

New Religious Movements and the Visual Arts

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ABSTRACT: Contrary to popular conceptions, modern artists are often religious. Some of them are part of mainstream religions including Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, and Islam. Others try to establish new religions and forms of spirituality based on art itself. A significant number of artists, while alienated from traditional religions, were either part of, or deeply influenced by, new religious movements and esoteric groups. Scholars have particularly focused on the influence of the Theosophical Society on the visual arts, but other movements have also been significant.

KEYWORDS: new religious movements, modern art and religion, Sixten Ringbom, Theosophical Society, Anthroposophy, Christian Science, Roman Catholic Church, modern art

In 1948 Austrian art historian Hans Sedlmayr (1896–1984) published his most important work, *Verlust der Mitte* (Loss of the Center).¹ Sedlmayr argued that, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, art had progressively lost its religious center and was becoming increasingly anti-religious. Even more influential was a book published one year earlier by a British-born American decorator, Terence Harold Robsjohn-Gibbings (1905–1976), *Mona Lisa's Mustache*.² The book's thesis was that modern art was against *traditional* religion, but largely originated in an esoteric and occult milieu. Robsjohn-Gibbings was a vitriolic critic of modern, particularly abstract, art. His book was so successful that, for decades, supporters of abstract art religiously avoided mentioning the esoteric connections of its pioneers.

Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions, Volume 19, Issue 4, pages 3–13. ISSN 1092-6690 (print), 1541-8480. (electronic). © 2016 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: 10.1525/nr.2016.19.4.3.

Finnish art historian Sixten Ringbom (1935–1992) wrote in 1990 in a letter that he “had a feeling that the whole question of the irrational sources of modernism had been swept under the carpet by a scholarly community anxious to save the respectability of the modern movement.”³ Ringbom himself had published a seminal article in 1966 emphasizing the influence of the Theosophical Society on Wassily Kandinsky (1866–1944) and the birth of abstract art.⁴ Art historian Rose-Carol Washton (later Washton-Long) developed the same argument in her 1968 dissertation on Kandinski.⁵ Ringbom followed in 1970 with a book-length treatment of Kandinsky, *The Sounding Cosmos*.⁶

These pioneer works were met with ostracism by members of the art history academic community fearful that acknowledging Kandinsky’s debt to Theosophy would open the door to the criticism and ridicule of which Robsjohn-Gibbings’ book was an example. *The Sounding Cosmos* did not get a single review in a scholarly journal during Ringbom’s lifetime and it was never reprinted.⁷ Apologists for abstract art simply denied that Theosophical and other occult interests were important for its founders. As late as 1990, Yve-Alain Bois, a leading scholar of Dutch abstract pioneer Piet Mondrian (1872–1944), wrote that happily “the theosophical nonsense with which the artist’s mind was momentarily encumbered” disappeared quite rapidly from his art.⁸ In fact, Mondrian himself wrote, “I got everything from *The Secret Doctrine*,”⁹ referring to the Theosophical Society’s main philosophical work published by Helena P. Blavatsky (1831–1891) in 1888. About his artistic style known as Neo-Plasticism, Mondrian wrote: “It is Neo-Plasticism that exemplifies theosophical art (in the true sense of the word),”¹⁰ and he remained a member of the Theosophical Society until the end of his life.¹¹

The bias against connecting the origins of modern art with Theosophy still exists. Waldemar Januszczak, the star critic of the *London Times*, wrote in 2010: “The fact is, theosophy . . . is embarrassing. If there is one thing you do not want your hardcore modernist to be, it is a member of an occult cult. . . . Theosophy takes art into Dan Brown territory. No serious student of art history wants to touch it.”¹² Januszczak insisted in 2014 that Theosophy was “fraudulent” and “ridiculous” and that “one day, someone will write a big book on the remarkable influence of theosophy on modern art” and “its nonsensical spell” on so many modern artists.¹³

A book deserves to be written indeed—as a personal confession, I am working on it—but in the meantime scholars from different fields have addressed the issue of how influential not only Theosophy, but a number of new religious movements, and religion in general, have been on the birth and development of modern visual arts. Little by little the myth of a largely anti-religious or irreligious modern art has been eroded in terms of three different research topics: artists faithful to mainstream religious traditions; artists who create new religious movements; and artists whose work is influenced by new religious movements.

ARTISTS FAITHFUL TO MAINSTREAM RELIGIOUS FAITHS

The first area of research is the discovery that mainstream religions were by no means foreign to modern visual artists. Although some leading artists were secular humanists or Marxists, many were devoted Christians. Particularly when their art was non-figurative, their work was not easily accepted by their churches. In the Roman Catholic Church, the first confrontation happened during the Holy Year 1950. Prelates variously hostile and favorable to abstract art organized competing exhibitions in Rome, with some controversies centering on the work of the French abstract painter Alfred Manessier (1911–1993).¹⁴ While some bishops considered abstract art as inherently anti-religious or iconoclastic, others embraced it enthusiastically.¹⁵ Some of the bishops remembered that the main manifesto of Italian abstract art, *KN*,¹⁶ hailed by Kandinsky as one of the must-read books on the subject,¹⁷ had been written in 1935 by a conservative Catholic intellectual, Carlo Belli (1903–1991).

In France, abstract art was for several years largely a Catholic affair, with artists such as Manessier, Georges Mathieu (1921–2012), Simon Hantaï (1922–2008), and Aurélie Nemours (1910–2005). If Manessier was a liberal Catholic, Mathieu and Hantaï were, or became, quite conservative.¹⁸ One of the leading Korean abstract painters, Kim En Joong (b. 1940), is a Catholic convert and a Dominican priest.¹⁹ Not only Catholicism, but also Protestantism²⁰ and Islam²¹ have had a significant influence on twentieth- and twenty-first-century avant-garde visual arts. As for Judaism, it would be enough to mention Marc Chagall (1887–1985), an enormously influential artist and a deeply religious Jew.²²

After some initial resistance, the Catholic hierarchy welcomed modern art. Pope Pius XII (1876–1958, r. 1939–1958) decided to open the Vatican Museums to modern artists. He also wrote in his 1947 encyclical *Mediator Dei*: “recent works of art . . . should not be universally despised and rejected through prejudice. Modern art should be given free scope,” although with some caution.²³ This position on modern art was reaffirmed by subsequent Popes, up to Pope Francis (b. 1936, r. 2013–present).²⁴

ARTISTS WHO CREATE NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

The second line of scholarly studies about religion and modern art concerns artists who tried to establish new forms of religion. Some founders of new religious movements were artists, including Oberto Airaudi (1950–2013), who led the Italian community of Damanhur and was a painter of some skill (see the article by PierLuigi Zoccatelli in this issue). Esoteric teachers Julius Evola (1898–1974) and Bô Yin Râ (Joseph Anton Schneiderfranken, 1876–1943) were also reputed painters.

Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947), a leading Russian painter, was the co-founder of Agni Yoga with his wife Helena Ivanovna Roerich (1879–1955).²⁵ In some countries, artists founded and led for several years the local branches of the Theosophical Society, including Jean Delville (1867–1953) in Belgium²⁶ and Kazimierz Stabrowski (1869–1929) in Poland.²⁷

Other artists believed that their art might actually function as a religion and eventually replace traditional religions. The first example of these was Mondrian. Although a member of the Theosophical Society, he was disillusioned by the lack of appreciation of his art by the leaders of the society in the Netherlands.²⁸ In fact, Mondrian saw Neo-Plasticism as a millenarian religious project for transforming the whole of society. He believed that, just as the Neo-Plastic way of painting had disposed of the old art and created an entirely new one, so Neo-Plasticism would end up destroying the old forms of state, religion, and family and creating new, simpler and better ones.²⁹

The second, and perhaps most significant, example is the Russian painter Kazimir Malevich (1879–1935), the founder of Suprematism. In 1920 Malevich wrote *God Is Not Cast Down*, in which he argued that the idea of God as spiritual essence and energy was compatible with the Communist Revolution, and that only his own brand of art, Suprematism, opened the door to experiencing this new concept of God.³⁰ In 1920 Malevich wrote in a letter, “Now, I have returned, or entered into the world of religion. . . . I see in myself, and perhaps in the whole world that the moment for religious change is beginning. I have seen that just as painting went towards its pure form of action, so the religious world is going towards the religion of pure action. . . . I see in Suprematism a beginning that is not just pictorial, but encompasses everything.”³¹

The Soviet regime did not believe that Malevich’s new religion was compatible with Communism. On 20 September 1930 he was arrested and remained in jail for six months. Upon his release, however, Malevich continued to cultivate Suprematism as a new spirituality within a small circle of friends.³² He came to believe that Suprematist art, through its international spread, would eventually create a new world and even a new nature. He wrote, “Our globe, the surface of the Earth, is disorganized. . . . There exists some nature, but I want to instead create Suprematist nature, which will be built according to Suprematist laws.”³³ In short, Malevich saw Suprematism as “a base not only for painting, but for everything, and the new religion.”³⁴ The new religion also had its rituals. In 1929, the death of his pupil, the artist Ilya Chashnik (1902–1929), was the impetus for Malevich’s first attempt to create a Suprematist rite for funerals. It was used for Malevich’s own funeral in 1935.³⁵

Mondrian’s Neo-Plasticism and Malevich’s Suprematism are examples of explicit new religions proposed by artists. They have not disappeared. A leading exponent of Italy’s Arte Povera (Poor Art) movement,

Michelangelo Pistoletto (b. 1933), proposed more recently a new “secular religion” he called Omnitheism.³⁶ Perhaps these artists’ proposals for new religions met with limited success. On the other hand, in postmodern and post-secular societies there may be an audience for new religious proposals based on art. This was probably what Philip Hook, a senior director at the international auction house Sotheby’s, had in mind, when he wrote in 2014, “art—even in its most secular form—has become the religion of the 21st century. Art meets a spiritual need in people that was previously met elsewhere. It has filled a vacuum in our society left by religion. The great art galleries of the land are its new cathedrals. A large number of the people who a generation or two ago might have taken their children to church on Sundays now take them to an art gallery instead.”³⁷ Perhaps Hook exaggerated, but these new spiritual phenomena are not limited to modern art. In December 2014, I visited the Ognissanti (All Saints) Church in Florence, where visitors from all around the world leave messages and requests for help at the burial place of Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli (1445–1510), as they would do for a Catholic saint. Botticelli, however, was not a saint, and most messages were far away from Christianity. They rather suggested the birth of a non-organized new religious cult, celebrating the Italian painter as a prophet of beauty.

INFLUENCE OF NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS ON ARTISTS AND ARTISTIC MOVEMENTS

Finally, the third line of investigation is about the influence of new religious movements on visual artists. It is perhaps true that many modern Western artists were alienated from traditional Christianity, but only a few exhibited a lack of interest in religion and spirituality. Many found a source of inspiration in the new religious and esoteric movements. This was argued in 1986 by American curator Maurice Tuchman when he organized in Los Angeles the exhibition *The Spiritual in Art*.³⁸ Sixten Ringbom was invited to lecture and contribute to the mammoth catalogue,³⁹ and felt finally vindicated. Tuchman was in turn controversial within the art establishment for his promotion of artists previously regarded as marginal, but his command of a network of influential relationships in the art world was much wider than Ringbom’s. He held his own against criticism,⁴⁰ and gradually it became fashionable in several circles to claim that modern art, particularly abstract, had something to do with new religious movements and esotericism. This was evidenced by several exhibitions, including *Okkultismus und Avantgarde* in Frankfurt in 1995.⁴¹ These scholarly efforts mentioned a few other esoteric movements, but focused mostly on the Theosophical Society.

The considerable scholarly work that led to the catalogues of the 1986 and 1995 exhibitions was continued in the twenty-first century,

particularly at the University of Amsterdam under the leadership of Wouter Hanegraaff and Marco Pasi, both scholars of Hermetic philosophy and Western Esotericism. In 2013 University of Amsterdam hosted the first conference of the Enchanted Modernities Network, led by art historian Sarah Victoria Turner, a lecturer at the University of York and later Deputy Director of Research at the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. The network organized several important conferences in the three years between 2013 and 2015. The aim of Enchanted Modernities was to explore the relationship between Theosophy and the visual arts. It succeeded admirably, generating dozens of valuable papers on all aspects of this relationship internationally.

However, the influence of new religious and esoteric movements on the visual arts is by no means restricted to Theosophy. Anthroposophy, founded in 1912 by Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) after he broke away from the Theosophical Society, was in several countries no less important in its impact on artists. In 2015 the Museum of Modern Art of Olomouc, Czech Republic, organized the exhibition *Aenigma: A Hundred Years of Anthroposophic Art*. It displayed works by internationally famous artists who were members of the Anthroposophical Society, such as Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), and lesser known Anthroposophist painters and sculptors.⁴²

Aenigma was the first exhibition to collect and display works by artists who had in common membership in a new religious or esoteric movement, and to discuss how this affiliation influenced their art. It would be both interesting and fruitful to organize similar exhibitions for other religious movements. Something has been done with respect to Spiritualism,⁴³ but perhaps a future exhibition might focus on artists who actually claimed that their hands were guided by spirits, including Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) in Sweden,⁴⁴ Ethel Le Rossignol (1873–1970), Anna Mary Howitt-Watts (1824–1884), and Georgiana Houghton (1814–1884) in England,⁴⁵ and several others in a number of different countries.

The influence of the different Rosicrucian orders and movements on nineteenth- and early twentieth-century art has been studied with reference mostly to Joséphin Péladan (1858–1918) in France and his *Salons de la Rose + Croix*.⁴⁶ However, Rosicrucian groups maintained an influence on the visual arts well after Péladan. One example is the Rosicrucian Fellowship founded by Danish American Max Heindel (pseud. of Carl Louis von Grasshoff, 1865–1919). Such an important French contemporary artist as Yves Klein (1928–1962) was a member of the fellowship, and was influenced by Heindel's theory of colors, although later he abandoned Rosicrucianism and returned to Catholicism.⁴⁷

Comparatively unexplored are the influences of other esoteric movements on modern artists. French esoteric teacher René Guénon (1886–1951) had a long association with the Swedish artist Ivan Aguéli (1869–1917) and participated in the esoteric circle that met in the home of the French painter Maurice Chabas (1862–1947).⁴⁸ Pyotr D. Ouspensky

(1878–1947), a former Theosophist who became an associate of the esoteric teacher George Ivanovich Gurdjieff (1866?–1949), wrote textbooks that were read with interest by many artists, including Malevich and other Russian modernists⁴⁹ and the American painter Georgia O’Keeffe (1887–1986).⁵⁰ The paintings of Aleister Crowley (1875–1947) have received mixed reviews,⁵¹ but one of his close associates was an artist of international fame, Italian-Argentinian Xul Solar (pseud. of Oscar Augustín Alejandro Schulz Solari, 1887–1963).⁵² Crowley was also a significant influence on a number of other artists. Giuliano Kremmerz (pseud. of Ciro Formisano, 1861–1930), an Italian occult teacher, founded the Brotherhood of Miriam, which had among its members Italian painter Emanuele Cavalli (1904–1981), and influenced other well-known artists, including Giuseppe Capogrossi (1900–1972).⁵³

The Church of Scientology offers courses for artists in its Celebrity Centers that teach the distinctive theory of aesthetics formulated by its founder, L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986). Well-known contemporary artists, including the Austrian Gottfried Helnwein (b. 1948), have been variously involved with Scientology.⁵⁴ Earlier on, Christian Science was a crucial influence on artists who became members of the church, including American muralist Violet Oakley (1874–1961), British colorist Winifred Nicholson (1893–1981), and American assemblage artist Joseph Cornell (1903–1972).⁵⁵

In 2015 in Reykjavik, I interviewed Birta Gudjonsdottir, chief curator at the National Gallery of Iceland, who told me about the influence of Sahaja Yoga, as well as of Theosophy, on the vibrant Icelandic contemporary art scene.

ARTICLES IN THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

The examples of new religious movements that have influenced artists could easily continue. A disproportionate number of artists joined new religious movements, and perhaps part of the importance of these groups within the larger framework of contemporary culture lies precisely in their influence on the visual arts. Certainly the topic cannot be exhausted in a single journal issue. This issue of *Nova Religio* on “New Religious Movements and the Visual Arts” also reflects the prevalence of scholarly studies on esoteric movements, particularly Theosophy, in connection with the arts.

Per Faxneld explores the use, or misuse, of the *Mona Lisa* by Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) in contemporary “occulture.” My own contribution is on networks of artists connected directly or indirectly with Theosophy. Although most previous studies of artists influenced by Theosophy have focused on Europe, my article is on artists in North, Central, and South America. Theosophy was but one influence

for the Polish self-taught painter Teofil Ociepka (1891–1978), discussed by Karolina Maria Hess and Małgorzata Alicja Dulcka. Ociepka was inspired by multiple esoteric schools, including Max Heindel’s Rosicrucian Fellowship and Rudolf Steiner’s Anthroposophy. Izabela Trzcńska presents Polish artist Janina Kraupe (b. 1921), who was crucially influenced by both Theosophy and Anthroposophy, and later, her understanding of Zen Buddhism. Boaz Huss explores how a little known esoteric group, the Cosmic Movement, influenced artists in the early twentieth century. A study of the influence on the visual arts of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) and the Swedenborgian churches founded after his death has long been overdue, and Jane Williams-Hogan offers a first overview. PierLuigi Zoccatelli’s photo essay illustrates the artistic career of the founder of Damanhur in Italy, Oberto Airaudi, and describes how his paintings function as sacred artifacts for his movement.

The reader will notice that all the authors in this issue are scholars of religion rather than art historians. As such, they focus on biographical data and the artists’ own writings more than on iconographic analysis. Years ago, this was a frequent criticism by art historians of those sociologists and historians of religions who became aware of the crucial influences of new religious movements on modern art and ventured into the art field. Conversely, historians and sociologists of religions often noticed that iconographic analysis, when not grounded in systematic study of the movements with which artists were involved, might lead to doubtful conclusions. Although these complaints are still occasionally heard, the Enchanted Modernities project was instrumental in creating a sustained conversation between art historians and scholars of religion, evidencing how much their cooperation may be fruitful in this field, with each group of scholars utilizing the methodologies of their discipline. I hope that this issue of *Nova Religio* will be read by art historians as well as historians and sociologists of religions. May the conversation continue.

To appreciate fully the paintings and sculptures that are discussed in the articles in this special issue of Nova Religio on “New Religious Movements and the Visual Arts,” they should be seen in color. Color images are contained in the pdf articles available at <http://nr.ucpress.edu/>.

The photo essay by PierLuigi Zoccatelli, “‘All the Heavens in Your Hands’: Oberto Airaudi and the Art of Damanhur,” is available on this webpage at no charge.

ENDNOTES

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