

# Art and Spirit: The Artistic Brain, the Navajo Concept of Hozho, and Kandinsky's "Inner Necessity"

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Most traditional art forms around the planet are an expression of the spiritual dimension of a culture's cosmology and the spiritual experiences of individuals. Religious art and iconography often reveal the hidden aspects of spirit as glimpsed through the filter of cultural significance. Moreover, traditional art, although often highly abstract, may actually describe sensory experiences derived in alternative states of consciousness (ASC). This article analyzes the often fuzzy concepts of "art" and "spirit" and then operationalizes them in a way that makes them useful for cross-cultural transpersonal research. The fact of the universally abstract nature of traditional art is analyzed and used as a clue to the function of art in expressing and penetrating to the spiritual domain. A "continuum of representational-associational abstraction" model is introduced and described. These concepts are then applied to the author's experiences with Navajo art and the relation between art and the important Navajo philosophical concept of hozho (which may be understood as "beauty," "harmony," "unity"). A perspective on art and spirit is developed that essentially supports Wassily Kandinsky's contention that abstract art is the expression of an "inner necessity" of spirit. The article argues for a greater sensitivity among researchers and theorists for the sublime nature of spiritual art, be induced by very different means, including contemplative practices and chemical substances, and yet have different after-effects. Taken together, these ideas lead to the cautious conclusion that some psychedelics can induce genuine mystical experiences sometimes in some people, and that the current tendency to label these chemicals as entheogens may be appropriate.

*The spiritual life, to which art belongs and of which she is one of the mightiest elements, is a complicated but definite and easily definable movement forwards and upwards. This movement is the movement of experience. It may take different forms, but it holds at bottom to the same inner thought and purpose.*

**Wassily Kandinsky**  
*Concerning the Spiritual in Art*  
(1977/1914)

*Physics is a form of insight and as such it's a form of art.*

**David Bohm**  
*Shlain (1991, p.15).*

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

objects in American society may reach the status of icon where their significance transcends mere artistic criticism. For instance, the famous 1851 painting by Emanuel Gottlieb, *George Washington Crossing the Delaware*, is recognized by virtually all adults and school children in the United States. The facts that the event depicted in the painting never happened, that the flag came into existence after the date of the alleged event, that Washington could not possibly have crossed standing up in a small craft under such weather conditions, and that the ice is all wrong, have no bearing at all, either upon the significance of the picture or upon the emotional impact felt by patriotic viewers. Rather, the significance of the image is all about a heroic figure who is central to American mythology.

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

It is the purpose of this paper to explore the structural relationship between art and spirit for whatever clues we may find about how the human brain makes sense of an essentially transcendental world. I present a model of art and spirit that will explain some of the universal properties of art—in particular the common association of abstraction and aesthetics that defines what we usually mean by the concept of art. In order to do this, I analyze the very fuzzy concepts of “art,” “spirit,” and “abstraction,” and operationalize them in a way that makes them applicable to cross-cultural and transpersonal research. I then apply the model to the art of the Navajo people of the American Southwest. I am especially interested in the relation between Navajo art and the Navajo philosophical concept of *hozho* (“beauty,” “harmony”). Finally, the model is used to analyze Wassily Kandinsky’s (1977) contention that abstract art, such as modern expressionist paintings and Navajo sandpaintings, is the product of an “inner

necessity” of spirit to express its nature.

### Operationalizing Art and Spirit

The term “art” is scientifically problematic. “Art” is one of those words we lift from common English and try to apply in a rigorous way to other cultures. Art is an artifact of the way we in modern society value certain kinds of symbolic activities and products (see Malraux, 1953, p. 220; Cassirer, 1979, pp. 145-215; Langer, 1953; Jung, 1966, p. 136; Read, 1960, Chapter 2; Dissanayake, 1988, pp. 167-192). One may search in vain in most of the world’s languages for a term that glosses “art” in anything like this modern sense, if by that term we refer to objects or products set apart in special places for the sole appreciation of their aesthetic and monetary value (see, e.g., Berndt, 1971, p. 101 on the absence of “art” or “artist” in Aboriginal languages).

### Operationalizing Art

This said, I do not wish to imply that the term “art” cannot be ethnologically operationalized. Of course it can be, and I intend to do so. But typical of natural categories, the concept “art” has fuzzy boundaries (Layton, 1978, pp. 25-26; Dissanayake, 1988, pp. 35-39)<sup>1</sup> and hence objects and activities may appear to be more or less “art-like” to our eyes. Our own modern Euro-American attitudes privilege the aesthetic in art, and we sometimes fail to realize that some traditional peoples consider this aspect to be less important, and even beside the point. For these peoples, what are for us primarily objects of beauty may be for them objects of significance or objects of utility. In fact, the symbolic mode of cognition is inherent to all human beings (Arnheim, 1969; Donald, 1991; Alexander, 1989) and the conjunction of right lobe, symbolic, cognitive processing, and aesthetic feelings is universal to human cultures, whether there is a name in any particular language for that conjunction or not (Dissanayake, 1988; Maguet, 1971, 1986). Moreover, however a people may refer to their art, symbolically rich and beautiful artifacts, activities, and performances are inextricably involved in symbolic action in traditional societies (Gell, 1998).

Thus, a cross-culturally workable definition of art requires that it encompass at least three major dimensions, aesthetics, the dimension of attractiveness, beauty, taste (Maguet, 1971, 1986), *significance*, the dimension of meaning and the relation between the

object's meaning and the society's cosmology and religious beliefs (Eliade, 1986; Layton, 1978), and *utility*, the dimension of usefulness, purpose, intention, function, and so forth, as in Alfred Gell's notion of "agency" (1998). In other words, what art ethnologists are really interested in studying are material culture and performances that involve expression through imagery that combines aesthetics, significance, and utility. As the exact interaction between these three may vary from situation to situation, and among cultures, anything like a crisp definition of art is pointless. As Dark (1978, p. 34) makes clear, western terms like "decoration," "craft," and "art" are somewhat interchangeable and flexible. What we can do however is lay out an operational definition to guide our understanding of the underlying processes producing art. We may define "art" as *any imagery that is the result of the coalescence of aesthetics, significance, and agency, realizing that one or two of these may not be strongly present and that the peoples themselves may not recognize one or two of these as important.*

For those readers who are more technically inclined, I am defining art in terms of an n-dimensional phase space (a geometrical space defined by any number ("n") of dimensions, each dimension of which may vary independently or in concert) in which aesthetics, significance, and utility are the major three dimensions, with an eventual fourth dimension, sublimity, and a fifth dimension, abstraction, defining sacred art. Because my intention here is to keep the discussion as simple as possible, some of the power of defining art as a phase space is lost. Nevertheless, this way of defining art is sensitive to the considerable variation we may encounter cross-culturally in how people conceive of art. It is possible to find art objects that are considered beautiful without being overly associated with any meaning per se. Ornamentation may or may not involve significant iconography. Paintings may or may not be "of something." Likewise, the beauty, or lack of beauty, of icons such as masks used in healing rituals may be considered peripheral within the cultural frame of reference. And, as Gell (1992) has shown, the principal concern of the people may be upon the use of the object as a kind of technology, as in the case of certain Pacific peoples who create shields, body art, and prow boards for their boats in order to dazzle the beholder and put them at a disadvantage in trade or warfare. But keep in mind that what first draws the interest of the Western mind is usually the sense of

beauty in the creation, execution, form, and deployment of the object, or the mastery of performance—usually some form of iconic symbolism or ritual performance.

It is also important to note that a culture may or may not recognize a special social status similar to our "artist," and may or may not conceive of artistry as distinct from the transmission of significance or technological intention, but the material intersection of these three qualities— beauty, symbol, and (to a lesser extent) utility—(1) has been demonstrated in research with captive primates and other animals (Alland, 1977), (2) crops up naturally in children's art cross-culturally (Kellogg, 1969; Alland, 1983), (3) is universal to human cultures (Dissanayake, 1988, p. 1x), and (4) has been so since at least Paleolithic times (10,000 - 40,000 or more years ago; Dissanayake, 1988, pp. 53-55). The universality of this combination cries out for a neurobiological explanation, for artistic proclivity obviously existed among human ancestors prior to complex cultural variation and personal conditioning. As I will show below, it is my position that this universality is explained as being mediated by an essentially artistic brain. The brain recognizes and experiences beauty, just as it cognizes and produces significance and initiates purposeful action in the world (Donald, 1991, 2001; Alexander, 1989). When these three natural, semiosomatic processes intersect in material objects or in cultural events, we in modern society will tend to recognize "art." And, because our English concept of art is so fuzzy, we tend to use various hedges to express more precise kinds of art. We may recognize the merely beautiful ("ornamental," "decorative," "fine," or "art for its own sake"), the beautiful and useful ("craft"), and perhaps the merely significant ("conceptual" or "symbolic" art).

### **Operationalizing Spirit**

Operationalizing the term "spirit" is, if anything, even more difficult than "art." The term "spirit" is frequently conflated with such terms as "sacred," "numinous," "religious," "soul," and the like. It is especially difficult to define in a scientifically meaningful way in the current climate of New Age thinking in which spirit is commonly defined in opposition to anything savoring of received or institutionalized religion. As Mircea Eliade (1986, p. 83) has remarked, this dualism is an artifact of the loss and rediscovery of the spiritual and sacred in modern society; religion being

more associated with bureaucratic institutions that participated in the despiritualization and materialization of nature. Yet the element of spirit cannot be ignored in non-Western art, nor in modern art. There is something missing from our definition of art above that must be included within any definition of art of use to ethnology. That something is *sublimity*. It is the element of the sublime in the art of peoples everywhere. I use the term in its ancient sense—from the root *sub*, “up to,” and *limin*, “threshold.” The latter root is the same one that has been central to Victor Turner’s use of the concept of *liminality* in his analysis of the function of ritual (Turner, 1969, 1979). I am using the term in Turner’s sense of threshold to some experience of the sacred. Such an experience may vary from a simple feeling of numinosity to a full-blown transpersonal encounter or ASC.

What ethnologists often find in traditional cultures is a profound appreciation of the sacred in what we Westerners conceive of as merely “matter.” Moreover, there is a universal recognition among peoples that there is a *hidden dimension* to nature, a dimension that hosts the animated and powerful—but normally unseen—forces that shape events in the human world. Even if we take a strictly psychodynamic view of spirit (or even a neuropsychological point of view; see Ernandes & Giammanco, 1998)—that is, that spirit is the projection of our own inner and largely unconscious and archetypal nature upon extramental reality<sup>2</sup>—the loss of the sense of the sacred and the spiritual in modern society has been accompanied by an interruption of an essential process in spiritual discovery, maturation, and expression. As those who have actively followed paths of spiritual discovery will attest, dialog with the depths is generally carried out by way of imagery encountered in hypnagogic fantasy, ritual practice, visualization techniques, and various thematic apperception methods such as meditation upon the esoteric Tarot. What may be accessed by way of these techniques is a panoply of extraordinary experiences—numinous experiences that may be interpreted by the individual or the society as living spirit. What has been lost for most people living in modern society is the smooth linkage of imagery and culturally rich, spiritual associations. In my opinion, the more astute critics of modern art, or at least certain schools of modern art such as abstract expressionism, understand the artistic process as a rediscovery of the spiritual or mystical dimension of imagery (e.g., Kandinsky, 1982; Read,

1960; Malraux, 1953; Ament, 2002).

The dialog between the conscious self and either the unconscious or the spiritual dimension of reality (depending upon one’s point of view) remains intact for many traditional peoples, especially those cultures whose core symbolism derives from shamanic imagery and practices (Winkelman, 2000). This dialogue means that the core symbolism within their cultural heritage remains pregnant—in Ernst Cassirer’s (1957, p. 202) sense—with cosmological meaning, and much of this symbolism constitutes “traditional” or “folk” art in the eyes of Westerners. Thus I want to retain the use of the terms “spirit” and “spiritual” for the recognition by peoples everywhere of what Eliade (1986) called “cosmic religiosity”—the recognition of a sacred or occult dimension behind or within the everyday world of appearances. For the purposes of this study, therefore, *spiritual art* is defined as *the confluence of beauty, significance, and utility in imagery that has associated with it a link to the sublime, regardless of how the culture within which the imagery is found interprets that imagery*. This definition is intended to apply to art found anywhere, whether the culture be traditional or modern. It applies as much to traditional Navajo sand-paintings and Northwest Coast spirit masks as it does to the cosmological paintings of Japan’s Kieji Usami or the “mystical” paintings of America’s Mark Tobey.

### Abstraction

I have so far incorporated four aspects of art within our model, those being aesthetics, significance, utility, and sublimity. There is yet another quality of art that needs addressing before the model may be considered reasonably complete. Ethnologists of art have long recognized that nearly all traditional art is abstract (see Redfield, 1971). In my opinion, this fact provides an important clue to understanding the power of art to penetrate into, evoke, and express the sublime dimension of being (Laughlin, 2003). In order to use this clue, however, additional clarification is required. It is crucial to understand that abstraction is to some extent a characteristic of all art—that is, involved in all beautiful, significant, and useful imagery. But once again we face the problem of rendering an everyday English word into a technical and universally applicable concept. The commonsense Western meaning of abstraction involves a movement away from particularity and toward generality—from the concrete presence of something to thought freed

from the demands of representation.<sup>3</sup> One of our most famous philosophers, John Locke, extrapolated this commonsense meaning of abstraction in his 17th-century study, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in which he argued that all abstract ideas derive from comparing the similarities and differences among the objects we encounter in our environment. The movement in Locke's notion of abstraction is from external particulars to internal ideas. The notion that some abstract ideas may originally derive from wholly internal—even inherent—structures of the brain and that these structures develop as they are instantiated in experience was quite foreign to Locke, as it is to many thinkers to this very day. Moreover, the English connotations of abstraction do not readily refer to the expression of ideas or iconic symbols having their origins in inner psychodynamic experience—say, from intuition, feeling, or contemplation. Other commentators have recognized this stumbling block. As one textbook in the psychology of art puts it:

Thanks to habitual terminology, many would agree that a great part of modern Western art, as well as Egyptian, African, American Indian, and Pre-Columbian art, is abstract, yet few would be willing to go along with the implication *that abstraction is built into the very essence of all art products and is essential for experiencing them no less than tension and relief and feeling-into*. The difficulty of accepting these hypotheses arises mainly from the usual connotations of abstraction, which place it as a contrast to concreteness, perceptibility, and individuality as well as to emotional experiencing.

(Kreitler & Kreitler, 1972, p. 302; emphasis added)

To apply this very Western idea of abstraction to the experiences of peoples outside the umbrella of Euro-American culture and history is obviously problematic, especially in those cases where the process of abstraction seems to be a spontaneous expression of some inner impetus or drive. Even among ethnographers, there is a tendency to presume that the abstract ideas expressed in traditional art inevitably arise from some kind of Lockean analysis of similarities and differences among experienced objects in the environment. Even the reputable ethnologist Robert Redfield (1971, p. 47), noted the inevitable “distortion of reality” that traditional art holds in common with modern art. As we shall see, eliminating this cultural bias will enable us to better understand the way that traditional systems of art, as well as some schools of modern art,

are able to express an intuitive grasp, and even the direct apprehension of the spiritual realms of human experience, as well as the essential forms and properties of “normal” experience (Burnham, 1971, p. 45).

### Continuum of Representative-Associative Abstraction

Recognizing that all art is to one extent or another the product of mental abstraction, perhaps a more scientifically useful model of abstraction in art would be to see that art products may be placed along a continuum from *representative abstraction* at one pole to *associative abstraction* at the other pole. I am not defining ideal types here, but rather suggesting polar tendencies in artistic intention, expression, and interpretation. All art products are abstract, but what determines their place on the continuum is their principal focus along the continuum of the abstraction process. To put it another way, of what phase of the neuropsychological abstraction is the art an expression? Is the main intention the description of sensed objects? Or is the focus upon some adumbrated property of the act of perception itself? Or is it an expression of an emotion, an intuition, an idea, or an eidetic image spontaneously arising from the depths?

Let me give some examples from the history of Euro-American art to demonstrate how the *representative-associative continuum* might be appropriate. If the theme of a painting or sculpture or performance is the depiction of the topographical relations visually sensed in the world, then we would consider that piece to be highly “representational” in common parlance. The clearest examples of “pure” representation are illustrations that utilize the various principles of illusion to produce a “realistic” picture of the sensed object. Among visual artists, a landscape—say, one done by John Gainsborough—would normally be interpreted as “representational.” Perhaps the paintings of Andrew Wyeth would also serve as being fairly representational in this sense. However, the portraits of Rembrandt or Renoir are as much inner emotional projections as they are illustrations. Even more, a pointillist painting by Georges Seurat, although on the face of things quite representational, actually focuses upon certain structural properties of the perceptual act and uses the representational aspect (the beach scene or whatever) to explore the infra-realistic organization of visual perception—in keeping with the other impressionists, the pointillists were phenomenologists and wanted to

describe how we see what we see. Further along the continuum, Pablo Picasso performed topological experiments upon the geometry of perception by changing the normally encountered relations of form and point of view. Still further along on the continuum, Wassily Kandinsky used the merest hint of real objects and forms, or pure geometric, nonrepresentational forms to explore the expression of spirit via “abstract” relations composed of color, form, and movement. Piet Mondrian likewise constructed paintings that use pure geometrical forms and colors to probe the dimensions of inner space, the realm of inner psychological experience. The paintings of the cubists and surrealists are also positioned at about this point on the continuum. As you can see when you look at such works, there is a clear movement away from the pictorial to the significant, from the sign to the signified. As Ortega y Gasset (1968, pp. 38-39) notes, the artist “shuts his eyes to the outer world and concentrates upon the subjective images in his own mind.”

#### The Pure Associative Pole and Automatism

The “dripped” paintings of Jackson Pollock are perhaps furthest from representational abstraction, and may represent for us the pole of pure associative abstraction in modern art. Pollock divested himself of all “natural” components in his compositions, including such things as objects, central focus, conventional borders, and conventional spatial relations. He wanted nothing whatever in his paintings upon which the mind could project remembered objects, even symbolic objects like archetypes. His avowed intent was to freely express the processes of the unconscious by giving up control of his body and the creative process to the unconscious—hence the epithet “action painting” sometimes used to describe his technique.

Pollock’s method became one of the most celebrated of the “automatic” methods of creation. *Automaticism* was derived from the earlier experiments by the cubists and surrealists (in fact Andre Breton once defined surrealism as “pure psychic automatism”; Ellenwood, 1992, p. 39) and was used by a number of artists, including many of the other abstract expressionists such as Robert Motherwell, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman, to access their own unconscious creative processes (Shapiro & Shapiro, 1990, p. 2). From surrealists like Andre Breton, these artists learned to use essentially meditative techniques “to subvert

accepted aesthetic standards and provoke, not only a new kind of authenticity, but unexpected ‘sparks’ that could be obtained in no other way” (Ellenwood, 1992, p. 178). Artistic activity became by definition a transpersonal process.

The great French Canadian painter Paul-Emile Borduas<sup>4</sup> distinguished three types of “automatism” (Ellenwood, 1992, pp. 173-174):

*mechanical automatism*—reliance upon the physical properties of a process, like centrifugal force, gravity, the properties of plastic media, etc. Not the product of psychological processes. For example, imagery from spirographs, or the so-called “fractal” imagery produced from computer transposition of Mandelbrot sets.

*psychic automatism*—creation with no control by conscious thoughts, and in an emotionally neutral state. This would include imagery from the hypnagogic, dreams, fantasy and hallucination, and produced surrealism. But it still involves memory. The artist is painting what one remembers of the imagery one has experienced in those ASC. Interest is more on the object than on the dialog with the materials being used.

*surrational automatism*<sup>5</sup> —creation without premeditation, process of creating with no attention to content. The first form that occurs leads by free association to the next form, and so on, until a feeling of unity and completion is reached (or a sense that to go further would destroy that unity). Understanding and interpretation of the work comes after it is finished. The painting is its own content, not a description of a recalled image.

The distinction between “psychic” and “surrational” automatism is an important one for my purposes, for not only is the neuropsychology of the two types of automatism different, there are different representations of these methods among traditional systems of art. The difference psychologically is that there are two distinct mind-states involved in psychic automatic methods—the mind-state that is the inspirational source of imagery is distinct from that during the act of producing the piece of art; e.g., an actual dream and the painting of an image from that dream—while there is but one mind-state involved in surrational methods—the inspiration and execution occurring simultaneously within the unpremeditated act of creation.

The neuropsychology is distinctly different

between psychic and surreational automatism, for each method involves a different process of expressive penetration. In the case of psychic automatic techniques, the subject of the artistic act is a recalled image. So the penetration is from unconscious processes to internal eidetic imagery in the first instance, and from the memory of that image to expression in the painting in the second instance. This involves an intentional entrainment of right parietal lobe cortical structures mediating the eidetic image, prefrontal cortical structures mediating working memory, long-term memory structures in the hippocampus, and the visual and somatic structures involved in composing and executing the painting. But in the case of surreational automatic methods, there presumably is a direct penetration from unconscious intuitive processes to motor and visual systems involved in executing the painting. The expression of unconscious neurocognitive processes via behavior to the canvas is direct and involves entrainment of unconscious associational structures (say, in the thalamus and limbic system, and perhaps structures in the basal ganglia) with the motor and visual systems.

The process of abstraction is reasonably obvious in the case of psychic automatism—the artistic act requires the abstraction of the image from its original experiential context. Borduas was correct in emphasizing that this involves an act of memory. To make Borduas' distinctions even more useful for a cross-culturally applicable model of art, I want to add my own subsidiary distinction between two types of surreational methods. A *pure surreational method* is one without figurative constraint of any kind, while a *figurative surreational method* is one in which a figurative constraint is imposed upon an essentially automatic act, as for example when Carl Jung required his patients to paint mandalas in their exploration of the unconscious (Jung, 1969, 1997). The general form of the mandala was set by the analyst, but the execution of the form and subsidiary imagery was left to automatic processes of the patient. The patient painted a mandala and only after it was complete did he or she address the issue of interpretation.

If psychic automatism involves abstraction via memory from an earlier experience, but surreational automatism does not, one may then reasonably ask to what extent is surreational automatic art actually abstract? And if it is abstract, then what is it an abstraction of? Is “abstract” in this sense synonymous with

nonfigurative? Certainly not, for the true sense of abstraction is retained for any expression of unconscious processes, either indirectly through psychic automatic techniques, or directly by surreational automatic techniques. Both are symbolic acts. The processes of the unconscious that produce the imagery are transcendental relative to any expression they produce through penetration to semiosomatic activity (acting, speech, writing, movement, singing, sculpting, painting, dancing, and so forth), and such unconscious processes are certainly not limited in their movement, associations, or relations by the physical properties of the artistic medium (be it paint, ink, film, stage props, yarn, wood, soapstone, or what have you). The initiating unconscious processes are limited only by the neurophysiological structures that mediate them. Surreational automatism is an abstract expression of unconscious processes—a medium by means of which the hidden, transcendental activities of the unconscious penetrate to those neurocognitive structures mediating expression in materials and movements.

#### Representative-Associative Abstraction and Traditional Art

The much vaunted iconoclasm of modern art is perhaps a reaction to the materialism of 19th- and 20th-century Euro-American culture. Modern artists have frequently rejected received cultural values and styles and have been forced to fall back on their own visions and insights, which are communicated using new and often esoteric symbolism (see Redfield, 1971, pp. 47-48; Read, 1960). Modern artists are frequently the agents of the process of “creative mythology” (Campbell, 1968, p. 4), which is no longer subject to the tyranny of historical styles and standards. Indeed, as Leonard Shlain (1991, p. 18) has suggested, as new insights must first be imagined, it is often the artist that presages creative changes in knowledge and society.

Things are quite different with respect to the status of associational abstraction in traditional systems of art, for abstract symbolism in traditional societies is typically spiritually iconic, a fact that anthropological theorists as far back as Durkheim (1995/1912, pp. 425-428) have considered significant. Art is often an expression of deeply held spiritual knowledge about nature, and especially about the hidden forces that impact upon human experience. Most of this knowl-

edge is incorporated in a worldview that has been transmitted through innumerable generations of story telling, ritual performance, and artistic expression.

### Sensate, Idealistic, and Ideational Cultures

To make the distinction between modern and traditional art clearer, it would perhaps be useful to introduce another continuum, this time involving types of society. Pitirim Sorokin (1957, 1962) has suggested that societies may be placed upon a pendulum-like continuum in terms of their dominant patterns of adaptation. Societies like ours that are out on what he called the sensate pole are extremely materialistic in their mode of adapting to reality. Sensate cultures tend to be outer directed and develop systems of knowledge that rely heavily upon rational thought and the expression of knowledge through language. Intuitive ways of knowing are usually held as suspect, are rationalized, or are merely ignored. Extremely sensate societies eventually tend to compensate by swinging back toward a balanced cultural view in which rational knowledge appears more integrated with knowledge from the spiritual mode (he called these more balanced societies midway on the pendulum swing *idealistic* cultures). This seems to be happening in mainstream North American culture at the present time with the rise of charismatic movements, increased use of alternative healing systems, conversion to Asian religions, and the growth of various New Age movements like neoshamanism, Wicca, and the mythopoeic men's movement.

Cultures are actually quite dynamic. They never stand still, and the balance found in one generation between rational materialist and imagistic/intuitive spiritual ways of knowing may be lost to subsequent generations in the continued movement of the culture toward the opposite pole, that characteristic of more mystical, or *ideational* cultures. From the point of view of people in an ideational culture, what we might consider "mystical" knowledge or experience is not mystical at all. It is simply "the way things are." After all, consider that the word "occult" in English just means "hidden from view" or "hard to see." When we finally experience and comprehend the mysteries, they are no longer hidden, and hence no longer "occult." Ideational peoples tend to be inner directed and reverence imagination and intuition as the path to knowledge. Wisdom is valued more highly than mere factual knowledge.

The swing back to the more spiritual modes of expression in modern society may be presaged in the iconoclasm of modern art, especially in the art of the surrealist movements that have forsaken any semblance of "realism." Surrealist art is often the product of a self-conscious exploration of the unconscious, of the hidden depths and unknown mysteries of the greater psyche—of spirit, if you will. The creative eye of the artist probes inward for a deeper well of intuitive understanding—a quest for direct apprehension of spiritual realization through the praxis of the artistic moment (Kandinsky, 1982, p. 758). This quest is in reaction to the lived experience of most people in modern society, whose preoccupation with making a living and raising families is done within a system of (for them) very commonsense materialist values. For most people the "drippings" of Pollock and the palate knife strokes of Jean-Paul Riopelle are noise at best, and meaning, if there is any, will be limited to the critical comments about art read in newspapers or on museum labels.

### Art as Icon and Portal Within a Cosmological Cycle of Meaning

The art of idealistic and ideational cultures is commonly both highly abstract and powerfully meaningful in a profoundly cosmological way—in a way exceedingly difficult for western-reared (sensate) people to comprehend. There is a seeming ease of access to meaning found in these groups with living traditions of art, and the avenue of access does not require deconstruction or demythologization. These cultures seem to balance and even privilege the mimetic function (or mimesis; see Donald, 1991, p. 168; 2001, p. 268) of neurocognitive processing—that is, the inherent process of eidetic knowing that may be unique to human beings and *that may operate independent of language*. In ideational cultures, people are used to understanding art-as-symbol. All members know what their society's art means, for they have been exposed to the imagery from childhood, and have learned a repertoire of meanings associated with forms of drama, dance, masks, paintings, and so on, which are part and parcel to their society's mythology (Berndt, 1971, p. 104; Burnham, 1971; Dissanayake, 1988). Styles of traditional art are typically quite conservative (Redfield, 1971, p. 48), and artists within these traditions are fairly limited as to the degrees of freedom they may enjoy in creating new forms of expression (Berndt,

1971, p. 102). It is quite true that we as outsiders cannot fully appreciate the meaning of traditional art and symbolism unless we come to understand the cultural context within which they are embedded (Whitten & Whitten, 1993). This conservatism of style and specificity of meaning tends to loosen up considerably, of course, when traditional artists turn their skills toward modern-day commercial art (see Parezo, 1983, for the Navajo), but here I am concerned only with the “inwardly directed arts” (Graburn, 1976b, p. 4) that traditional societies produce for their own consumption.

The power of traditional art for ideational peoples is due in part to the fact that the art-as-icon (mimesis) is part of a much greater system of culturally conditioned signification, a system that may be modeled as a *cycle of meaning* (see Laughlin, 1997, 2001; Laughlin, McManus, & Shearer, 1993; Laughlin & Throop, 2003). Ideational cultures typically understand the world as a cosmology; that is, as a vast living system in which everything is embedded, has a role to play, and accrues its meaning. The world is understood to be a single monad comprised of relations between all things big and small, apparent and hidden, momentary or enduring, including human beings and their social relations and institutions. This cosmological understanding is expressed in various institutionalized forms of symbolic expression (myth, ritual performance, drama, art, stories, and so forth) in such a vital way that it intertwines with direct life experiences. The experiences and memories that arise as a consequence of participation in the culture’s semiosomatic procedures are interpreted in terms of the cosmology in such a way that they enliven and thereby empirically verify the cosmological order. A living cycle of meaning would seem to be a delicate process, and one that requires change or “revitalization” (Wallace, 1966) over time in order for meaningful dialogue to continue between a people’s worldview and their everyday lived experience. The social construction of knowledge and individual experience is thus involved in a reciprocal feedback system, the properties of which may be so changed by circumstances that the link between knowledge and experience may be hampered, and even lost. In other words, a religious system may become moribund due to the failure of the dialogue between worldview and direct experience.

I should emphasize that the interpretive phase of the cycle of meaning is rarely one of deconstruction or

rational reformulation. Human beings really are mimetic creatures (Donald, 1991, 2001) and do not require language or rational faculties to apprehend rich and complex meanings associated with objects and events. The tendency of Western analysts to demythologize traditional art in their attempt to understand it is a common failure in both ethnology and art criticism—a failure that among other things distracts us from more appropriate and productive phenomenological approaches. As Charlotte Otten (1971) notes, “...in asking the ‘meaning’ of an art event, we are asking for a translation into discursive mode, embalmed in a tradition of literacy, a translation which (as all artists are acutely aware) cannot be achieved...” (p. xiv). The apprehension of meaning is typically one of immediate intuitive comprehension (Cardew, 1978, p. 18): realization occurs as a rapid, experiential instantiation of the symbolic context that evoked the experience, and by way of that symbolic context to the underlying worldview of which the symbolism is an expression. It should be mentioned that a shaman or other specialist may act to design and control the ritual context and perhaps act as an interpretive agent linking experience with the world view, as is the case with Moroccan dream interpreters or the elders officiating at a Sun Dance among some Plains Indian cultures.

Many ideational cultures encourage their members to seek extraordinary experiences arising in ASC (arising in dreams, visions, meditation states, drug trips, trance states, and so forth) and interpret those experiences according to culturally recognized systems of meaning (Read, 1955, p. 87; Winkelman, 1986, 1990, 2000). This process of exploring experiences in multiple realities—what we have elsewhere termed *polyphasic culture* (see Laughlin, McManus & d’Aquili, 1990)—combined with social appropriation of the meaning of these experiences within a single cycle of meaning, is definitive of ideational culture.<sup>6</sup> Many societies go so far as to compel ASC by putting their members through initiation rituals, sometimes using psychotropic drugs like datura or hallucinogenic mushrooms (see Dobkin de Rios & Winkelman, 1989), and enforcing vision quests (see Bourguignon, 1973; Naranjo, 1987). The experiences encountered during these procedures in turn reinforce the society’s belief in the existence of multiple realities and inform the meaning of the society’s art products (masks, icons, mandalas, and so forth) associated with

such experiences (see, e.g., Reichel-Dolmatoff, 1978 on this issue among Columbian Indians). This is why art is so commonly linked to ritual and play in traditional societies. Art objects are poignant reminders of the underlying spiritual realizations indicated by their symbolism. In this sense, art “makes special” otherwise mundane contexts (Dissanayake, 1988, p. 98). The art-as-symbol is a reminder of the hidden spiritual dimension, and may well operate also as a portal or passageway into an alternative reality experienced by the individual in ASC. Hence art objects may figure prominently as neuropsychological “drivers” (elements that penetrate into and evoke semiosomatic processes mediating experience) in religious ceremonies (see d’Aquili, Laughlin, & McManus, 1979) and play (see Laughlin, 1990), both of which have distinctly spiritual associations in many traditional societies.

Most ideational cultures are also polyphasic (to at least a minimal degree), and of course their art products frequently depict imagery related to experiences encountered in ASC. For example, the Huichol peoples of Central Mexico ingest peyote in their religious rituals, and their yarn paintings, beadwork, basketry, and weaving incorporate imagery that depicts experiences had during psychedelic episodes (MacLean, 2001). Other cultures will use their art products as *portalling devices*—as symbolically loaded icons that penetrate to the neuropsychological systems mediating extraordinary experiences and intuitive insights (see MacDonald, Cove, Laughlin, & McManus, 1989, on the process of portalling and portalling motifs in art). Tibetan Buddhist practitioners, for example, use sacred scroll paintings (*thang ka*), usually of specific deities, as objects of veneration and devotion. They may also use these paintings as foci of meditation and visualization, especially when carrying out their foundation practices (*sngon ’gro*) in which meditation on the refuge tree and guru are important (Jackson & Jackson, 1984, pp. 9-13; Laughlin, 1994a).

#### Art and the Sacred in Navajo Cosmology

We in Euro-American society are very used to experiencing art from our secular point of view. Perhaps we visit museums and art galleries, theaters and festivals, and then carry the memory of those experiences away with us into our normal sphere of life. Perhaps we hang pictures or position sculptures so that they add beauty to our surroundings. But this is not the typical pattern encountered in traditional soci-

eties where we find art well integrated into daily cultural life (Redfield, 1971, p. 44; Dissanayake, 1988, pp. 98, 168). In order to bring home more effectively the role of art among traditional people, let me offer a more extended example from my own fieldwork among the Navajo people of the American Southwest (see also Witherspoon, 1977, Chapter 4; Witherspoon & Peterson, 1995).

Present day Navajo represents the kind of balance typical of Sorokin’s idealistic cultures. Navajo is also a nation full of artists. Navajo people produce everyday art in the form of jewelry, pottery, utensils, textiles, and so forth. Yet much of the symbolism incorporated into these objects has for the traditional Navajo profound historical, cosmological, and religious significance (see Adair, 1944; Reichard, 1939; Kaufman & Selser, 1999; Witherspoon, 1977; Witherspoon & Peterson, 1995; Frisbie, 1992). Indeed, Jackson Pollock and many other modern artists have been directly or indirectly influenced by Navajo weaving, sandpainting, and performance (Witherspoon, 1977, p. 174). It is interesting that Shlain (1991, p. 245) makes the point that whereas museums hang Pollock’s paintings on the wall so that they are in a vertical orientation relative to the audience, Pollock himself often painted the canvases tacked to the floor of his barn, and while dancing around them. These horizontal canvases were basically portals into energetic space for him, much as are the more geometrical, but no less abstract, Navajo rugs and sandpaintings that so influenced his understanding of art.

Yet it is interesting that the closest one can come in the Navajo language to “art” is *na’ashch’aah*, which refers to the act of decorating something. But we must be careful here, for as Gary Witherspoon (1977, p. 151) remarks, beauty (*hozho*) for the Navajo is an internal mental state, not a quality of something “out there.” Beauty is a path or ideal of living, and objects can be made with such skill that they enhance the beauty one experiences while walking through life. Beauty is what one projects onto happenings and objects from within oneself. Thus to collect a bunch of objects and store them in a museum is a foreign notion to a traditional Navajo, although like so many other peoples around the globe today, Navajo artists (weavers, sandpainters, silversmiths, painters) have now learned to cater to Anglo tastes and patterns of consumption (Graburn, 1976a). And like so many other peoples, the Navajo have produced modern

artists whose work is no longer perceived by more traditional Navajo as sacred or as an expression of Navajo values or aesthetic ideals.

Beauty is a natural state of both perceived events and the hidden forces behind those events (Farella, 1984). The Navajo, like so many other peoples around the globe (see, e.g., Laderman, 1991, for the Malay), have noticed that we cannot actually see the air we breath—that we only know the existence of air by its effects on other things (rustling leaves, whirling dust, the sensation of the breeze on our skin). It is not surprising then that in Navajo philosophy the hidden dimension of things is called *nilch'i*, or Wind (McNeley, 1981). Physical reality—indeed, all things in the perceptual world, including people—are manifestations of this one, vast, cosmic Wind that flows in and out of all things (*bii'asti*, the “animated energy within”) and that underlies the normally hidden totality of the universe. Wind is the essential, vital, and unitary truth of nature, from the contemplation of which the people attain their intuitions about the purpose of existence. And it is an imbalance of that portion of the “wind that stands within” (*nilch'I hwii'sizini*) each one of us that leads to disease and misfortune. According to one of my Navajo friends, one of the ways that balance, harmony, or as the Navajo say, *hozho*, can be lost is by forgetting. One returns to the state of beauty therefore by remembering—and I believe he meant remembering in the literal sense of “re-membering,” of re-collecting, of putting it all back together again in the normally healthy way (our words “health,” “hale,” and “holy” all derive from the same root meaning “whole”). One again “walks in beauty” by remembering what the old ones taught from the beginning of time. If need be, one may be reminded by a medicine man, or by singing the appropriate songs, or by doing the proper rituals, such as greeting the dawn with an offering of corn pollen.

### Art and Healing Ritual in Navajo

The Navajo imagine the hidden dynamics of Wind as the movement of the Holy People (*Diyin Dine'e*)—for instance, the Mountain People, the Star People, the River People, the Rain People, the Corn People, and so forth. The Holy People are the Wind personified—the Wind imagined. Hence, one of the major mnemonic devices for the hidden is iconographic art—that is, art objects that invoke cosmological figures (the gods or *yee'ii*), themes (the open circle), and

events (slaying of monsters) that reveal the causally powerful but hidden spiritual dimension of the world. The iconic representation of the Holy People are highly abstract and geometrical, almost insectoid figures that merely suggest human forms. These figures are immediately recognizable to traditional Navajo, and are considered very sacred. The key to understanding this sense of the sacred in art is that whether traditional or modern, a piece of art is sacred if it is associated in the mind of the artist or the audience with the cosmogonic stories that comprise the core of Navajo history and philosophy. A piece of sacred art reminds the viewer of the teachings of the ancient ones, and thus the mind is guided, via the object and its narrative associations, back onto the path of beauty and harmony. The art object must be experienced as a portal into the sacred teachings, or it simply is no longer “Navajo.”

The most dramatic deployment of art in Navajo is within healing rituals called “sings” (*hataal*; see Reichard, 1950; Sandner, 1979). Sings are very elaborate affairs, often taking days to complete (e.g., see Faris, 1990, on the nine day Nightway ceremony). Every phase and element of the ceremony is under the supervision of a medicine man or woman (*hataali*, “singer”). Sings involve artistic creations, dramatic performances, and chanting of songs that describe events during mythological time. The rituals and artistic ingredients are considered to be gifts given by the Holy People to the Navajo in order that they may avail themselves of powerful techniques for evoking and controlling the hidden energies (Witherspoon, 1977, p. 25; Frisbie, 1992, pp. 459–460) of the Holy Wind and the Holy People that bring about healing. A sing may only occur within or around a traditional Navajo hut called a *hogan*—a round, five- or eight-sided hut made of logs, mud, rocks, or in more modern times, brick, lumber, or concrete. Today most people no longer live in hogans, but rather in more modern styles of buildings like ranch-style houses, row houses, and mobile homes. But even today, a healer will not consider holding a sing unless the family sponsoring the event owns or builds a hogan. The reason is that the myths and other texts that prescribe the techniques for symbolic healing require a hogan, and a hogan must be constructed in the proper way, with its one door pointing east—the direction of the rising sun and Changing Woman. The daily cycle begins in the east with the rising sun, which is associated with birth, proceeds clock-

wise through the south and the west, and ends in the north, the latter being associated with night and death. By positioning symbols and people within and around the hogan in the proper way, one automatically positions them properly in relation to the four sacred mountains that define Navajoland, and the four cardinal directions of the cosmos.

In many sings, the singer or his helpers will construct a sandpainting (also called a “drypainting,” for no sand is actually used; see Witherspoon, 1977, pp. 167-172; Sandner, 1979; Reichard, 1939, Parezo, 1983) on the smooth dirt floor of the hogan. The painting is achieved by spreading pulverized stone of various colors in a geometrically prescribed way and in the proper orientation to the hogan. Sandpaintings usually take the form of mandalas (see Jung, 1969, and Laughlin, 2001, on the transpersonal significance of mandala symbolism), the eastern side of which is left open and pointed toward the door of the hogan, and thus toward the east (all patterns in Navajo art are left open in this way, whether in pottery, basketry, or weaving, so that the energies may flow in and out). The singer will either construct the painting himself, or have it done by his apprentices under close supervision. If an error is made in rendering the image, no matter how small, the error will be erased and made over. When people enter the hogan for ceremonial activities during the sing, they move clockwise around the sandpainting and sit along the walls according to their gender, age, and status. Thus people become arranged properly relative to each other, relative to the sandpainting, relative to the homeland, and ultimately, relative to the cosmos—all because of the physical structure of the hogan.

Sandpaintings relate directly to the mythological stories being chanted and often depict the Holy People, mythological characters, features, and events mentioned in the stories. But they are far more than pictorial illustrations. In Gell's (1992) terms, the Navajo sandpainting, properly configured and deployed, is a kind of “technology of enchantment” in which the intent is to evoke and focus the healing power of the Holy People and to thereby effect a change of state in the patient. At the appropriate moment in the ritual, the patient is placed in the middle of the sandpainting, thus inviting the Holy Wind energies in the form of the Holy People to pass into and heal the disease. The healing is accomplished by returning the inner Wind of the patient to its natural

state of harmony (hozho) with the cosmos. Everything in the painting and everything within the hogan are brought into resonance with the cosmos, the inner essence of which is the Holy Wind. The sandpainting thus operates as a portal (MacDonald et al., 1989) that facilitates the passage of the normally invisible energies into the patient and the hogan. The passage of healing energies seems to be directed only one way in Navajo psychology, thus reversing the direction often described for “flying” shamans in other cultures, who may pass through a portal of some sort (geometric pattern, mirror, skrying device, and so forth) and make a “soul flight” into the spirit world (Winkelman, 2000, p. 61). There are in fact no data of which I am aware that Navajo practitioners have ever practiced or experienced this kind of ASC.

The utility of the sandpainting is over when its phase of the sing is concluded. As it would remain powerful and potentially dangerous to others, it is completely destroyed by being swept up, and every last bit of the colored powder from which it was made is disposed of outside and to the north of the hogan. Under no circumstances will an accurate sandpainting be conserved, nor is it permissible to photograph it. The various ethnographic renditions of sandpaintings executed by various medicine men for research and archival purposes are said to all have intentional errors painted into their form that render them harmless and incapable of evoking the power of the Holy People.

### **More Modern Utility of Art in Navajo**

As the above discussion demonstrates, the association of art and myth within a cycle of meaning is essential to understanding both the sacred nature (i.e., the significance) and the utility of art for Navajo people. For a more modern application, let me turn briefly to the use of pictures by another of my Navajo friends who is a social worker. Let me call him Fred. Fred frequently works with families that have been ravaged by alcoholism, drug addiction, and domestic violence. He works to reintroduce his clients to the proper traditional roles each must play to form a harmonious Navajo family. Parents must come to see that they have to become appropriate role models for their children. And appropriate here means traditional—in accord with the ancient stories that prescribe how the People are to behave. In beginning his counseling on the natural state of harmonious relationships, Fred sometimes uses a drawing of the famous sandpainting depicting

Father Sky on the right and Mother Earth on the left (as one looks out of the painting). The male element is associated with the right hand side and the female with the left hand side of the body. He teaches that his clients should think about the act of taking a bath, an act that involves the right hand (male) washing the female side and the left hand (female) washing the male side of the body. Relations among the genders should be, and once were of this kind of mutual help, respect, and cooperation. Things have changed, Fred says, for the attraction between the genders is often merely lust these days.

Father Sky and Mother Earth are depicted as connected mouth to mouth by a track of corn pollen, and between the legs by a rainbow—the former referring to the morning ritual of greeting the sun from the earth with offerings of pollen and the gift of rays of golden light from the sun to the earth, and the latter recalling the common experience of a rainbow arching from earth to sky and back again. Mother Earth is shown as pregnant and as festooned with the four sacred plants (corn, tobacco, beans, and squash). The genital area of the predominantly black Father Sky is white and that of the white Mother Earth is black. This reversal has much the same significance as the dots in a yin-yang symbol. Both male and female contain, and are dependent for their existence upon, the opposite.<sup>7</sup>

Fred emphasizes in his counseling that we are all, whether male or female, both born from the female and are female—and that men have become specialized in their development. Men are nowadays actually weaker than women, but in the olden days women stayed at home and the men protected the women. This was symbolically enacted in everyday life when men slept toward the eastern side of the hogan—the side that always faces the rising sun and has the only door to the outside—while the women slept on the western, protected side. Fred tells his clients one or more of the ancient myths about the tragic conflicts between First Man and First Woman, and how these conflicts were only resolved when both men and women acknowledged their interdependence in the scheme of things. According to Fred, many of the maladies facing the People today are due precisely to a failure of folks to remember these teachings and to act accordingly.

### Art and Cosmology in Navajo

Of course sandpaintings are not the only forms of

art (or craft) among the Navajo. Navajo artists also produce world-famous fabrics and jewelry, as well as the masks and regalia used in the *yee'ii* dances that are also a part of healing rituals and public ceremonials. Yet all of the imagery used in blankets, silver bracelets, baskets, pottery, or masks have their origins and significance within the context of Navajo cosmology. In other words, for the traditionally minded Navajo, in order for any art object to be perceived as being “of the People,” it must partake in the Navajo cycle of meaning—it must relate in some way to the corpus of sacred stories that all Navajo hear in their childhood, and that relate the formative events in the mythic history of the People. This corpus of stories and the traditional cosmology behind them comprise the Navajo cycle of meaning within which artistic expressions find their significance and their association with the sublime. The role of art is thus thoroughly mimetic—to encapsulate and remind the people to follow the “beauty way” (*hozho-ji*). To live properly as a Navajo means that one is living in a state of *hozho*, and thus in accord with the teachings encoded in the sacred stories. Art is an expression of this atemporal binding of mythic and modern times, thereby reminding people through the immediate nonlinguistic impact of symbolism of the way of beauty and harmony, of the significance of the four sacred mountains that define their land, and of the immanent presence of the Holy People, whose sublime energies animate the ever-dynamic forms and processes that constitute the world. Nor is art merely a passive representation of the cosmology, but, as we have seen, may constitute an active “technology of enchantment” by means of which the hidden forces of the cosmos may be evoked and applied in the service of the way of beauty. Navajo art, and especially art deployed in healing rituals—and as we have seen, in modern family counseling—is thus a clear example of the nexus of aesthetics, significance, and utility that frame and suggest the deeper sublimity that I have identified as a defining characteristic of art in an ethnological frame. But the Navajo tradition does not allow pure surreptitious art. Figurative surreptitious art is apparent in the designs woven into fabrics. Another of my friends who is a well-known Two Grey Hills weaver has told me that she never weaves the same pattern twice, and that the patterns come to her “out of the blue” before she begins a rug. Her patterns arise as either psychic automatic productions or figurative surreptitious ones, depending upon how spontaneously

they originate before weaving begins.

### The Artistic Brain and the “Inner Necessity” of Spirit

*Art itself is a metaphorical activity, finding (rather than seeking) new symbols to signify new areas of sensibility.*

Herbert Read  
*Icon and Idea*

The model of art and spirit I have constructed, and the example of traditional spiritual art among the Navajo people, both concentrate upon the inextricable and universal association of abstract imagery and spiritual or transpersonal experiences. I am by no means the first student of art to suggest the cardinal importance of this association. In what surely must rank as one of the greatest pieces of art criticism ever penned, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* (1977 [1914]), the great painter and philosopher Wassily Kandinsky took this relationship to be pivotal in the understanding of modern art and its connection to traditional art. Kandinsky defined two types of “resemblances” of art in relation to culture. The first kind of resemblance is between people who share the same culture and age—as he said, “Every work of art is the child of its time...” (p. 23). This resemblance is due to a similarity in the background, attitudes, styles, circumstances, and foci of a particular society during a particular era of its history. No other society will produce exactly that kind of art, nor will people in that society later on be able to exactly reconstitute the art of the earlier period. As we all know, “history” is a point of view on the past taken through the filters of contemporary culture. Kandinsky called this kind of resemblance merely “external.” In modern ethnology we might say that this kind of resemblance in style refers to *cultural specific patterning* which changes with each generation. An obvious example from our own Euro-American experience is the change in pop music fads that seem to occur every few years.

The second kind of resemblance—the one of relevance to my study—derives not from cultural taste, but from an “inner necessity” of spirit to express itself through artistic creation. An ethnologist might call this kind of resemblance *transcultural patterning* and recognize perhaps two explanations for apparent similarities: diffusion of cultural patterns across societies that have come into contact at some point in the past,

and universal structural processes inherent in the human brain or psyche. Again, obvious examples from our own Euro-American experience might be the blues which, although it arose out of the specific experience of an oppressed people at an earlier phase of history, and although there have occurred stylistic changes over the generations, nonetheless is essentially timeless in its structure and the feelings it evokes, and may be appreciated by anyone in any age and by people of other cultures. As Kandinsky wrote,

But among the forms of art is another kind of external similarity, which is founded on a fundamental necessity. When there is, as sometimes happens, a similarity of inner direction in an entire moral and spiritual milieu, a similarity of ideals, at first closely pursued but later lost to sight, a similarity of “inner mood” between one period and another, the logical consequence will be a revival of the external forms which served to express those insights in the earlier age. *This may account partially for our sympathy and affinity with and our comprehension of the work of primitives.* Like ourselves, these pure artists sought to express only inner and essential feelings in their works; in this process they ignored as a matter of course the fortuitous.

(1977[1914], pp. 23-24; emphasis added)

Kandinsky is referring here to something like Sorokin’s pendulum swing between the sensate and ideational poles of culture discussed above. He has recognized the stifling effect of sensate (“materialist”) culture on spirit, and the difficulty faced by people enculturated in a sensate society when trying to understand the inner-directed quality of spiritually generated art. Again, in Kandinsky’s own words,

This great point of inner contact is, in spite of its considerable importance, only one point. Only just now awakening after years of materialism, our soul is infected with the despair born of unbelief, of lack of purpose and aim. The nightmare of materialism, which turns life into an evil, senseless game, is not yet passed; it still darkens the awakening soul. Only feeble light glimmers, a tiny point in an immense circle of darkness. This light is but a presentiment; and the mind, seeing it, trembles in doubt over whether the light is a dream and the surrounding darkness indeed reality. *This doubt and the*

*oppression of materialism separate us sharply from primitives.* Our soul rings cracked when we sound it, like a precious vase, dug out of the earth, which has a flaw.

(1977[1914], p. 24; emphasis added)

Although he was primarily addressing the state of the fine arts during the early 20th century, and the difficulty most people at the time had in comprehending modern art, Kandinsky was aware that the one-sided focus of sensate consciousness upon outer reality is conditioned at the expense of an awareness of the inner, mystical or spiritual domain. Most members of sensate cultures, for instance, pay little or no attention to their dream life, and thus commonly do not tap that domain of experience to inform their waking self-awareness. Art expressive of sensate culture tends to be external art that typically does not tap into the sublime dimensions of spirit. Thus spiritually active individuals in a sensate society must struggle both to access and to express the insights that emerge intuitively and that may give rise to their eidetic imagery. Yet at the same time, individuals who are spiritually active frequently find that the spiritually pregnant art of traditional peoples is moving and even transparent in its essential significance. Having been previously involved in both the spontaneous transpersonal experience of hypnagogic mandalas (Laughlin, 2001), and the use of mandalas as visualization devices in Tibetan Buddhism (Laughlin, 1994a), when I eventually experienced Navajo sandpaintings, their structural significance—if not their exact cultural content—was transparent to me. Indeed, I happen to know that Tibetan Buddhist monks who also make sandpainted mandalas during their rituals, and who have visited Navajo singers while passing through the American Southwest, find it easy to discuss such art and share experiences with the Navajo. Each in fact find the sandpaintings of the other moving and meaningful, and expressing similar insights about the unitary nature of the hidden.

Art expressive of sublimity will endure through history and across cultural boundaries. As Kandinsky put it, merely external art “has no future” (1977[1914], p. 24) while art generated out of the “inner necessity” of spirit “contains the seeds of the future”—by which I take it he meant that the inner meaning of spiritual art is recoverable, regardless of the age in which it was created or the cultural differences in details. In music, the blues penetrates to the spirit in a way that perhaps much pop music does not. The

inner meaning is recoverable by way of penetration from art object to a level of sublimity marked by distinct feelings—as Kandinsky says of the spiritually expressive artist, “...his work will give to those observers capable of feeling them emotions subtle beyond words” (1977[1914], p. 24). And of course such imagery may penetrate to archetypal levels of imagery and insight, and evoke direct spiritual experiences in normal waking consciousness or ASC: “the spectator hears an answering chord in himself” (p. 25). Little wonder then that traditional peoples all over the planet have concluded that certain art objects are “enchanting,” or that they are the abode of spirits. A spiritually evocative art is very much a living thing, animated by the penetrations and projections of observers.

### Inner Necessity and Traditional Art

Peoples around the planet have been able to conserve the spiritual impact of their art by embedding their artistic heritage in a cycle of meaning and a myth-ritual context that inhibits alterations in style. Indeed, it is partly this transgenerational conservatism of form, significance, and psychological impact that defines the meaning of the term “traditional” in the first place. The key to understanding traditional art among ideational and idealistic peoples is that the force of the “inner necessity” of spiritual expression is “locked in” so to speak, recurring anew for each generation with only subtle changes discernable across the generations—in Wallace’s (1966) terms, the art is subtly “revitalized,” along with its mythopoeic context, in the crucible of each generation’s experience. Technological modifications may indeed occur. Australian Aboriginal artists took to acrylics like fish to water, and yet the spiritual impact of their paintings remains the same. The impact is the same because of the association between the motifs and movements of the art with the mythopoeic context of Aboriginal religion, an association that remains intact for both artist and audience. Modern Japanese *Noh* players purchase more three-dimensional masks than would have been acceptable in generations past, but the use of the mask in ritual dramas remains the same (Young-Laughlin & Laughlin, 1988).

As we have seen above, Navajo sandpaintings are highly constrained in their form and in their utility. As a consequence, and in keeping with the practices of most traditional peoples, one will not encounter any-

thing as individualistic as pure surreational automatism among the Navajo. The only exceptions, of course, are the Navajo artists who have left their cultural roots behind and are operating in the Euro-American art world. However, some figurative surreational art occurs within the confines of traditional forms. In completing a sandpainting for a sing, the singer will often refer to notes about the proper conformation of the image—notes that the singer has learned from his or her teacher. The paintings and the rituals of which they are a part have recurred for untold generations, and they recur because people perceive them as effective.<sup>8</sup>

### Conclusion:

#### Ethnology and the “Inner Necessity” of Spirit

What I have done here is suggest a model of art (1) that may be applied to artistic productions cross-culturally, (2) that allows the ethnologist or transpersonal researcher a flexible but operationalizable definition of artistic production, (3) that allows the analyst to take into consideration the often ineffable sublimity of art, (4) that recognizes the true function of abstraction in art, (5) that allows the analyst to distinguish between cultures in which spiritual art is embedded in a cycle of meaning from those cultures in which spiritual art is, as it were, cast adrift, (6) that explains the seeming paradox between cultural conservatism in artistic styles and the often profound spiritual consequences of artistic production. Above all, we can see how abstract, spiritual art may be seen as an inevitable outcome of humanity’s essentially mimetic nature—our predilection to comprehend our world and ourselves by way of pregnant symbolism. In sensate cultures, the tendency is toward apperception of the external world, but in modern art and in the art of idealistic and ideational cultures generally, we see an opposite spin toward apperception of the psychic or cosmological depths through abstract expression. This linking of the various functions of imagery (aesthetic, significant, utility), abstraction, and sublimity—of art and spirit—is fundamental to humanity, and requires on the part of researchers a greater sensitivity for and appreciation of the transpersonal dimensions of life and culture. Ethnologists have an all-too-frequent predilection for the obvious and superficial when it comes to describing and analyzing symbolic activity. Moreover, ethnographers have historically shied away from direct experiences of the sublime, the transpersonal dimensions of their hosts’ experiences (Laughlin, 1989, 1994b). It is

perhaps far easier to ask our informants “what does that image mean” than to actually participate in the imagery in a direct mimetic way. But when it comes to spiritual art, there is no alternative if one wishes to get to the real bottom of things—to fully comprehend the “inner necessity” that gives sublimity its voice through art.

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### End Notes

1. See Rosch (1977) on fuzziness of natural categories, and Laughlin (1993) on categorical fuzziness related to transpersonal experiences.
2. A process considered by some to be fundamental to animism and the origins of religion; see Guthrie (1993).
3. Abstraction is commonly defined in contrast to such terms as “representation,” “facticity,” “concreteness,” “perceptibility,” “individuality,” “realism,” “objective,” and the like. The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that the word was derived from the Latin *abstractus*, from *abs* “off” or “away” plus *tractus* “to draw.” The OED goes on to trace the use of the English concept back to the 16th century where it connotes “to withdraw, deduct, remove, or take away (something),” as well as “to draw off or apart; to separate, withdraw, disengage from.” At least by the 17th century the term had picked up mental connotations, as “to separate in mental conception; to consider apart from the material embodiment, or from particular instances,” “to derive, to claim extraction for,” and “to make an abstract of; to summarize, epitomize; to abridge.” The act of abstraction came to include “the act or process of separating in thought, of considering a thing independently of its associations; or a substance independently of its attributes; or an attribute or quality independently of the substance to which it belongs”; and “a state of withdrawal or seclusion from worldly things or things of the sense.” Certainly by the early 20th century the term was being applied to the arts meaning “the practice or state of freedom from representational qualities; a work of art with these qualities.”

4. Paul-Emile Borduas led another group of artists that experimented with “automatic” techniques, a group that included such artists as Jean-Paul Riopelle, Jean-Paul Mousseau, Marcelle Ferron, and Pierre Gauvreau, among others—and who produced some very remarkable, nonfigurative abstract paintings, as well as sculpture, poetry, dance, and performance (Ellenwood, 1992). Their methods were intended to circumvent either culturally conditioned method and interpretation, or ego-driven motives like aesthetic convention, external expectation. Borduas and his group were influenced by Breton’s earlier thinking about the nature of the “automatic” method.

5. The suffix *sur-* means above, over, super, or up. Ortega y Gasset (1968, p. 35-36) distinguishes between the surrealism of metaphors and infrarealism, the latter probing below reality to get at its details.

6. For examples of ideational cultures, see Tonkinson (1978) and Poirier (1990) on the Australian Aborigines, Guedon (1984) on the Tsimshian in northwestern Canada, Laderman (1991) on Malay shamanism, and Peters (1982) on Tamang shamanism.

7. FB also uses the traditional cradle board (*awet-saal*) as an artistic mnemonic. He instructs his clients that the different parts of the board relate to the different aspects of gender and energy. Looking out from the board, the left board is female and the right board male. The two boards are tied with four thongs which represent the four directions, the four sacred mountains that define Navajoland (*Denetab*). The stitching is done in a zigzag pattern representing lightning, which involves the exchange of energy between Father Sky and Mother Earth. A string representing a sunbeam is tied on the left side if the baby is a girl and on the right side if the baby is a boy. The hoops are rainbows and the foot board is earth.

8. It should be mentioned, however, that fewer Navajo families are willing to take on the financial burden of sponsoring a sing because they are expensive to mount (I have been given figures averaging in excess of \$3,000). Also, there are now competing alternatives to the sing—primarily the much less expensive and time-consuming ceremonies of the Native American Church, various Christian sects, and of course modern Anglo medicine. Still, my understanding is that roughly 20 percent of Navajo families still have recourse to traditional sings.

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