

THE SPIRITUAL SENSES AND THE LITURGICAL ARTS

Lecture 2: The Spiritual Senses and Making


Chichester Cathedral, February 2022

Synopsis

This lecture will attempt to show how the spiritual senses can shape artistic forms. To this end, we'll investigate the processes and disciplines involved in making these forms: How does the liturgical artist approach their work? What are the artist's prime sources and reference points? There'll be consideration, too, of what is shared by the liturgical artist and all Christians.

Lecture Series
The Spiritual Senses and the Liturgical Arts

- 1. The Spiritual Senses in Tradition (1st February)*
- 2. The Spiritual Senses and Making (this evening)*
- 3. The Spiritual Senses as Transformation (15th February)*



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INTRODUCTION

1. Parameters of this lecture

We're going to consider the source of the image for the liturgical artist and how this source affects the way they make, and determines certain characteristics of what they make. I'm going to consider these questions comparatively so we'll be jumping around a bit, but my hope is that a stable picture emerges through the course of the lecture.

Let's get straight into it. Where does an image come from for the liturgical artist? How does this emerge in the mind of the artist and how does it manifest in their made objects?

One immediate and right response is that a liturgical artist receives her or his images through the transmission of an established tradition. Indeed, a visual tradition has developed since the early years of the Christian dispensation and has settled at points into conventionally accepted ways of depicting Christ and the saints [below].



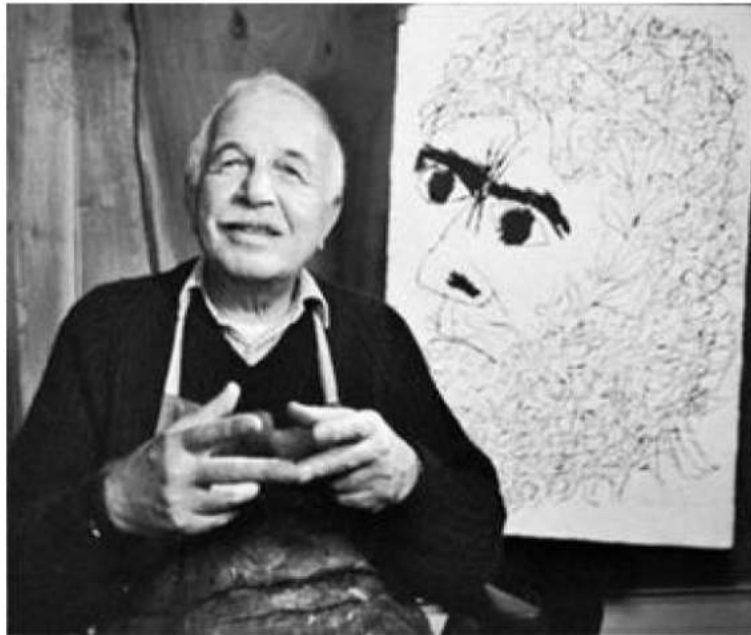
Certain images become key to a standardized visual vocabulary for the icon, and the liturgical artist learns their trade, in part, by making copies from this canon.

But! A liturgical artist who simply copies remains simply a copyist, and will not flourish in the creative work that is demanded of them. To address this with a clear aspect, I want to put to one side, as a kind of thought experiment, the whole inheritance of the tradition of icons and iconography. This is generally not a good thing to do, in the sense that the inherited Tradition remains, and will always remain, vital; but I offer this move as a provisional one intended just to draw attention to the sources of the liturgical artist's inspiration without total recourse to the pictorial tradition.

So, having hastily - but temporarily - put received tradition aside, I want to mark out territory for our investigation by reference to two twentieth century western artists and the different ways in which images emerged for them, at least according to their own accounts. They are Ben Shahn and Agnes Martin.

✠

Ben Shahn was a Lithuanian-American Jewish artist (1898-1969), pictured here.



*Ben Shahn
(1898-1969)*

He describes the process of painting as follows, and in relation to a painting by him that we see in front us [below], painted in egg tempera on panel, in 1948, called 'Allegory'.



*Ben Shahn,
Allegory, 1948*

He writes: "The painter must become acutely sensitive to the feel, the texture, the light, the relationships which arise before him. At one point he will mold the material according to an intention. At another he may yield intention – perhaps his whole concept – to emerging forms, to new implications within the painted surface. [...]. Thus,' he continues, 'idea rises to the

surface, grows, changes as a painting grows and develops. So one must say that a painting is both creative and responsive”.

There’s here what he calls a ‘tug of war’, and a ‘long, ascetic tug of war’, between his mental intention for the work and the image that emerges in the surface matter. It seems to be a mutually transformative mirroring of the immaterial and the material - a mutual transformation of the concept in the mind and the shaping of the paint.

It’s an interplay in which matter has some say. I say this figuratively: the paint of itself has no intrinsic agency: but Shahn the painter allows it to speak, he gives matter voice.

We will come, further on, to consider how matter plays out in the work of the liturgical artist. Immediately though, we turn from Shahn to another artist who offers a more contemplative approach in distinction to this active one.



Agnes Martin’s life (1912-2004) overlapped with that of Ben Shahn.



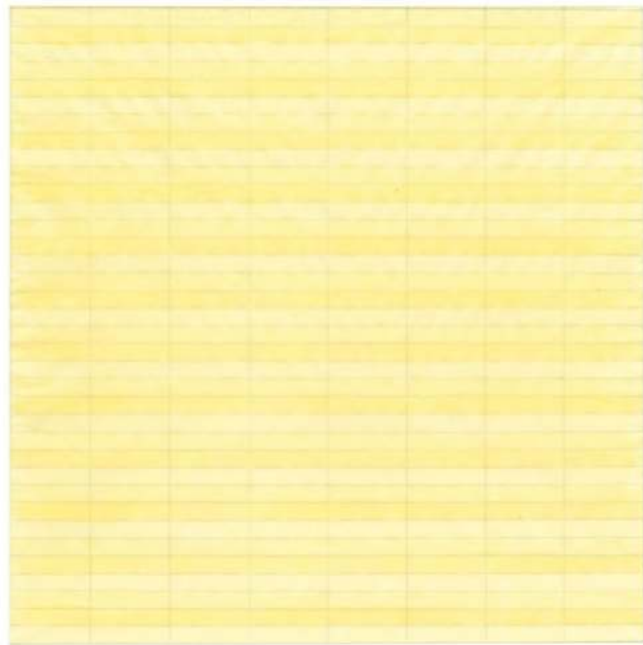
*Agnes Martin
(1912-2004)*

Like Shahn, Agnes Martin gives her own account of her method. “I don’t get up in the morning”, she says, “until I know exactly what I’m going to do. Sometimes I stay in bed until about three in the afternoon, without any breakfast”.

We might imagine that by this time in the day, Ben Shahn would already have been engaged in some hours of ascetic tug of war. Martin has her own asceticism though.

In the words of her biographer, who was also a friend, “[S]he waited for inspiration. There would be periods of months that she wouldn’t paint; she’d be waiting. [...]. The paintings were

made quite quickly, but she would work on the inspiration for the paintings for weeks, and would repaint the picture as many as 10 times.”



Agnes Martin,
Untitled, 1977
© 2015 Agnes Martin/
Artists Rights Society (ARS)

She was waiting then, for the image to appear in her mind before she started making. Note the distinction with Shahn, whose image developed in the process of his making.

Now Agnes Martin’s image does not come from nowhere; it comes from her prior experience. “First”, she says, “I have the experience of happiness and innocence. Then, if I can keep from becoming distracted, I will have an image to paint.” So Martin’s battle seems to be between the mental image and the prior experience. She has an experience. Then she waits until she has in mind that image that fittingly recalls and communicates that experience, and then she commits that mental image to matter - to paper, board, or whatever. For Martin, this material image can remind other people of the same originating experience that she had.

In summary, Agnes Martin’s fundamental creative work on the image has been done before she starts to paint: and this creative work consists in a long vigil of undistracted attentiveness to an image in the mind.

So we have here two different approaches to the question with which we started, the question being: whence the image, or where does the image come from? One approach, Shahn’s, is more active, materially engaged; the other approach, Martin’s, is more contemplative, entailing a patient inner attention.



With this distinction in mind, I want to introduce some landscape content. Now I do this as an extension of my earlier intention when setting aside copying from tradition as a source of imagery for the liturgical artist. Landscape painting, or the painting of nature more widely, has received little attention in the tradition of liturgical art; and it is important for what I want

to say *precisely because* it is much less familiar in liturgical art than depiction of the human figure. As such, we can approach landscape painting with a certain freshness and openness.

I appreciate that we haven't got to looking at liturgical art just yet. Ahead of that, which is to come, I want first to take us to eleventh century China.



Su Shih, *Wood and Rock*

Handscroll, ink on paper, 26.3 x 50cm (10 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ "")
Source: Christies

Specifically, we go the era of Northern Sung (or, Song) landscape painting, amidst a philosophical fusion of Buddhism, Taoism and neo-Confucianism. And among Northern Sung landscape painters, we go to Su Shih, *zu* Tung-p'o (1036-1101). Su Shih was not only a painter but a prominent polymath of the time, and remains a pre-eminent figure in Chinese culture. Surviving paintings of his are extremely rare. One, 'Bamboo and Rock', is in China's National Art Museum. Another, 'Wood and Rock' [above] has been sold into a private collection, shown here in images from Christies ahead of sale. Here's a detail [below] of the painting within the scroll above.



Su Shih, *Wood and Rock*
Source: Christies

What survives of Su Shih's writing about art, and particularly on painting natural forms within the larger landscape tradition, is our main reason for turning to him. Su Shih wrote, in a description of the painting method of his teacher, Yü-k'o:



Unidentified artist, *Bamboo*
Post 14th.c, in the style of Su Shih.

“When you are going to paint a bamboo, you must first realise the thing completely in your mind. Then grasp the brush, fix your attention, so that you see clearly what you wish to paint; start quickly, move the brush, follow straight what you see before you, as the buzzard swoops when the hare jumps out. If you hesitate one moment, it is gone.”



“... as the buzzard swoops when the hare jumps out”

This analogy with the buzzard and the hare guides us into considering the painter's mind

which, in a singular moment of fixed attention, contains a full visual image - and in response to this image the painter's hand acts like a buzzard swooping upon a suddenly emergent hare.

This resonates in a general way with Agnes Martin's approach. In both there is a patient waiting upon the visual form in the mind prior to material commitment.

I do also think that there's something of Shahn's materiality here as well - as in Su Shih's scumbling ink representing the surface of the rock and the trunk of the tree. You can see that scumbling here in a closer view of his painting [below].



Detail of Su Shih's *Wood and Rock*

But let's keep for now to the process of vigilant concentration, awaiting the emergent image. A friend of Su Shih's called Tung Yü, ǝǝ Yen-yüan, gives us more insight into the arising of the image in the mind out of the forms of nature. He writes:

“Out of the forms of nature the images are produced; they are brought out by the conception which seizes the natural. They are first seen in the mind like flowers and leaves detaching themselves and beginning to sprout. Then they are given the outward shapes and colours by the work of the hand. [Such painters] seldom seek likeness as support for their ideas”.

Allow me to try to spell out further what might be going on here.

Firstly, the mind takes, even seizes, information from the forms of nature: for example, from the physical perception of wood or rock, bamboo or water.

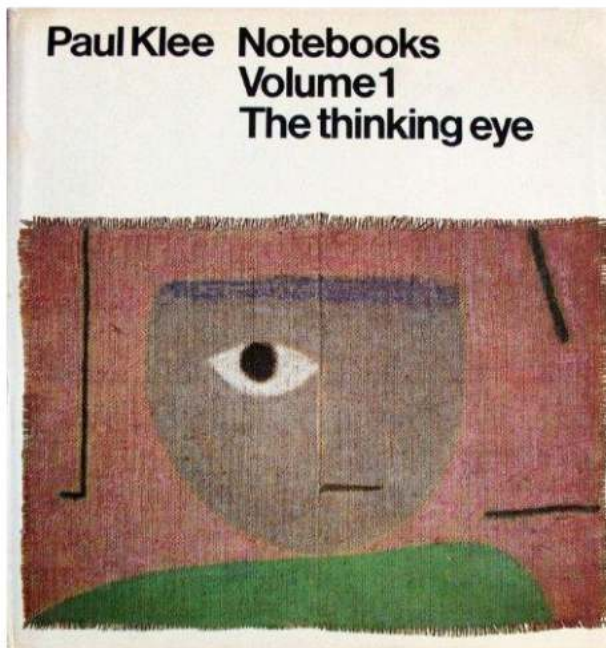
Now these images themselves contain the dynamic, organic qualities of their forms of nature that they represent. So, importantly, the images in the mind, taken from observation of nature, have their own independent visual integrity and growth.

Then the painter's hand acts to manifest this dynamic image in a material form - say with brush and ink on paper. This is the moment described earlier at which the buzzard swoops upon the hare. The picture we end up with may or may not have a physical likeness to the

source; the point has been to capture the dynamic of growth, the living energy in nature.

Nearly nine hundred years later in Europe Paul Klee (1879-1940) was writing much the same thing. I appreciate this is a bit of a jump, but if you'll bear with me as we hear some of Klee's words, I'll then offer what I think is a strikingly close connection of ideas.

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Paul Klee (1879-1940)

Paul Klee writes, in his great book, *The Thinking Eye*:

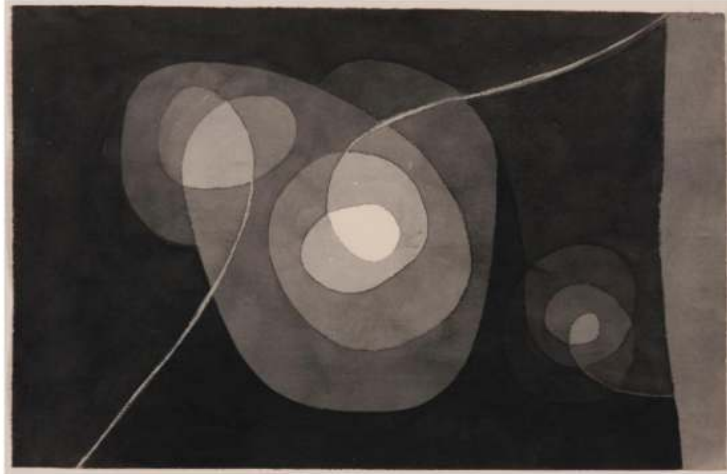
"I should like [...] to show why the artist often arrives at what seems to be an arbitrary 'distortion' of natural forms.

First of all, he does not set much store by natural forms as do the many realists who criticize.

He sets less store by these realities, because it is not in these finished forms that he sees the crux of the natural creative process.

He is more concerned with the formative powers than with the finished forms.

[...] [I]n place of the finished image of nature, the crucial image of creation as genesis imprints itself on him."



Paul Klee, *Spiral Screw Flowers II*, 1932

He goes on to write later:

“[The artist’s] growth in the vision and contemplation of nature enables him to rise towards a metaphysical view of the world and to form free abstract structures which surpass schematic intention and achieve a new naturalness, the naturalness of the work. Then he creates a work, or participates in the creation of works, that are the image of God’s works”.

Note this: free abstract structures which depict the dynamic energies of growth, the formative powers of the nature, constitute a new naturalness. A nature above nature, we might say. And he references God. But which God?



Paul Klee, *Row of Trees in the Park*, 1928

He says more on this elsewhere in the same work:

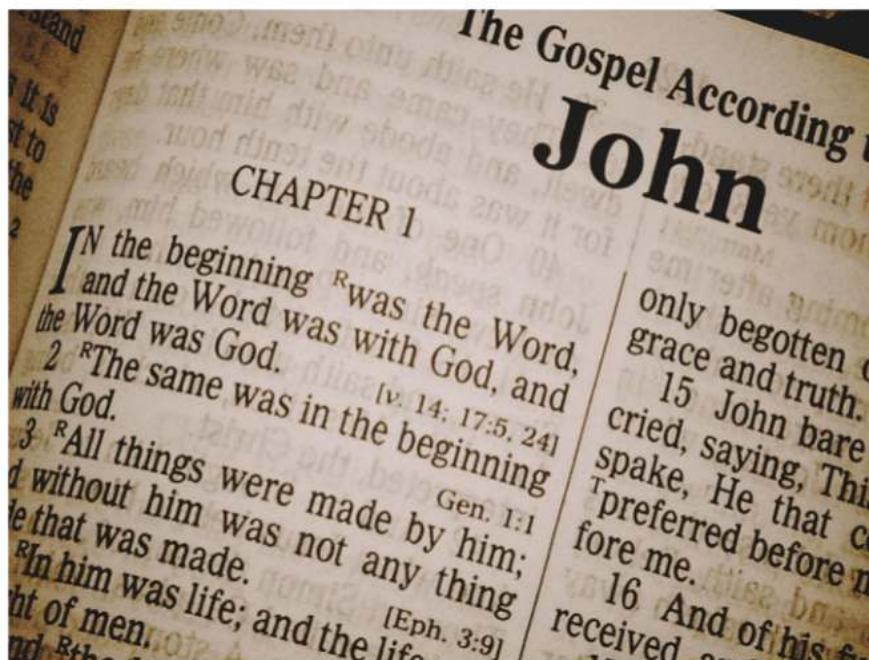
“In the beginning is the art; yes, but above [art] is the idea. And since infinity has no definite beginning, but is circular and beginningless, the idea may be regarded as the more basic. **In the beginning was the Word**, as Luther translated it.”

The first observation I want to make is that both Su Shih’s friend and Paul Klee have gone beyond physical observation to make sense of the images they’re making. In fact, they’ve both moved into metaphysical categories, which is to say categories beyond - *meta* - nature - *physis*.

✧

I want to stay in this area for just a bit because it is here that we enter into consideration of the landscape forms of liturgical art. At the same time, I commit to staying in this area just briefly: I don’t anticipate that heavy duty metaphysics, or any metaphysics at all, is what we came to listen to this evening. Although for any of us who enjoy this kind of thing, there might be time to talk it through some more afterwards.

So: Su Shih and Klee have taken us into what is beyond the physical senses, beyond nature, in order to explain the meaning of their works based on observing nature with the physical senses. But Klee, I think, must be wrong, in at least one part of what he writes.



For he says that above his work, his art, is the idea, which he equates to the biblical ‘Word’ in the Gospel according to John. I think he is wrong here because this Word, the second person of the Trinity, is known only through the flesh He became - the Word made flesh, as John has it. The Christian Word cannot be known abstractly, but only through the flesh.

I think Klee's sense of the 'Word', the Logos in Greek, is actually much closer to Lao-Tzu's notion of the Tao which informed Su Shih - as an abstraction inferred from intense and contemplative analysis of natural forms.

So: what we can take of powerful value from Su Shih and Paul Klee is the significance of what is beyond nature in making sense of the artistic representation of natural forms. But we now need to address the Christian idea of what is beyond nature so as best to understand the liturgical artist's representation of natural forms.



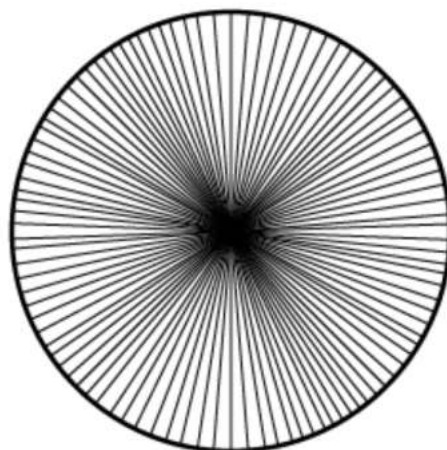
In the beginning was the Word, through whom all things were created: this we also hear in John's gospel. So: it is through the One above nature that we come to understand what nature is, for nature comes into being through Him.

There is an argument, not dissimilar to that of Su Shih and Paul Klee, that infers the existence of a power above nature simply from observation of nature. The apostle Paul references this kind of argument in his letter to the Romans. But this only takes him, and us, as far as the probability of an originating power outside nature. This result may be significant in some respects, but it's not clear how it might affect our lives unless we know more about it - whether for example, it hates, or loves, or is indifferent to human life.

Now I turn here, and unapologetically, to the position of trust in Christ, or Christian faith. There isn't another way, I think, to get a sense of the liturgical artist's ultimate and required vantage than to accept that a leap of trust in the person of Christ is required - even if one doesn't oneself take it.

As we discussed last time, a trusting intimacy in besouled and embodied union with Christ, which we interpreted from the Song of Songs, is the core of Christian life. Here we live in the very One through whom all things are created, and he lives in us (John 15). He shares with us spiritual eyes to see as He sees; to see nature, His creation, as He sees it; to see Him, Christ, active and alive within nature.

Imagine being at the centre of a circle.



And now hear, if you will, some words of Saint Maximus the Confessor, one of the greatest among theologians. "The centre of a circle is regarded as the indivisible source of all the radii extending from it; similarly, by means of a certain simple and indivisible act of spiritual knowledge, the person found worthy to dwell in God will perceive pre-existing in God all the inner principles of created beings" (2CT). Our whole being is raised up into this spiritual knowledge, this transformed seeing. We see that ultimately all of creation participates in the love of the Creator.

The Church's liturgy is a training in, and a manifestation of, this vision. It is an encouragement to the spiritual senses to see - and to hear - the joy of Christ in creation.



Any of us in the Cathedral for Choral Evensong on Saturday [pictured similarly above] will have heard the choir singing, most wonderfully, Kenneth Leighton's setting to George Herbert's antiphonal poem, "Let all the world in every corner sing, My God and King!" - in which are the lines: 'The earth is not too low / His praises there may grow'. Earth's praises, nature's praises, sing out.

Leighton himself was a lover of nature; so it seems was Herbert.

The meaning of nature, then, is experienced in Christ's transformation of our multiple senses, whether in the liturgy (and pre-eminently in the Eucharist itself) or elsewhere, anywhere, in the natural world.

I do fully understand that the focus of my presentation rests on seeing Christ as God-man, as divine-human and, again, that to see in this way is an act of trust. But this is an inescapable feature of any presentation on Christ: it is all a matter of trust. And a trust in matter too. On which point we make our final turn: to a material imaging of nature and the landscape seen with divine eyes.

[See the wonderful depiction of natural forms here, below]



Mosaic in the Cathedral Church of Hagia Sophia, Thessaloniki

The liturgical artist's task is basically the same as that of any other person of Christian faith: to respond to Christ's love, to enter into His love, to see as He sees, and to act accordingly. In the particular case of the liturgical artist, her or his action is to paint, carve, mould, or shape in accordance with the vision.

There's something of Agnes Martin's approach for the artist here: a vigilant waiting upon an image that communicates the experience of unity and love in creation with integrity and clarity. An entering in the heaven of loving unity, satiation in love, and then a return to the informing of the material.

There's something of Ben Shahn's approach too. At certain points you've just got to get on and put the stuff down. Lay a load of mosaic cubes into plaster, trusting that the image will emerge, reflecting back a coherent form through grace. Or put the pigments together into a tempera wash and go for it, filling the space with colour, in trust that the planes of colour will play joyfully beside each other in freedom and light. Watching the materials carefully as the surface develops, listening for emergent form, keeping the heart fixed in Christ, trusting in Him.

Indeed, the key focus throughout is this keeping of the heart and mind united with Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, the origin and the end.

We've come some way, I believe, in answering the question as to the sources of the liturgical artist's work in painting nature. Can we now discern any characteristics of the kind of images that they will make as a result? I think we can, and offer some characteristics here, though tentatively.



*John Milton, as depicted by William Blake, one time inhabitant of Felpham,
seven miles from 'the very handsom City' of Chichester*

For a start, it's not nice art. This is to borrow from John Milton in a glorious vision of nature transformed. He writes of nectar feeding [I quote] "Flowers worthy of Paradise, which **not nice Art** In beds and unions knots, but Nature boon Poured forth profuse on hill, and dale and plain".

Not a tidy scene, but a fertile one, nature 'poured forth profuse'.

Not nice art, then. But not entirely chaotic either. The iconographic landscape will likely have at least the characteristics of rhythm, fluidity and communion. Firstly...

Rhythm

Returning to music, we may take rhythm to "be defined as the way in which one or more beats are grouped in relation to an accented one. [...]. [Rhythm] always involves an interrelationship between a single, accented (strong) beat and either one or more unaccented (weak) beats".



And so it is in the iconographic landscape. On the one hand, the landscape forms are shown as the physical eye sees them: a mountain is recognisably a mountain. A tree is recognisably a tree. The sea is recognisably the sea. At the same time, these same forms are shown as the spiritual eye sees them. They form into a rhythm that signifies the harmonising activity of the Word. The weaker rhythms accentuate towards the accented beat, the accented form: and this is Christ Himself, the Word made flesh, crucified, resurrected, ascended.

Take, for an example, an icon of the Baptism of Christ, an icon in which natural forms traditionally have a greater role than in many other icons. This one [above] is by contemporary iconographer George Kordis. See how the water swirls rhythmically around the central figure of Christ, and how the mountains participate energetically, even joyfully, playfully in the event.

The same points could be made of an older icon in the same Tradition.



Perhaps it's not too much of a stretch to suggest that the forms of the mountains here read almost as a kind of musical annotation.

Another way of thinking of this is to think of this rhythm as governed by the heartbeat of Christ. Insofar as we lay our heads upon Christ's chest, like the beloved disciple did at the last supper, then we will hear His heartbeat and its reverberation throughout the whole cosmic order.

Further characteristics of the iconographic landscape follow on quite quickly here.

Fluidity

The rhythm is itself realised through fluid, supple lines. As such, every element flows and interpenetrates every other element, through and from the person of Christ.



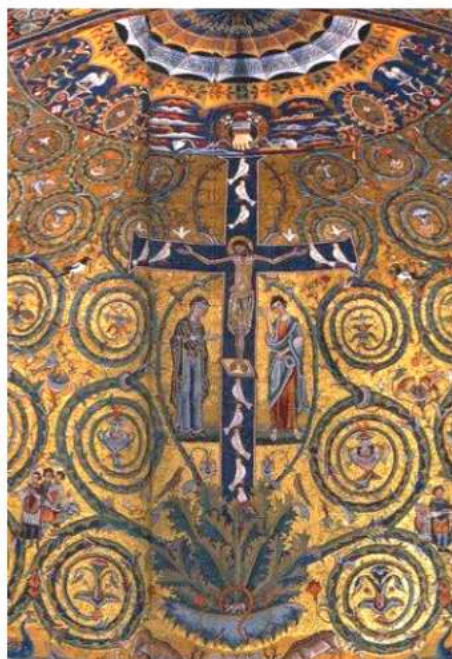
from George Kordis,
Icon as Communion

We can take a closer look at a design technique that creates this element of the vision. This is from George Kordis in a book on drawing icons. His descriptive writing is in Greek, but it's the lines themselves that I want to compare for you. See in the left hand column a curve at the top, then straight angular lines below, then a kind of boxy line and a cloudy one. These, Kordis argues, do not belong to the icon, they do not belong to good liturgical art.

Now turn your attention, if you would, to the lines on the right. Here, the sweeping curve is broken into a flowing zigzag. The angular lines on the other hand are shaped into a more curving, dynamic forms, having, as Kordis describes elsewhere, the springiness of sheet steel. And the boxy and cloudy lines have become more fluid too: the eye stays and moves fluidly, not jerkily. This whole design approach gives a sense of harmonious, generous activity, or energy: the activity of Christ in nature.

And, finally...

Communion



*Mosaic in the Basilica of
Saint Clement,
Rome, 12th.c*

“For [God was pleased] to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (Colossians 1.20).

The fluid, rhythmic energies of the image are harmonious because they foretell and tell of the reconciliation of all phenomena in Christ. Everything is in communion with Christ. Christ is all in all, fulfilling all, perfecting all. This is represented and made real in the Holy Communion, the Eucharist, on which more next week.



But now it's time to sum up where we've got to.

I started by setting aside Tradition, artificially, in order to open access to liturgical arts through an investigation of other art forms, looking at how images may arise in the artist's mind.

For the Christian artist, the vision which they paint comes from union with Christ. Christ offers the artist - as to every Christian, and every person - the gift of spiritual sight, seeing His energies throughout the cosmos, throughout creation.

And this is to return to our beginning, for this gifting of spiritual sight *is* Tradition. We were never going to get away from Tradition, nor would we want to.

Tradition is not for the copyist. It's a living community in which a vision of the world transformed, like a burning fire, is brightly shared.