

Art and Thought: From Here to Eternity and Back Again

By Eric Timmreck

A work of art elicits and accentuates this quality of being a whole and of belonging to the larger, all-inclusive, whole which is the universe in which we live. —John Dewey¹

Dewey's words above suggest the deep connection between art and life, with particular emphasis on art as a unifier of humanity. But what is the nature of this unification? No doubt it is multidimensional. I would like to pick one of these dimensions, specifically the way in which art and human thought have interacted and influenced each other over the ages. My intent in this article is to illustrate the strength of this correspondence through time. The reader is asked to forgive the many generalizations necessitated in part by space limitations but more fundamentally by the compromises needed to treat in summary form a topic of such infinite richness and depth.²

To begin this discussion, let's imagine ourselves in Egypt, say in one of the tombs in the Valley of the Kings. The preserved color on the richly adorned walls belies the washed-out monuments we have seen outdoors, massively impressive but nearly colorless due to the effects of time and weather. We notice Hathor, Horus, Khepri, Anubis, and many others of the Egyptian pantheon, creations that held force for an amazing several thousand years as images in which the Egyptians embodied the forces of nature to which they were subject. We also notice how animals played such an important part in this embodiment, namely, cow, falcon, beetle, and jackal, respectively. Clearly and obviously, the art of the Egyptians captured the way that Egyptians thought about the world, embodying the vicissitudes of nature in animal-centric gods. Of course, such animal-centric personification of forces was present in many other cultures as well.

Now let's go northeast to ancient Antioch, where many Roman mosaics were on display, possibly one like *The Musical Contest between Apollo and Marsyas*. (For the reader's convenience, most of the specific works that I will reference in this article are viewable in the MFAH collections.) We see Dionysus, Athena, Apollo, Nike, and a couple of Muses, all gods, now represented as anthropomorphic, no longer connected with the animal world. We might say then that the Greeks and Romans (whose influences are combined in such a work) "promoted" their representation of natural forces from animal form to human form. That their various divine representations embody so many of our human foibles and peccadilloes comes as no surprise.

We also note a direct opposition displayed: that between Marsyas—representing Dionysus—and Apollo. (The wonderful story³ behind this opposition is strongly recommended to the reader but if included here would take all the space that I have left!) Much later, Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* highlights this opposition as the classic distinction between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the intellectual vs. the emotional,⁴ the elegant vs. the base, heaven vs. earth, abstract vs. concrete, order vs. chaos, universal vs. particular. What has happened here? We have the beginning of the Western approach of division and analysis, highlighted by the opposition in the Marsyas story. So the animal gods have been promoted to human gods, and things are starting to be divided up!

(The reader no doubt recognizes by now that this analysis is moving along the development of Western thought only, deferring to a possible later article the continued unity illustrated in Eastern thought, so opposed to the fracturing divisions through which Western civilization has achieved its progress.)

To continue, let us now leap (pardon the size of the leap) to medieval Europe. Pick any work of art displaying God, angels, saints, sinners, heaven, hell, or any representative subset of these. How has thought evolved? One could say that the "multiple gods" of the

past have been "promoted" to the one God. People's beliefs are now centered around the concept of the one God. God has now moved to the extreme Apollonian end of the spectrum, especially when we consider his (or her) associated characteristics: perfect, eternal, all knowing, all good, etc. Consider, for example, Fra Angelico's *The Blessed and the Damned*. One side of the painting shows a progression of souls (mostly female, for some reason) toward heaven, one version of the Apollonian extreme; the other shows a similar progression (though mostly male, for some reason) to the opposite, much more Dionysian, pole. Clearly, the Apollonian extreme is the place to be; Dionysus is to be avoided at all costs.

Saint Thomas Aquinas captures this Apollonian mode of thought in his *Summa Theologica*, deriving all truth from the nature of God and constructing a rich edifice of thought that permeated the (Western) society of the Middle Ages and is amply and multipliciously represented in the religious art of the time. The reader may wish to consult Giovanni Bertucci's painting *St. Thomas Aquinas*, which explicitly represents the transmission of truth from God to the mind of Aquinas, then to Aquinas's writings, and on to the church and its people.

The Apollonian extreme is further represented in some allegorical paintings that suggest the true existence of universal concepts, originally brought forth via the shadows in Plato's cave. Two examples are Anton Mengs's *Truth* and Luca Giordano's *Allegory of Prudence*.



Anton Raphael Mengs, *Truth*, 1756, pastel on vellum mounted on plain weave linen, MFAH purchase with funds provided by "One Great Night in November, 1998."

¹ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*

² Readers are invited to help overcome these generalizations by participating in an informal forum on this topic. Your e-mail to EMTimmreck@comcast.net is welcome.

³ See Edith Hamilton's *Mythology* or Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.

⁴ The persistence over time of the force of the Apollonian/Dionysian distinction is represented by its reprise in popular culture in the personalities of Spock and McCoy, integrated uncomfortably in that of Kirk, in the original *Star Trek* television series. Remember also the characters of Rosie Sayer and Charlie Allnut in the movie *The African Queen*, brought together in a union of the elegant and the earthy.

The unitary nature of the one God drives toward a single standard of goodness. Has this single standard served us well, in contrast with the multiple, ambiguous goodnesses represented by the plural gods that we have seen in the art of antiquity? Plato's universals became ascendant; Aristotle's particulars were subdued. But this situation was not to last.

Jumping ahead a couple hundred years or so, we see in art the impact of the Renaissance, coupled with increased focus on *this* life, *this* earth, our *senses*, what we can and can't know *based on our senses*. In art and in thought, *this* life now takes prominence, in contrast with the near-total domination of a next life in earlier thought and art. Jusepe de Ribera's painting *The Five Senses: Touch* could not have been conceived in earlier times. Dutch landscapes, Rembrandt's portraits, Van Huysum's bug-infested flowers, Heda's feasts, the portraits of Gerard, and many thousands of paintings over many hundreds of years carry Aristotle's notion of "art as imitation" to perfection.⁵ Newton has come along and said that we can understand this world through equations, raising hope and expectation of complete knowledge of *this* world. Descartes has changed the initial focus from God to "I" in his cogito (though he quickly reincorporates God).⁶ This world of certainty in thought is reflected also in art until—Edouard Manet!

The earlier forces that broke from the idea of a single, certain truth—the Reformation and the Enlightenment—broke into art through Manet, who in effect said that there is not a single, certain, proper way to do art. Note the unconventional mixing of brushstrokes and the placement of the viewer in *The Toilers of the Sea*. The succeeding Impressionists captured in art what Kant had brilliantly brought forth, that what we see (the "phenomenon") is different from what is actually there (the "noumenon" or thing-in-itself).⁷ The Pointillists then carried this idea to an extreme. Meanwhile, Cézanne presaged the movement of abstraction with his emphasis on form, carried on through the Cubists and the Abstract Expressionists.

What is happening here? On the one hand, we are moving away from the Apollonian, by

concentrating on this earth and our empirical knowledge of it, though obscured by the limitations of our mind. On the other hand, abstraction moves back toward the Apollonian, by removing particular characteristics (e.g., form, color) from their embodiments, treating them as universals. Plato would have been proud! One can view some artists as recombining the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the intellectual and the emotional, in works such as Wassily Kandinsky's *Sketch 160A*.

In both art and thought, we have gone from here (early cultures' approach to natural forces) to eternity (the Apollonian, eternal, all-powerful God), and back (to the focus on this finite world suggested by portraits and landscapes). Not just back, though. Instead, here and eternity have been combined by artists such as Kandinsky.

Why did Kandinsky choose the style that he did? The world of creeping uncertainty was impinging on him. The mind-stretching ideas in Einstein's relativity theory, the confusing discoveries of quantum mechanics, Ernest Rutherford's discovery that the atom is mostly space, Freud's ideas of a truly existing unconscious—such things caused Kandinsky to say, in effect, "We don't know what's real anymore, so I'm going to paint what I feel, not what I think I see." I believe that the effect of this was that Kandinsky integrated the emotional and the intellectual, the Dionysian and the Apollonian, in his work. It is interesting that Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* praised as the highest and most cathartic tragedy that which combined these two aspects of human nature.

In a way, Kandinsky did in art what Hegel⁸ did in philosophy, as Hegel brilliantly illustrated that what first appear as opposites become unified when considered from another viewpoint, his approach popularly rendered as thesis, antithesis, synthesis. It seems that Hegel takes us back to thinking about Eastern thought again, which never left synthesis behind in the first place. We find here an unexpected correspondence between art and thought.

We now move from the world of creeping uncertainty to the world of truly deep uncertainty. Consider, for example, Roberto Matta's untitled Surrealistic painting of 1942. Matta



Edouard Manet, *The Toilers of the Sea*, 1873, oil on canvas, the MFAH, gift of Audrey Jones Beck.

referred to an "inscape," a psychological view of reality, as compared with a landscape or seascape. He wanted to represent things that don't have names, that can't be directly seen, that he called "neologisms." For example, when you see a group of people, you see the people but not directly the many relationships among them. Matta wanted to represent things such as those unobservable relationships and chose Surrealistic forms and semi-transparency as two of his tools. His work reflects the deep uncertainties that we associate with several important modern constructs, such as Jung's ideas of a collective unconscious, Kurt Gödel's incompleteness theorem (which proved that you can't develop an entirely complete and consistent mathematical system of any complexity), and Jacques Derrida's deconstructionism (which seriously challenged the validity of any of our knowledge).

Art and thought have moved together from early uncertainties, to total certainty, and back now to the world of deep uncertainty, while along the way recapturing the unity between the Dionysian and the Apollonian.

Is this the end of the story? We have yet to deal with the totally unconstrained nature of contemporary art and how that relates to the thought of today. Perhaps there is a connection between the "no rules" of contemporary artists and the "no knowledge" of the deconstructionists. Perhaps these two aspects of Postmodernism are closely related. The evaluation of this hypothesis will be left to the imagination of the reader or to a possible future article.

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⁵ See Aristotle's *Poetics*.

⁶ See René Descartes's *Discourse on Method*.

⁷ See Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

⁸ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.