various media to explore the correspondence between the intimate and the monumental. His works, each named with a word Kahn invents, express either a Jewish or an interfaith context. For the past 25 years, he has created a series of miniature sacred spaces he calls “shrines.” His paintings, observes the art critic Peter Selz, “combine visual calm with pictorial energy . . . [They] fuse observation, memory, and making—what Walter Benjamin called ‘the concrete totality of experience.’ ”98

Jerome Witkin (b. 1939) is a prominent figurative painter who was born in Brooklyn and has created, besides his psychological portraiture, an extensive series of narrative paintings bearing witness with a powerfully metaphoric realism to the acts of the Holocaust.

Christianity in Post-World War II Art

Late-life Works with Christian References

Those who deny the significance, if not the very possibility, of the spiritual in modern art, will not be impressed that some late-life works by prominent artists have explicit religious references. They point out that these artists’ place in art history was earned
prior to their late works. Nonetheless, such works are part of the overview of this subject and are sometimes a major part of the artist’s oeuvre.

During the two years before Andy Warhol (1928–1987) died, hours after a gall bladder operation, he created over 100 works with religious themes—based on either the Last Supper or on Raphael’s Sistine Madonna—in addition to his series of the Cross paintings in 1982. He overlaid onto some of these paintings and silkscreen works commercial logos for Dove soap [the dove is the symbol for the Holy Spirit] or GE lightbulbs [Christ is called the Light of the World] or a small bit of packaging bearing the numerals “6.99” or “59¢.”

Although Warhol never explained himself, several art critics have suggested theories about why he included these incongruous commercial elements and why he was fascinated with Coke bottles and soup cans in the first place. I feel that the answer may well lie in a statement he made about his works of Pop Art:

What’s great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coke, Liz Taylor drinks Coke, and just think, you can drink Coke, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it.99

Warhol grew up poor (six people living on a coal miner’s wages), a formative experience that shaped his very private sense of whom and what he identified with. As an adult, he valorized that which functions as a leveling agent in society—which included popular consumer items enjoyed by all socioeconomic classes and also the Catholic religion (although this was not the only reason he valued the Church). He called his studio the Factory, and he began his works by using not the best available reproduction of a subject but, rather, a common photo “like you’d buy in Woolworths.”100 His statement “Pop Art is a way of liking things”101 can be understood to mean that Pop Art was a way of getting the art world to like images of things used by ordinary people, including the poor. He observed that Pop Art uses such common subjects as “comics, picnic tables, men’s trousers, celebrities, shower curtains, refrigerators, Coke bottles—all the great modern things that the Abstract Expressionists tried so hard not to notice at all.”102

Warhol (né Andrej Warhola) was a Catholic of the Ruthenian Byzantine rite practiced by his immigrant Slovak parents and their community in Pittsburgh. As an adult, he kept a Crucifix, a prayer book, and a statue of Christ Arisen near his bedside. He also had a small shrine in the kitchen. He privately went to a Catholic church in Manhattan several times a week to pray and light a candle, as well as volunteering repeatedly in a church-run soup kitchen for the homeless, where he found that many of the ladies reminded him of his mother.103 Most of the associates and assistants whom Warhol assembled around him in the Factory were ex-Catholics. The art critic Eleanor Heartney has suggested that this communal structure—“a radical departure from the more accepted model of splendid isolation developed so visibly by the Abstract Expressionists”—“might have evolved from the coterie’s earlier
exposure to religious practice.” She also notes “the iconic nature of his portraits of Marilyn, Liz and Jackie,” whose dramatic coloration and arresting presence may share an intimation of the Byzantine icons central to worship in Warhol’s childhood church.104

The third theme in his work, besides common items and religion, was death—including suicides, disasters, car crashes, electric chairs, widows, gravely ill celebrities, and “vanishing animals.” This focus is thought to have resulted from his childhood neurological illness (Sydenham’s chorea, known as St. Vitus Dance); his father’s death from tuberculosis when the artist was 14; and his being shot in 1968, almost fatally (his heart stopped during surgery). Warhol felt that death is always hovering nearby. He may have recognized it as the final leveling agent.

In some cases, a prominent artist made a single work with explicit references to Christianity. Two weeks before he died, at 31, Keith Haring (1958–1990) created Altarpiece: The Life of Christ (1990), which hangs not in a white-cube gallery or museum but in the AIDS Chapel within Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. A triptych made of bronze with white gold leaf patina, the altarpiece is 81 inches high by 60 inches wide and is rendered in Haring’s post-graffiti style, which exudes, as always, a joyful vitality.

In recent years the Norwegian painter Odd Nerdrum (b. 1944) has included themes of hope and redemption in his works, adding to his dramatic oeuvre of loss, suffering, and alienation. Long opposed to abstraction, assemblage, and much else in modern art, he became a champion of “the concept of kitsch,” which he defines as pathos-inflected depictions of the unchanging experiences of human life and which he regards as a new superstructure for sincere and narrative painting.105 Nerdrum’s major influences are Rembrandt and Caravaggio. He was educated in a Waldorf school, based on Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophical teachings, and later studied art with Joseph Beuys. He read widely in the spiritual literature of Steiner, Blake, Swedenborg, and Dostoyevsky. Nerdrum has observed, “Today the world resides in spiritual darkness,” which he attributed to the take-over of the human mind by rationalistic science in the twentieth century.106 Although he has long made references to Christianity in his work, such as Second Birth (2004), they are always outweighed by a grim and desolate landscape of human suffering.

Saints, Tableaux, and Holy Art of Salvage

Paula Rego (b. 1934) was born in Portugal and has lived for most of her adult life in London, where she was selected in 1989 to be the first artist-in-residence (Associate Artist) at the National Gallery and where many honorary degrees have been conferred upon her. Most of her painting is done in a magical-realist style that depicts people, often women, in a state of distress or discomfort. She has said that she is “some sort of Catholic” but that her father was anti-clerical and that she joined him in disapproved of the Portuguese Catholic Church’s tacit support of the right-wing dictator António de Oliveira Salazar. Rego’s saints, as in the painting St. Margaret of Scotland (2004; Durham Cathedral), are grim, formidable, and unforgettable.

Ana Maria Pacheco (b. 1943) was born and raised in the interior of Brazil, where she experienced a mix of modern education plus several layers of cultural history
and religion: medieval Catholic practices from the initial colonial period, Baroque Catholic art from the seventeenth century, the religion of the waves of African slaves, the cultures of the indigenous peoples, and the folkloric culture that drew from all of these. After earning degrees in both music and art, she moved to London in 1973 to study at the Slade School of Fine Art and remained in England, where she was selected to be the artist-in-residence at the National Gallery during 1997–1999. She is best known for her dramatic installations of larger-than-life, carved, and polychromed wooden sculptures, which combine Baroque presence with a simplicity of expression that is often tormented or tormenting. Sometimes her subjects are entrapped and are being interrogated by what she calls “conspiratorial figures,” a reference to recurring periods of officially sanctioned harassment, repression, and violence in Brazil. Among her best-known sculptural groupings are her depiction of the martyrdom of St. Sebastian, Dark Night of the Soul (1999); The Banquet (1985); and The Longest Journey (1994). Before sculpting a group of figures, Pacheco usually explores the subject in the “unreal space” allowed in drypoint works or paintings, from which she then seeks to manifest “that which we do not see” into the tangible plane of sculpture.

In 2008, Pacheco created the second of two smaller sculptural works comprising Memória Roubada (Stolen Memories). Memória Roubada II is composed of a dark wooden cabinet bearing rows of small, polychromed sculpted heads, each carved from a single block of wood and looking down at a large, carved wooden shell gilded in white gold leaf (a symbol of pilgrimage on the road to Santiago de Compostela) and several inscribed lines of Queen Isabella’s 1,504 directive that the Indians of New Spain should never be made to suffer any offense and should always be well and justly treated. Memória Roubada I incorporated rows of carved heads witnessing the pierced heart of the Seven Sorrows of Mary. Like her other works, these two pieces are multivalent, calling to mind religious votives in shrines, the head of St. John the Baptist, and the violent abuses of power in both colonial and postcolonial times.

Guided by what he calls a “theology of glitter and poverty,” Thomas Lanigan-Schmidt (b. 1948) creates remarkable collages of religious icons and altars—as well as chalices, patens, crosses, and other religious objects—from ordinary materials found in a working-class home: aluminum foil, plastic wrap, candy wrappers, shattered dishes and glass, pipe cleaners, glitter, staples, cellophane, and the like. His intention is not irony or mockery but, rather, an appreciation of the immigrant Catholic experience of the pre–Vatican II visual culture—viewed from the perspective that “it is not the gold but the glitter that counts.” His work has been acquired by major art museums, and in 1986 the Walters Art Museum featured many of his religious artifacts next to an exhibit of Byzantine objects. The art critic Ken Johnson has called Lanigan-Schmidt’s oeuvre one of “transcending beauty, eroticized religiosity and poignant autobiography,” adding that were the work Iconostasis (1977–1978)—a free-standing wall of more than two dozen conjoined panels representing the Madonna and Child, Jesus, and various saints and angels in a style imitating that of medieval Byzantium—installed in a church, it would not raise any censorious eyebrows. “Redemption is the key,” Johnson concludes, in the artist’s act of consecrating trash and “making it the stuff of art that is as aesthetically rich as it is spiritually expansive.”
Transgressive Works with Christian References

The Culture Wars that were waged in this country during the 1980s and 1990s often focused on works of art that made reference to Christianity in ways that were considered by many to be aggressively offensive. This art received an insightful explication in 2004 by the art critic Eleanor Heartney in *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art*. She begins by raising the question of why so many artists who were raised Catholic figured so prominently in the Culture Wars. She suggests that the Catholic “imagination” (a religion’s particular response to the spiritual dimension of life) involves “an essential carnality” stemming from the theological implications within Catholicism of the Incarnation. Heartney proposes that the Catholic artists’ “Incarnational consciousness” sees body and soul as one and that they may well not have been intentionally trying to transgress the bounds of established religion.111

With this frame of reference, Heartney posits that these artists were actually celebrating human imperfection and impurity, as well as “taking aim at present-day moralists who distance themselves from the real message of Jesus and his gospel of love and tolerance”—particularly regarding works by Karen Finley (b. 1956), Renée Cox (b. 1960), and David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992).112 In addition, she sees the conflicted relationship with his childhood religion expressed by Robert Mapplethorpe (1946–1989) as being at the far end of the spectrum from the serene acceptance of the duality of heaven and hell by Andres Serrano (b. 1950) and its nuanced embrace by Robert Gober (b. 1954). She sees the subversive humor by Joel Peter Witkin (b. 1939) as part of a private search for God and notes that he, like Ana Mendieta in her early works, regards death, blood, and decay as necessary stages in the eternal cycle of life.113 Heartney appreciates these artworks for enlarging our definition of religion and its meaning in people’s lives.114

When the British exhibition *Sensation* traveled to the Brooklyn Art Museum in fall 1999, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights issued a statement declaring the painting *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996) by Chris Ofili (b. 1968) to be offensive to Catholicism and, further, urging people to picket the museum. The large painting (8 feet high by 6 feet wide) features a folkloric African-style Blessed Mother on a background of luminous gold tones and surrounded by angelic *putti* represented by glued-on images of female genitalia. What was found most offensive were the three rounded clumps of elephant dung affixed to the canvas. Ofili, born in England of Nigerian parents, had incorporated this element in several other paintings, since making a trip to Zimbabwe and observing that elephant dung was a construction material, a fuel, and a symbol of fertility. Acting as part of the campaign of outrage, a Catholic man defaced the painting by squirting white paint over it. In response to the uproar, Ofili explained to the media that he has a warm, familial relationship with the Virgin Mary: “I was brought up a Catholic and was an altar boy,” adding with an eye to the censors, “Religion should be used in the appropriate way.”

Islam in Post–World War II Art

The internationally celebrated video- and film-maker and photographer, Shirin Neshat (b. 1957) was sent by her father to California for college two years before
the Iranian revolution in 1979. After earning three degrees in art, she returned to her homeland for a visit in 1990 and was shocked to find, “It was as if you lost color and suddenly everything went to black-and-white.” She began in the late 1990s to make short black-and-white videos: wordless, lyrical narratives focused mainly on the women-in-black, often choreographed as poetic forms moving through their stark context. These videos and their musical soundtracks were deeply moving and attracted immediate acclaim. Within a short period, she created the two-channel videos *Turbulent* (1998), *Rapture* (1999), and *Fervor* (2000), as well as the color work *Soliloquy* (1999). She won the International Award at the 1999 Venice Biennale, after which several other short works followed. In 2009 she won the Silver Lion award for best director at the Venice Film Festival for her film *Women without Men* and was named in 2010 “Artist of the Decade” by the critic G. Roger Denson of *The Huffington Post*.

From the outset, Neshat determined to convey “ideas that were entirely based on non-Western rationality without compromising their authenticity and meaning.” One aspect of this decision was her ignoring the disdain held by many artists in New York in the 1990s for beauty as a meaningless social construction. In contrast, Neshat has stated,

> I really believe that beauty is a fundamental way of getting closer to the Divine. Of course, that conception comes from spiritual Islam. But I also think it’s very poignant to bring that spiritual element into juxtaposition with the political reality. In other words, we have all these beautiful women with the veils against the background of those magnificent mosques and architecture, and then we have the guns. To me, these are two conflicting forces that reveal the ongoing complex web of Islam today. Where it comes from, where it’s going, and how they’re all in this world together.

Some of her early works dramatized these “conflicting forces” by inscribing lines of poetry by two female Persian poets, Forough Farrokhzad and Tahereh Saffarzadeh, on the bodies of female actors who are always encased by the black chador required since the revolution.

Although Neshat considers herself a secular Muslim today, she recalls that while directing her first feature-length film, *Women Without Men*, “I was every day praying to God to keep me strong mentally and physically.” Like the other artists in this chapter, she had formative religious experiences in childhood—in her case, learning about the beauty of spiritual Islam from her maternal grandmother—that instilled a deep appreciation for that which cannot be quantified by the modern world, that which resides in a spiritual aesthetic.

**Shirazeh Houshiary (b. 1955)** is an Iranian installation artist and sculptor who has lived in London since 1974 and was short-listed for the Turner Prize in 1994. Her work draws inspiration from Sufi mystical teachings and from the thirteenth-century mystical poetry of Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi. Her abstracted biomorphic sculptural forms, which have been featured in many international exhibitions, seek to embody spiritual concepts physically. She also creates subtle abstract paintings and drawings. One of her most poetic works is the East Window of London’s Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, which she co-created in 2008.
When Shahzia Sikander (b. 1969) was an art student in Lahore, Pakistan, she decided to specialize in painting the highly stylized and exacting genre of Persian and Indian miniatures, considered passé and irrelevant by most of her peers. She then earned an MFA degree from the Rhode Island School of Design, where she continued developing her expertise in the genre in order to be able to experiment from inside of it to “find new ways of making meaning,” as she explained in the “Spirituality” episode of the PBS series Art21.\textsuperscript{119} During the late 1980s and early 1990s, Sikander developed a new visual language for miniature painting by challenging both the formal constructs of the medium, such as the representation of architecture and the human figure, as well as the physical parameters of the technique, such as the use of material and scale. Her work often employs the Gopi hair motif, a symbol of the female followers of the Hindu god Krishna. Her innovative decision to bring Hindu iconography to the Pakistani miniature tradition has been adopted at the National College of Arts in Lahore.

Sikander, who received a MacArthur Fellowship in 2006, also creates drawings, abstracted paintings, film, photography, performance, installation, and animation, exploring the complexities of multicultural identities in modern and postmodern contexts (see Figure 20). Several of her works involve layering—painting on a wall, covering the image with tissue paper, and then drawing on the layered surface—which suggests, she notes, “a certain sense of meaning being either manipulated or constructed—or that there is more to understand than a simplistic reading of something.”\textsuperscript{120}

The array of extraordinary works created by the artists in this chapter makes one wonder if the leaders of the Abrahamic religions ever feel gratified that their faith tradition was able to impress artistically inclined children with a gestalt of spiritual vitality that they later took out into the world as the matrix of their explorations of art and life. Does it matter that most of the artists left the formal institutions of religion? Perhaps this formative grounding in the more-than-human world is one of the gifts of the Abrahamic religions to society.
WE HAVE SEEN THAT THE GREAT UNDERGROUND RIVER OF SPIRITUAL INFLUENCES in modern art flowed through nearly all the major art movements of the era, affecting more than 200 celebrated artists. From this vantage point—having read the statements by the artists themselves about the importance of spiritual interests in their art-making—imagine for a moment that that dynamic had not existed. Different art would have been made, but the extraordinary, spiritually engaged works by the artists in this book—many of them among the great works of the modern period—most likely would not. The spiritual dimension, then, resides along with other factors at the very heart of much of modern art, though it has long been misunderstood, suppressed, or overlooked.

A Typology

I have structured this book as a chronological survey of major art movements of the modern era, but it is also possible to think about the subject in another way. I have proposed that the underground river has four major tributaries: the Abrahamic, the Esoteric, the Allusive, and the Immanent. These four orientations comprise a typology of spiritual influences in modern art. If one were creating a typological chart, the diverse examples within each orientation could be organized in several ways: according to formal genres of art, by subsets of religion or spiritual tradition, by chronology, or by the framing events of cultural history. Here I will merely give some examples of the artists who populate each of the four categories, from 1800 to the present.

The Abrahamic Religions

William Blake countered the stasis and frivolousness of Enlightenment art with his boldly fluid lines and smoldering colors depicting powerful dynamics of God the Creator. The Nazarenes modernized biblical tableaux by using several formal innovations. The Synthetists of Pont-Aven reincarnated figures from the Bible as somewhat abstracted forms who appear in unnatural coloration and exist in a land without
perspective. The Nabis followed, just as wild at first, then opting for a new art of hieratic figures in the calm ambiance of a quietly charged gestalt.

The sense that faith in God and the people of God is buoyant and can carry one through life's travails animates the world of Marc Chagall's ethereal dream-scenes, the radiant Hebrew texts floating across Ben Shahn's post-Holocaust canvases, the delicate tracery of David Jones's watercolors—and the playfulness in many of Andy Warhol's silkscreens.

The English figurative painters after the Great War who painted Christ and other biblical figures insisted that they exist in the here and now, in the residents of Cookham, in the people you see on the tram. Yes, but tell more of the truth, insisted other artists, about the suffering, broken bodies: Georges Rouault, Max Beckmann, and Otto Dix, and later on Paula Rego, Ana Maria Pacheco, Kitaj, and the transgressive Catholics—as well as the inscribed female body in Shirin Neshat's haunting films.

Here we require a hybrid type: the **Abrahamic-Immanent** for all the artists who were situated in Christianity but were drawn especially to create new art in communion with the Creation as a site of divine Mystery. Obviously, the Romantic Christian painter Caspar David Friedrich and his colleagues in Dresden belong here, as do Samuel Palmer, the Hudson River School, Renoir, Van Gogh, Cézanne, and Gaudí and Jujol. What about the Pre-Raphaelites? They adored (female) bodies and nature, whether they were painting imagined scenes of medieval Christianity, Arthurian legends, or ancient myths. Then, in our time, there is Bill Viola.

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**Esoteric Spirituality**

Waves of new art resulted from the avant-garde's intensely felt rejection of “mere” material perception, naturalist depiction, and oppressive perspective. The search for deeper realizations and more penetrating ways of seeing yielded Symbolism, Expressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Orphism, The Blue Rider, and non-objective painting. The dance with the inner worlds continued after the Great War with Klee, Kandinsky, Miro, Arp, Mondrian, and more. After the next war, new seekers drew from pre–World War I occult teachings (Joseph Beuys and Yves Klein), while others followed Jung into mystical symbolism (Jackson Pollock). Louise Nevelson built abstract sculptures from Steiner's eurythmy. And somewhere through it all was that sly magician of “non-retinal art,” Duchamp.

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**Allusive Spirituality**

From silent contemplation arises the subtle gesture—or the zip, or the luminous block of color, or the explosive field of untamed line. The Abstract Expressionists stated repeatedly that their paintings were a spiritual engagement, but they kept it free and only lightly defined. A hybrid category is needed here for the theorist Barnett Newman: **Allusive-Abrahamic**, to which we'll add Tony Smith, who searched for and found bold new forms in partnership with his faith. Sean Scully goes here, too, for the abstract paintings he's made on the bounce from The Fall.
Asian serenity and cosmological scope inspired Ad Reinhard, Agnes Martin, Mark Tobey, John Cage, Isamu Noguchi—and later Sanford Biggers, Mariko Mori, and Ernesto Pujol. Gerhard Richter sees art as “the ideal medium for making contact with the transcendental.” Richard Tuttle arrives at allusively spiritual art by seeking to “create the space between appearance and reality.”

**Spirituality of Immanence**

Art that explores the mysteries of body, nature, and cosmos is the oldest spiritual path of all. We have noted the hybrid of Abrahamic-Immanent, but we also need one for the Immanent-Esoteric groups: the 291 painters and the Group of Seven, who, unlike the Europeans, were inspired by mystical ideas but used them to spark a new aesthetic engagement with their great love: the land.

The postwar performance piece that was Joseph Beuys’ pose as a shaman resurrected by Tatars also resulted in sculptures of primal materials. Wolfgang Laib and Andy Goldsworthy sculpt original works solely with what nature offers them. DoDo Jin Ming’s photographs convey stark vistas full of a mysterious presence. Anselm Kiefer’s mixed-media paintings are ecological-cosmological revelations. Matthew Ritchie seems a cosmological Futurist as he draws down onto canvases, walls, and rambling sculptures the speed and dynamism of the universe—an act, like any act of perceiving the cosmos, that he considers spiritual.

The sacral dimension of the human body inspired the sculptures of Henry Moore, Magdalena Abakanowicz, Stephen De Staebler, and later Kiki Smith. It enhances the paintings of Nathan Oliveira and haunts the photos of Francesca Woodman. Neolithic art of the sacral body-in-nature fascinated Nancy Spero, Mary Beth Edelson, and Ana Mendieta. Ritual connection with the more-than-human world evokes art from Wangechi Mutu and María Magdalena Campos-Pons.

This sketch of a typology suggests the varieties of spiritual experience—unique in every artist, as it is in every one of us—that figured in the making of much of modern art. As this history is gradually folded into the narrative of art history, an array of scholarly lines of research becomes apparent. I look forward to seeing more of the story brought to light and watching it continue to unfold in contemporary art.

**Art and Religion**

Our focus thus far has been on the spiritual content in modern and contemporary art since 1800, but what is the significance of this art in the larger cultural unfolding in which the modern era is embedded? And what was the impact on that significance when art was marginalized as a specialized sector in modern society? For most of human history, art was regarded as the means of communing with our larger context.

The diverse origins of culture occurred in many places in the world among paleolithic groups, who were each responding to the Grand Aesthetic Display that is the natural world. The evolution of our imagination was evoked by nature’s multiplicity of colors, forms, and movements; by the subtle differences in daily light as the seasons unfolded; and by the stellar array at night. Indeed, our very survival depended on alert perception of forms, color, and motion. Eventually most of the far-flung groups
of early humans created more elaborate cultural responses to the Grand Aesthetic Display. They may have laid flowers or objects in graves. Many cultures decorated bowls and pots and their bodies with markings that reflect a sense of interrelatedness within the biological–ecological–cosmological continuum of existence. Cultures that perceived a transcendent totality of the Grand Aesthetic Display engaged with it in various ways, usually by creating their own closely entwined cultural stream of religion and art: ceremonies, ritual music, symbols, decoration, and sacred spaces.

In Christendom the kinship of art and religion resulted in several periods of artistic invention, including the great florescence of the Middle Ages when many new forms of art, music, and architecture were created. The commanding presence of Renaissance art then signaled a humanist distancing from the medieval immersion. The drama of Baroque art insisted on spiritual experience that exceeds any text. Then came the transition to a modern worldview, in which religion was detached from art, now utterly free but merely a commodity. In this historical situation, the radical expressions of a modern art that began to appear around 1800 set the trajectory for a revitalized entwining of art and the spiritual. This time, however, it would depend not on calcified institutions but on participatory consciousness and individual exploration of the transcendent presence and dynamics in and around us. Blake demanded a new religion with a new art; Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats kicked over the mechanistic worldview in order to blaze a path into deep communion with the intelligence of the Grand Aesthetic Display, which Friedrich insisted must be the embedding context of the symbolic Crucifix. This migration of spiritual communion out of religious institutions and into the realm of personal spiritual exploration became a hallmark of the modern era and continues to this day.

Several secular streams within modern art emerged as well, but that seems a less useful distinction than this: modern and contemporary art either does or does not attempt to engage with the vital sources of meaning for human culture. The mechanistic worldview has left us so oblivious to dynamic interrelatedness that we cannot even seem to perceive the meaning of extremely urgent reports on the global climate crisis, let alone the spiritual explorations by artists in this book. We moderns have long been slipping into a detached solipsism that shrinks us further into ourselves and the binary logic system of our electronic devices. This societal trajectory away from the vital and the profound was set in place long ago—but the great works of modern art have never surrendered to it.

The Story of the Story of Modern Art

The major developments in shaping the narrative of art history in the twentieth century are delineated in the Introduction. The major books and exhibition catalogues that have sought to counter the denial of spiritual content in modern art are listed in the Appendix. It is worthwhile, however, to revisit the story here by considering just three major exhibitions and the reactions to them from art critics. Each of them took place at the Museum of Modern Art—in 1936, 1984, and 2013.

The first, of course, is the exhibition that was influential in shaping the canonical view of two radically modern styles of art: Alfred Barr’s Cubism and Abstraction
in 1936. As we have seen, his formalist interpretation of art drew from Heinrich Wölfflin's formal principles of “scientific art criticism” (explicated in *Classical Art* [1898] and *Principles of Art History* [1915]). In his Barr's catalogue essay, he asserted that the entire array of cubistic and abstracted art had been created because of the artists' boredom with painting exhausted naturalistic forms.

That the major museum of modern art in the United States would brush aside the historical dynamics propelling the emergence of abstract painting enraged a young art historian in Barr's circle, Meyer Schapiro. He immediately set to writing a rebuttal, "The Nature of Abstract Art" (published in *Marxist Quarterly* in early 1937), in which he critiqued the “limited mechanical conception” of Barr's historically incorrect, teleological theory by which abstract painting and sculpture are supposedly “the logical and inevitable conclusion toward which art was moving.” Schapiro pointed out that Barr's theory lacked a motor for change other than supposing that artists became bored with realism so set out to invent something different. In contrast, Schapiro asserted,

> The painters justify themselves by ethical and metaphysical standpoints, or in defense of their art attack the preceding style as the counterpart of a detested social or moral position. Not the processes of imitating nature were exhausted, but the valuation of nature itself had changed. The philosophy of art was also a philosophy of life.³

Alas, Schapiro's critique of Barr's reductionist formalism failed to expand its boundaries significantly or to dislodge his assertions.

In 1952 the English art critic Herbert Read also published a strong critique of formalist limitations: "Farewell to Formalism." He argued that a critical appreciation of modern art, particularly that with a “symbolist” or “transcendentalist” content, requires an interpretative dimension of understanding that is beyond the epistemological range of a formalist analysis.⁴ He was specifically rejecting the formalist analysis derived in Europe from Wölfflin's scientism, but Read was also well aware of the formalism championed by Clement Greenberg, which was regarded by many art world professionals in New York as “purifying” Barr's initial explication with an even more severe stance.

Thus it was a Marxist (Schapiro) and an anarchist (Read) among prominent art historians who first insisted on the inclusion of the historical evidence of artists' deep involvement with the prewar spiritual quest to escape the limits of materialist perception and to express the dynamics of the immaterial realm. Had Schapiro and/or Read attracted enough supporters to successfully enlarge art history of the modern period beyond the tight constraints of formalism at that time, it is likely that they would have welcomed the inclusion of both social/economic/political factors and cultural factors, including the spiritual dynamic. Unfortunately, that did not occur. Instead, formalism reigned as the dominant narrative of the history of modern art from 1936 until the 1980s, when it was contested by social art criticism.

A second illustrative exhibition was mounted in 1984: "Primitivism" in Twentieth-Century Art. To convey the influence of "primitivism" on modernist art dating from 1905 through the 1930s, the curators featured numerous modernist paintings and sculptures juxtaposed with display cases containing scores of African and Polynesian
statues that had been collected by prominent artists of the period, mostly in Paris. Also featured were enlarged, wall-size photographs of the artists’ studios documenting their collections of such sculptures. The formal correspondence between the “primitive” statues and the modernist art was obvious, but I remember walking through those galleries and wondering about an equally obvious question: Had the European artists adopted forms from the “primitive” statues as if they were merely fascinating found-objects with no relevant meaning—or were they aware of and inspired by the spiritual import of the pieces? This question, however, was not addressed in the curators’ wall plaques or the 18 essays in the two-volume catalogue (except for one very brief mention of the spiritual regarding Klee). The head curator of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) exhibition, William Rubin, was subsequently attacked by the art critic Thomas McEvilley, who charged him in *Artforum* with the ethnocentrism of “an outdated modernist formalism” that blinded the curatorial team from seeing the “primitive” statues as religion and from inviting an essay on the religious meaning of those works in Africa, Polynesia, and ancient Egypt. Granted, the curators did not treat the ritual statues as religious—but McEvilley’s raging critique, which made a big impact at the time, also neglected, as had MoMA, to raise the issue of whether the modernist artists themselves considered the statues spiritual or merely exotic. This question, so seemingly obvious, was apparently a non-subject for all the art world professionals involved in the dust-up.

The third exhibition, *Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art* in 2013, reiterated the formalist explanatory theory of the birth of abstract art. As we have seen in the section on “Non-Objective Painting: Picturing the Immaterial Realm” in Chapter 2, the curator, Leah Dickerman, argues in the lead essay in the catalogue that the “radical idea” that suddenly sparked abstraction was simply the notion of making a painting “with no subject.” In a second essay, on “Abstraction in 1936,” Dickerman mentions Schapiro’s “majestic essay” of 1937, but, remarkably, she airbrushes out his insistence on acknowledging the “metaphysical standpoints” that drove the pioneering abstractionists. She describes Schapiro’s critique, instead, as a call to include “the economic, social, and political context of the art’s making.”

On reading such a historically unsupported exegesis in 2013, I felt every bit as dumbfounded as I had at that moment in the 1997 Mondrian exhibition at the Tate when I read the curators’ statement in the gallery guide that it was “clear that he rapidly left behind” his interest in Theosophy after 1912 (in spite of abundant documentation to the contrary). At first, I wondered how MoMA could possibly make such statements in 2013 in light of all the substantive essays by art historians in the catalogue of the *Traces du Sacré* exhibition only five years earlier at the Centre Pompidou, let alone Tuchman’s exhibition catalogue and all the other scholarly works listed in the Appendix—but then I came upon the curator’s surprising assertion that such scholarship [on the spiritual in Kandinsky’s art] is based on “a simplistic framing of Kandinsky’s thinking as concerned with a primarily transcendental immateriality.” It’s “simplistic” to think Kandinsky’s art was about “a primarily transcendent immateriality”? He wrote directly about this very subject in numerous of his commentaries on the new art.

I supposed at the time of the exhibition that at least one prominent New York art critic among those who have demonstrated an awareness in past reviews of the
spiritual influences in modern art must surely be composing a McEvilley-type refutation of the MoMA exhibition’s reductionist thesis. But no. All the reviews I happened to read were entirely approving, and none asked, “Isn’t there something missing here? Quite a lot, in fact?” Even back in 1989, three years after Tuchman’s exhibition, the art critic Roberta Smith had noted in a New York Times review of an exhibition of Hilma af Klint’s Theosophical abstract paintings, “This show goes a long way to reminding us how little we know about early abstract art and its sources; likewise, how unnecessarily narrow is the history constructed around it.” And yet, in 2013 the “unnecessarily narrow” perspective still prevailed.

Because art is a multivalent endeavor the totality of which will always exceed the reach of our language and concepts, it is to be expected that art history and criticism are always in transition. Although social art history was resisted by many art historians on the grounds that it is too narrowly economistic, a gradual accommodation evolved, resulting in the still-limited combination of formal analysis plus some social art history, often with a postmodern, or social-constructionist, inflection. Occasionally, someone within the field has pointed out the shortcomings of such an exclusionary history of art, but for the most part its adherents have kept the drawbridge up. Finally, in 1999 the art historian Wanda Corn could observe that “a new cultural art history” was emerging. This book is part of that effort, the spiritual stream of which is charted chronologically in the Appendix.

Cultural art history, including the spiritual dynamic, might someday become a significant part of the curriculum in art education. Currently, I have been told by professors of studio art, students are taught to situate their work within a formalist lineage—with the common understanding that serious contemporary art is not the place for anything as “sentimental” as spiritual influences. I hope that young artists who have an interest in a particular spiritual orientation will see from this book that numerous artists at the very top of their profession got there not by disallowing spiritual explorations in their art but by working in tandem with those energies.

On Writing This Book

Three things surprised me while I was researching and writing this book. First, I did not grasp initially that the number of prominent modern and contemporary artists whose art was influenced by their little known spiritual interests was so large. I ended up with files of documentation on more than 250 major artists. Nor did I expect to find that nearly every significant art movement in the modern period emerged partially in response to spiritual issues in the zeitgeist and the particular spiritual interests of numerous artists.

Second, I did not expect that so many of the contemporary artists I interviewed or wrote to would turn out to be from a Roman Catholic background. It was a fortuitous coincidence that I knew from personal experience exactly what they were talking about when they referred to the spiritual immersion in post–World War II Catholicism and its aesthetic gestalt, a combination that seemed particularly vivid to artistically inclined children.
Third, and most strikingly, I was often moved by the spiritual depth and beauty of many of the direct statements by the artists, both the historical and the contemporary. When we read, for instance, that Matisse wrote to Bonnard in their old age,

*Giotto is the summit of my desires,*

do we not feel an almost vertiginous falling away of the presiding narrative of the history of modern art (that the very greatest masters of modern art would surely not have had any interest in the spiritual) as well as the pride of modern art stretching over 500 years: the invention of perspective, the improved accuracy in painting musculature once dissection was finally allowed, the grand drama of Baroque art, the neoclassical order and serenity, the near-photorealism of academic painting after the Dutch clarity, the rebellions of art against the status quo in the nineteenth century, and the dazzling parade of radical formal inventions in the early twentieth century? All that Matisse brushes aside to get to the premodern art of a fourteenth-century Italian who painted hands unrealistically, landscape irrationally, and depth via very rudimentary perspective – yet who was able to depict the luminous grace of spiritual presence in his human figures such that its allure is unmatched after six centuries of progress and advancement.
APPENDIX

MAKING THE CASE

The effort to induce the professional art world to acknowledge the spiritual content in modern and contemporary art has a history, although not a very successful one with regard to effecting widespread change in the status quo. The following list charts the stream of books, articles, exhibitions, and public lectures on the significant role of prominent artists’ spiritual interests in the creation of their art. It begins in the aftermath of Alfred Barr’s influential exhibition on *Cubism and Abstraction* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1936, before which there was little need to argue the case for recognizing spiritual interests in the new art because the subject was so well-known and frequently written about in Europe by artists and art critics between the mid-1880s and the early 1920s.

Each of the works and presentations listed below addresses a sub-set of the larger story by focusing on an art movement, or a time period, or an area of influence. Monographs of individual artists are not included here, although hundreds of relevant monographs are cited in the Notes. A complete bibliography of all the books I consulted during the years of researching this book would be too vast for the space limitations I was given. Finally, this list is limited to works written in or for the art world. Many insightful papers and articles have been presented within the academic fields of religion and philosophy about modern art, but those have not generally attracted the attention of art world professionals.

1937

1952
Herbert Read, “Farewell to Formalism,” *Art News*, 51:4, Summer

1959
Herbert Read, *A Concise History of Modern Painting*

1961

1966

1969
Jane Daggett Dillenberger, *Secular Art with Sacred Themes*
1975
Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: From Friedrich to Rothko*

1977

1983
Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*
Lucy Lippard, *Overlap: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*

1984
Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, ed., *Art, Creativity, and the Sacred*
Roald Nasgaard, *The Mystic North: Symbolist Landscape Painting in Northern Europe and North America, 1890–1940*

1986
Maurice Tuchman, ed., *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890–1985* (exhibition catalogue from Los Angeles County Museum of Art)
*Sacred Images in Secular Art* (catalogue of a small exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art)

1987
Kathleen J. Regier, ed., *The Spiritual Image in Modern Art*
“Abstract Art and the Rediscovery of the Spiritual,” special issue of *Art & Design* (London) 3:5/6, June

1988
Peter Fuller, *Theoria: Art, and the Absence of Grace*
John Lane, *The Living Tree: Art and the Sacred*
Roger Lipsey, *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*

1990
Jane Daggett Dillenberger, *Image and Spirit in Sacred and Secular Art*

1991
Suzi Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art*

1992
Michael Tucker, *Dreaming with Open Eyes: The Shamanic Spirit in 20th-Century Art and Culture*

1993
Mark Levy, *Technicians of Ecstasy: Shamanism and the Modern Artist*
1995
Spiritual Expressions: Art for Private Contemplation and Public Celebration (exhibition catalogue from the Art Institute of Chicago)
Reesey Shaw, ed., Espíritu (exhibition catalogue from the California Center for the Arts Museum)

1996
Nella Arambasin, La conception du sacré dans la critique d’art: En Europe entre 1880 et 1914
Richard Francis, ed., Negotiating Rapture (exhibition catalogue from the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago)

1997
“Spiritual in Art,” special issue of Artweek, 28, January
Maureen Korp, Sacred Art of the Earth: Ancient and Contemporary Earthworks
Charlene Spretnak, “The Spiritual Dimension of Modern Art” (keynote address at SightLines, an international conference of printmakers, Edmundton, Alberta)

1998
Charles A. Riley II, The Saints of Modern Art
Bernard Smith, Modernism’s History

1999
Cosmos: From Romanticism to the Avant-Garde (exhibition catalogue from the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts)
Dawn Perlmutter and Debra Koppman, eds., Reclaiming the Spiritual in Art
Sarah O’Brien Twohig, The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art (five-part lecture series at the Tate Gallery, London)

2000
Art et Spiritualité, special issue of Ligeia (Paris), no. 29–32 (October 1999–June 2000)
Wanda M. Corn, The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935 (on the 291 Group and others; Introduction is on “Spiritual America”)
Danilo Eccher, ed., The Shadow of Reason: Exploring the Spiritual in European Identity in the 20th Century (exhibition catalogue from the Galleria d’Arte Moderna, Bologna, Italy)
John Golding, Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko, Still

2001
The Arts and the Spiritual (conference at School of the Visual Arts, New York)
Lynn M. Herbert, ed., The Inward Eye: Transcendence in Contemporary Art (exhibition catalogue from the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston)

2002
Anne Morgan, “Beyond PostModernism: The Spiritual in Contemporary Art,” Art Papers, 26:1, January–February
Klaus Ottmann, “Spiritual Materiality,” Sculpture, 66, April
Lynn Gamwell, Exploring the Invisible: Art, Science, and the Spiritual
Celia Rabinovitch, Surrealism and the Sacred: Power, Eros, and the Occult in Modern Art
2003

Jacquelynn Baas and Mary Jane Jacob, eds., Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art
John Baldessari and Meg Cranston, eds., 100 Artists See God (catalogue of a travelling exhibition; Independent Curators International)
James Elkins, On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art
Eleanor Heartney, Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art
Laura Hoptman, ed., 54th Carnegie International (exhibition catalogue from the Carnegie Museum of Art)

2005
Jacquelynn Baas, The Smile of the Buddha


2008
Mark Alizart, Alfred Pacquement, Jean de Loisy, Angela Lampe, eds., Traces du Sacré (exhibition catalogue from the Pompidou Center, Paris)
Franklin Sirmans, ed., NeoHooDoo: Art for a Forgotten Faith (exhibition catalogue from The Menil Collection, Houston)
Holy Inspiration: Religion and Spirituality in Modern Art, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

2009
James Elkins and David Morgan, eds., Re-Enchantment (a seminar plus essays)

The Spiritual (Re)Turn (online symposium at the Guggenheim Museum)

2010
Dan Fox, “Believe It or Not: Religion versus Spirituality in Contemporary Art,” Frieze, Issue 135, November–December

2011
Beyond Kandinsky: Revisiting the Spiritual in Art (online symposium at School of the Visual Arts, New York)

2012
Mark C. Taylor, Refiguring the Sacred: Beuys, Barney, Turrell, Goldsworthy

2013
Beyond Belief: 100 Years of the Spiritual in Modern Art (exhibition at the Jewish Contemporary Museum, in conjunction with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art)
Linda Nochlin and Sarah O’Brien Twohig, Modernism and Spirituality (one-day conference at the Tate Gallery)
As the reader will note, all but two of the exhibitions cited above were held in art venues located far from New York City, the site of greatest resistance to this subject. In addition, all but two of the entries above, many of which are truly important works, are focused on a limited scope or time frame within the larger story. The exhibition catalogue for *Traces du Sacré*, as well as a shorter version with the same title, contains many excellent essays and does present the comprehensive story, beginning with a Caspar David Friedrich painting from 1818. However, the large body of works and commentaries in that exhibition are presented in an array of 22 categories of concepts. To my knowledge, the only book that seeks to present the entire story in the chronological order of the art movements of the modern period, beginning with the early nineteenth century, is the present volume.

In recent years, a number of art critics have courageously—or perhaps stubbornly—acknowledged and sometimes discussed spiritual content in various works of modern and contemporary art: Kenneth Baker, Holland Cotter, the late Arthur Danto, the late Peter Fuller, Eleanor Heartney, Dave Hickey, Waldemar Januszczak, Ken Johnson, Michael Kimmelman, Donald Kuspit, the late Thomas McEvilley, Jed Perl, Peter Schjeldahl, Amei Wallach, and others. I appreciate their high-profile contributions to liberating this “non-subject.”

In the twentieth century the art critic and historian who most consistently, and insightfully, engaged with this subject in nearly all of his books was Herbert Read. Several other art historians have also written or spoken repeatedly and compellingly about the spiritual in modern art: Robert Rosenblum, Peter Selz, Meyer Schapiro, Sixten Ringbom, William Seitz, Jane Daggett Dillenberger, Bernard Smith, John Golding, Suzi Gablik, Wanda Corn, Jacquelynn Baas, Sarah O’Brien Twohig, Charles Jencks, and James Elkins. The art world professional who has had the greatest impact on opening the conversation about this subject is, of course, Maurice Tuchman, who persevered through much resistance to mount the exhibition *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890–1985* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1986. He first proposed the idea in 1970 and never gave up, even after his grant application to the National Endowment of the Humanities was turned down twice.

A resource for those interested in this subject is the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art (MOCRA), the world’s first interfaith museum of contemporary art that engages religious and spiritual themes. Founded by Terrence Dempsey, S. J. in St. Louis in 1994, it recently celebrated its twentieth year of high-quality exhibitions of works by established artists. This museum maintains an informative website on the spiritual in contemporary art: www.slu.edu/mocra.
NOTES

INTRODUCTION: THE GREAT UNDERGROUND RIVER

5. This situation is not the fault of the art history libraries. They simply apply the national system of categorizing of books that was developed by the Library of Congress in consultation with scholars in each field, beginning in the nineteenth century. All books on the visual arts are in Subclass N, the subcategories of which do not include religion or spirituality (except under Decorative Arts), though such books can be catalogued under “Special Topics in Art.”
9. Private Correspondence, November 2010.
11. These preliminary works were further developed and published in Rosenblum, Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).
12. Tuchman, in a telephone interview by Charlene Spretnak, on August 11, 1998.
13. See “Abstract Art: Rediscovery of the Spiritual,” Art and Design Profile 3, in Art & Design, 3:5/6, June 1987, London; this special issue was perhaps the most extensive response to Tuchman’s exhibition; it includes an interview with Tuchman by Charles Jencks, as well as articles by Sixten Ringbom, Peter Fuller, Frank Stella, Patrick Herron, Catherine Cooke, and others.
NOTES


Chapter 1: Nineteenth Century

5. Ibid.
15. Caspar David Friedrich in Briefen, 128.
19. Grewe, Painting the Sacred, endnote 17 on 323; also see her Conclusion, 303–320.
21. See Tim Barringer, Reading the Pre-Raphaelites (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), Chapter 4.


29. Ibid.


31. Ibid., 243.


43. Ibid.


51. Ibid., Letters 133 and 136, 69 and also 64.
52. Ibid., Letter 339a, 86.
54. Ibid., Letter 542 and 544a, 97–98.
57. Ibid., Letter B21, 57.
58. Ibid., Letter B8, 74.
59. Ibid., Letter 531.
60. Ibid., Letter 625.
64. Gauguin, in François Cachin, Gauguin: The Quest for Paradise (New York: Abrams, 1992), 45.
68. Gauguin, Interview by Jules Huret, L'Echo de Paris, February 23, 1891, in Cachin, Gauguin, 67; also in Daniel Guérin, ed., The Writings of a Savage: Paul Gauguin (New York: Viking Press, 1978), 48. Note: The more accurate translation of sauvage, which means primal, primitive, or wild, has been used in the present volume, rather than the somewhat menacing English word “savages.”
71. Gauguin, in Guerin, ed., The Writings of a Savage, xxv.
77. Gaudí, in Descharnes (following Pujols), Gaudí, The Visionary, op. cit., 43.
78. Freixa i Serra, “Gaudí in his Social and Cultural Context.”
80. Ibid., 158.
Chapter 2: 1885–1918 (Esoteric)

1. Rosicrucianism is an esoteric system that was supposedly founded by a mystical German doctor, Christian Rosenkreuz [Cross Made of Roses], in 1407. Two anonymous manifestoes circulated in Germany in 1607 and 1616 told the story of the small Rosicrucian Order (which drew in part from Lutheranism). There was widespread public interest in these revelations of a secret occult order operating in their midst, but historians are not certain whether Dr. Rosenkreuz ever existed or whether the manifestoes were hoaxes. Nonetheless, subsequent versions of the Rosicrucian Order have arisen.


5. For example, in 1843 an arithmetic of four dimensions called a quaternions, involving associative algebra, was defined by William Rowan Hamilton. Challenging Euclid’s “parallel postulate” that only one parallel to a given line can be drawn through a given point, Bernhard Riemann’s postdoctoral thesis, On the Hypotheses that Lie at the Foundations of Geometry (1854), proposed that a “point” could be any sequence of coordinates, so a geometry of four dimensions, or more, was possible; other mathematicians later drew from this work. Also, beginning in 1884, Charles Howard Hinton (“What Is the Fourth Dimension?”) proposed that points observed in three dimensions could be imagined as successive cross-sections of a four-dimensional arrangement of lines that pass through a three-dimensional plane. He is credited with giving the name tesseract to the four-dimensional cube.


13. Ibid., 27.


21. Satie’s Rosicrucian compositions are available on a double-disc CD: Erik Satie: Musique de la Rose + Croix (LTM Recordings, 2010).


31. *Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto* was originally published as a pamphlet in Milan on April 11, 1910; in Chipp, ed., *Theories of Modern Art*, 289–293.


34. Ibid., 61.


62. Ibid., 53.


73. Kandinsky, Ibid.


76. Ibid., 27.

77. Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, 1.


82. When Madame Blavatsky wrote in *Isis Unveiled* about the dynamics of the active, male (vertical line) and the passive, female (horizontal line) principles, she was most likely drawing from *Dogma and Ritual of High Magic*, written in 1855 by Éliphas Lévi (pseudonym of the ex-priest Abbé Adolphe-Louis Constant).
NOTES

87. Ibid., 252.
89. Malevich, Ibid., 188.

CHAPTER 3: 1919 – 1939

6. Ibid., 13.
NOTES

17. Breton, Ibid.
25. Ibid., 10–12.
27. Dupin, Joan Miró, 17.
34. In conversation with Gordon Onslow Ford at his home in Inverness, CA, April 1, 1996. Regarding his sense of Surrealism, see his books, including Yves Tanguy and Automatism (Point Reyes, CA: Bishop Pine Press, 1983); also see the Lucid Art Foundation (www.lucidart.org).
50. Klee, Diaries, no. 421, 123.
51. Klee, Diaries, no. 920, 278.
63. Birksted, Le Corbusier and the Occult, Chapter 5.
64. Ibid., Plus 277–279.
68. Rouault, in *The Graphic Work of Georges Rouault* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame University Art Gallery, 1972), unpaginated; and in Courthion, *Georges Rouault*, 341.
75. Ibid., 36.
83. See “Elizabeth Collins, 1904–2000,” at www.EnglandGallery.com; several of her works are owned by Tate Britain; she first painted an image of the wise and pure Fool, which her husband then adopted as his most famous recurring archetypal form.
85. Collins, in *The Vision of the Fool and Other Writings*, 43.
102. Ibid., 30.

**Chapter 4: Allusive Spirituality**

6. Ibid., 166.
7. Fariba Bogzaran, Lucid Art Foundation, Inverness, CA, e-mail to Charlene Spretnak on April 3, 2014; she also notes that accounts differ as to whether Jackson Pollock was in attendance at times.
18. Ibid., 48.
22. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 45.
29. Ibid., 61, 71.
30. Ibid., 63.
38. Kelly, Ibid., 75.
47. Ibid., 34.
52. Nechvatal, *Beyond Kandinsky Symposium*.
57. Klein, Ibid., 41.
64. Kimmelman, op. cit.
66. Tuttle, interview conducted by Charlene Spretznak on August 18 and 19, 1999, with follow-up questions in January 2014; unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from this interview. Also see the film by Chris Maybach, *Richard Tuttle: Never Not an Artist* (2005).
69. Tuttle, in an interview by Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, 1990, in Harris, 51.
73. Kimmelman, “Influence Cast in Stone.”
76. Tuttle, in Grynsztejn, “A Universe of Small Truths,” 21; here Tuttle refers only in general about some “Metaphysical Experiences” he had in childhood, without relating them.
77. Grynsztejn, Ibid., 60.
78. Tuttle, in Grynsztejn, Ibid., 32.
80. Kimmelman, “40 Years of Making Much Out of Little”; Tuttle in Baker, “Richard Tuttle Has Earned His Major SFMOMA Retrospective.”
82. Cotter, “Richard Tuttle.”
86. Ibid.
92. Ibid., 183.
99. Ibid.
114. Ibid., 30.
120. Kapoor, in Martin Gaylord, “All & Nothing,” Apollo, 106.
125. Ibid.
129. Ibid., 52.
130. Ibid., 66.
131. Ibid., 68.
Chapter 5: Spirituality of Immanence

2. These works have been gathered in *Joseph Beuys: Early Watercolors* (New York: Schirmer/Norton, 1991).
7. Ibid., 34.
17. Ritchie, interview by Charlene Spretnak, conducted in New York on February 8, 2001; follow-up questions in January 2014; all quoted statements are from this interview.
27. Oliveira, Ibid., 131.
31. Selz, “Stephen De Staebler’s ‘Figure Columns,’ ” Sculpture, 21: 4 (May 2002).
36. Ibid., 34.
40. Selz, “Stephen De Staebler’s ‘Figure Columns,’ ” Sculpture, 21: 4 (May 2002).
42. Schneeman, Letter to the Editor, Artforum International, October 1983, 2.
43. Saar, artist’s website, betyesarr.net (accessed December 7, 2013).
54. Mendieta, Ibid., 29.
62. Viola, interview by Charlene Spretnak, June 24, 1999 at SFMOMA and January 31, 2003 at the Getty Museum; follow-up questions in February 2014; unless otherwise noted, quoted statements are from these interviews.
73. Paul, Ibid., 3.
74. Sullivan, Ibid., 76, 32.

Chapter 6: Rocked In the Bosom of Abraham

1. Carlos Fuentes, This I Believe (New York: Random House, 2005), 44.
5. Le Corbusier, Ibid., 119.
10. Matisse, in Marie-Alain Couturier, Build in Truth, unpublished manuscript (Houston: Menil Collection Archives), 97, 103.
18. The facts of Scully’s story plus all quoted statements unless otherwise noted are from the interview by Charlene Spretznak, conducted by telephone on February 5, 2001, and by fax on April 4, 2001, with follow-up questions via letter and e-mail in October 2013.
24. Scully, interview by Daniela Name.
29. Scully, interviewed by Cleusa Maria.
31. Scully, interview by Daniela Name.
33. Ibid., 101.
34. Scully, in Combalia, “Sean Scully: Against Formalism,” 43.
40. Parker, Ibid., 50.
41. Parker, interview by Charlene Spretnak, London, May 23, 2003, with follow-up questions via e-mail on November 4 and 5, 2013; unless otherwise noted, all quotations citing Parker are from this interview.
42. Parker, in Blazwick, Cornelia Parker, 107.
46. Kiefer, in interview by Klaus Dermutz, Mary Walks amid the Thorn, Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac (Paris and Salzburg), July 24–August 27, 2008.
55. Von Rydingsvard, from two sources: Interview by Charlene Spretnak on September 5, 2002, with follow-up questions on November 4 and 5, 2013 (unless otherwise noted, all direct quotations are from this interview); also “In Conversation: Ursula von Rydingsvard with Irving Sandler and John Yau, The Brooklyn Rail, April 2010.
57. Von Rydingsvard, in Judy Colishan and Van Wagner Interview, Judith Murray, Paintings; Ursula von Rydingsvard, Sculpture (Greenvale, NY: Hillwood Art Gallery, Long Island University, 1985).
64. Martin Friedman, in Berman, “Ursula von Rydingsvard Sculpts Metaphors in Wood,” 100.


75. Ruscha, interview by Charlene Spretnak via e-mail, September 2013 and January 2014.

76. Knight, in Dooley, “Words.”

77. Ruscha, interview by Spretnak.


84. Gornik, interview by Charlene Spretnak on February 22, 2001; follow-up questions via e-mail on September 23–24 and October 5, 2013. Unless otherwise noted, all direct quotations from the artist are from this interview.


86. Ibid.


89. Gornik, in “Rooms in the View,” 77.


114. Heartney, Ibid., 175.


120. Ibid.

**Afterword: When Form Follows Spirit**


5. The curators were following the lead of Robert Goldwater’s book *Primitivism in Modern Art* [1938], which addresses the subject solely in terms of the Romantic, the emotional, the exotic, the subconscious, the formal reductionist, and—getting warmer—“a harmonious relationship with nature.”
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