

Regarding the Spiritual in Art

A Theoretical and Philosophical look at Arts Ability to Evoke the Spiritual

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By the time I was six years old I knew I wanted to be an artist. The creation of fine art has been both my passion and my singular study for almost as long as I can remember. I devoted myself to art-making with a concentrated ardor, while simultaneously growing in my Mormon Christian faith. My spirituality became the very center of my life, around which art revolved.

In 2009, after serving for two years as a full time missionary to the people of Los Angeles, an experience which was instructive and life-changing, I returned to my studies at The Cooper Union School of Art in New York City to continue my passion as an artist. However, after two years of strengthening families, helping people overcome addictions and get jobs, doing community service and being a direct influence for good in people's lives, creating art seemed pointless. A dead Damien Hirst tiger shark in formaldehyde or an Andy Warhol can of soup will not save the soul of anyone today or tomorrow. Therefore, I struggled to make sense of why I was given this artistic ability and how it could be of any real use when millions around the world were suffering and needed peace and a helping hand.

Faced with this crisis, I sought guidance from God. I fasted and prayed for weeks wanting to know what to do and how to proceed as a self-declared artist. It was the first week of October, 2009, when I entered the LDS Manhattan Temple. I had been to this sacred building before, but this time was different. I wasn't

going to the temple because I simply knew it was a good thing. I was going to the temple because I needed answers. My eyes were wider, my mind more open, my ears more in tune, and my gate more calm. I was looking for even the slightest sign of something from God, and in so doing, the physicality of the architecture and interior design became ever more present. I was noticing the way the light bounced off the table tops, the way the molding was carved, the way the color in the carpet accented the curtains. Everything, from the choice in material to the slight upward slope entering the Celestial room, had an impact. It was a profound experience, and yet to try to describe the feeling almost seems like it would be a futile attempt to explain that which is unexplainable. However, one thing is for sure. For the first time ever I realized that the visual impacts the spiritual.

I started to create work that dealt with religious principles, giving me a greater sense of purpose. However, it also exposed me to greater criticism from my fellow classmates and even some of my teachers. It seemed to me, that for them the contemporary art world and religion were fundamentally at odds, and yet deep down I felt that art needed the sacred and the sacred needed art... but why? What makes art sacred or spiritual? How is the sacred or spiritual manifest in material form? Is the art object itself sacred, or is it simply a bridge to transport a spiritual experience? Is there some universal recipe for creating spiritual art?

This essay is an attempt to answer these questions. In doing so, my intention is not to create an argument for purely intellectual purposes or to discuss philosophical ideas simply for curiosity. I am in search of truth. In this pursuit, I will compare Christian scripture and Mormon Theology with the works of Rudolf Otto, Karsten Harries, and Wassily Kandinsky. I will show that the sacred needs art, but that the art object itself is not sacred; rather, is a stimulus and ‘occasion’ for experiences of the sacred. I will then look at specific works of art, showing that spiritual truths are best conveyed through symbols, but that there is no universal visual language that can evoke a spiritual experience. I will finish by arguing that regardless of a universal visual language, the artist has a duty to try to convey the sacred in order to uplift and elevate the viewer.

In order to fully understand the argument, it is first important to define the words ‘spiritual’ and ‘sacred’ and then to understand Mormon thinking at it relates to the sacred, the spirit and material things. Webster’s New World College dictionary defines ‘sacred’ as, “consecrated to or belonging to divinity or a deity; holy; regarded with the respect or reverence accorded holy things; venerated; hallowed” (Agnes). In the broadest sense, one might think of the sacred as anything that comes from God and anything that is offered to God. This property of sacred or holy can be ascribed to people, object, time, and place. Tithes, for example, are generally considered sacred because it is something that is consecrated for deity and regarded with respect. That same dictionary defines ‘spiritual’ as, “of the spirit or the soul as distinguished from the body or material matters; characterized by the ascendancy of the spirit; showing much refinement of thought and feeling.” From this definition we can say that, while tithes are related to religion, they are not of the spirit or ‘characterized by the ascendancy of the spirit’ and therefore tithes are more often referred to as ‘sacred tithes’ or ‘sacred money’ and not ‘spiritual money’. However, recognizing that while the two terms are different, there are also similarities and thus are often used interchangeably.

One such similarity between the spiritual and the sacred is that they both demand an inwardness that seems contrary to the clear outward material of fine art. They demand self reflection, meditation, focus on the inner spirit, putting off the natural man, and denouncing materialism, whereas today’s art seems to say, ‘look at me, glorify the object, and enjoy the sensuous.’ However, there is a deep connection between the spiritual and matter. John Durham Peters, a Mormon and an associate Professor at the University of Iowa,

commented on a scripture saying, “The marriage of matter and spirit is the order of the eternities: ‘spirit and element, inseparably connected, receive a fulness of joy; And when separated, man cannot receive a fulness of joy’ (D&C 93:33-34)” (Peters, p.47). Both Peters and the scripture he quoted, I believe, are referring to that which God created—the earth, animals, and human life itself. In Mormon theology, “God created all things... spiritually, before they were [created] naturally” (Smith, Moses 3:5). Literally speaking, every life form and particle of the earth consists also of spirit. With the existence of this magnificent truth, it is also important to say, along with Peters, that, “we hardly have any inkling of the philosophical and practical consequences of the materiality of spirit and the spirituality of matter” (Peters, p.47). The question arises though, if all particles of earth also consist of some spiritual matter unseen to the human eye or by any machine known to man, then are we to believe that man-made objects, created from the reappropriation of matter, also have literal spirits? Such a question seems absurd and a thorough discussion of the topic is not pertinent for this essay. It is only presented in order to ask whether there is something spiritually inherent in a work of art that makes it ‘sacred’ or ‘spiritual’ or is it simply the viewer or artist who projects the sacred upon it?

Karsten Harries, a philosopher and professor at Yale University claimed that “constitutive of the sacred, is the inseparable unity of spirit and matter.” Speaking of the sacred manifest in material form, he said, “the sa cred breaks into the horizontality of the mundane and establishes a vertical that unites heaven and earth. The divine logos descends into the visible. Meaning is incarnated in matter. Matter becomes the bearer of divinity. That gives objects we experience as sacred their special aura” (Harries, p.15). Here Harries describes a sort of portal between heaven and earth which allows the divine to descend on the physical object. In answering the previous question with Harries’ statement, art would not be inherently sacred, but would become such as the divine descends upon it. In considering if art has the potential to become sacred by its possession of the divine, it is necessary to understand what the ‘divine’ is that Harries mentions, and how and why it can ‘descend’. I will address this by looking at Rudolf Otto’s, *The Idea of the Holy* and Mormon Christian Theology.

Otto’s central claim is that “religion is not exclusively contained and exhaustively comprised in any series of ‘rational’ assertions” (Otto, p.4). There are different aspects of religious faith which he categorizes into rational and non-rational. He begins his argument

by discussing ‘the holy’ and suggesting that “we generally take ‘holy’ as meaning ‘completely good’” (Otto, p.5). This for him is inadequate and thus he appeals to the term ‘numinous’, a term he uses for that which is above and beyond mere goodness and stripped of any moral factor, ‘moment’ or ‘rational’ aspect. For Otto, the human encounter with the numinous is a unique mental state that “cannot, strictly speaking, be taught, it can only be evoked, awakened in the mind; as everything that comes ‘of the spirit’ must be awakened” (Otto, p.7). In other words, the numinous must be experienced.

According to Mormon theology, an experience with the numinous would be a spiritual experience with the Holy Ghost. In Mormonism, the trinity—God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost—are three distinctly separate beings. A passage in modern Mormon scripture states, “The Father has a body of flesh and bones as tangible as man’s; the Son also; but the Holy Ghost has not a body of flesh and bones, but is a personage of Spirit. Were it not so, the Holy Ghost could not dwell in us. A man may receive the Holy Ghost, and it may descend upon him and not tarry with him” (Smith, D&C 130: 22-23). Here we learn that the Holy Ghost can descend on us, dwell within us, and then leave. Despite the differences in trinitarian theology, the Mormon view is indeed quite interesting to consider in regards to this topic and several questions arise because of it. First of all, what does this numinous experience of having the Holy Ghost with us feel like and why does it occur?

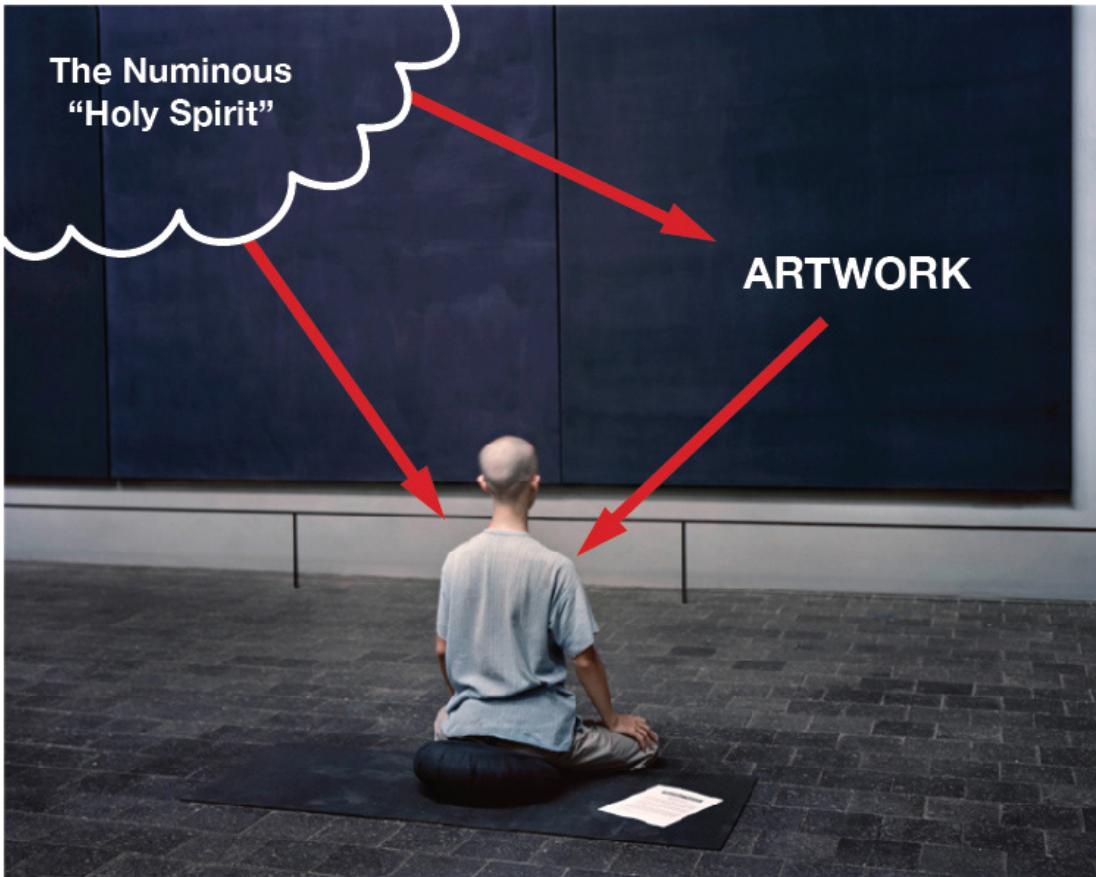
An unknown clergyman reported an experience with the Holy Ghost saying that it was “like a great orchestra when all the separate notes have melted into one swelling harmony that leaves the listener conscious of nothing save that his soul is being wafted upwards and almost bursting with its own emotion” (James, p.70). Boyd Packer, an artist and Apostle in the Mormon Church said, “the voice of the spirit is described in the scriptures as being neither ‘loud’ nor ‘harsh’. It is ‘not a voice of thunder, neither … voice of a great tumultuous noise,’ but rather ‘a still small voice of perfect mildness, as if it had been a whisper,’ and it can ‘pierce even to the very soul’ and ‘cause [the heart] to burn’ (3 Ne. 11:3; Hel. 5:30; D&C 85:6-7). Occasionally it will press just firmly enough for us to pay heed” (Packer). These statements seem to describe an emotional experience of the heart and soul, yet Otto described an “encounter with the numinous [as] a unique mental state”. Otto is not entirely wrong. A modern Mormon scripture found in the book of the Doctrine and Covenants records Jesus Christ speaking to one Oliver Cowdery as saying, “I will tell you in

your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost” (Smith, D&C 8:2). Here we see that the Holy Ghost is not just a feeling of the heart, but also something of the mind.

According to scripture and Christian theology, the Holy Ghost has many purposes. To comfort, to teach, to bring things to remembrance (*see John 14:26*), and to testify (*see John 15:26*). In relation to art, the Holy Ghost teaches and testifies of truth and goodness, purity and righteousness. This does not mean though, that every viewer of a good and truthful work of art will experience the numinous. There is a prevalent Mormon teaching that was well conveyed by Jeffrey Holland, an Apostle of the church with a PhD in American Studies from Yale University. Addressing the general body of the church at a world-wide broadcast in April 2011, he stated, “If we teach by the Spirit and you listen by the Spirit, some one of us will touch on your circumstance, sending a personal prophetic epistle just to you” (Holland). What does it mean to ‘teach by the spirit’ and to ‘listen by the spirit’ and how does this apply to artists and viewers of art?

Galatians 5:22-23 in the New Testament says, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance”. Later in Ephesians 5:9 it says, “For the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth”. What is the fruit of the artist? If an architect creates a building or an artist creates a painting or a photograph with pure intention, conveying goodness and truth, then according to Christian theology, the fruits of the Spirit would have to be in that thing. If the artwork conveyed truth, then isn’t it the job of the Holy Ghost to teach and testify of that truth? The artist therefore would be ‘teaching by the Spirit’. And in order to ‘listen by the Spirit’ and have an encounter with the numinous, Otto suggests that you must ‘awaken’ it. Throughout canonized scripture, we read that one must ‘ponder’, ‘seek’, and ‘listen’ and say, in a manner and expression, like Samuel of ancient times, ‘Speak [Lord], for thy servant heareth’ (1 Sam. 3:10).

As Heidegger asks in “The Origin of the Work of Art”, “Works are made available for public and private art appreciation. Official agencies assume the care and maintenance of work. Connoisseurs and critics busy themselves with them. Art dealers supply the market. Art historical study makes the works the objects of a science. Yet in all this busy activity, do we encounter the work itself?” (Heidegger, p.39). Another way to ask this question is, are we, as the viewer of the art, ‘listening by the spirit’? Are we pondering and considering what the artwork has to say to us or are we simply glancing at it for purely aesthetic entertainment?



Art is a form of communication devoid of language. It exists purely as line, shape, color, form, and texture. The combination of these elements create images and objects, whether abstract or figurative. Rudolf Otto said that, “all language, in so far as it consists of words, purports to convey ideas or concepts;—that is what language means;—and the more clearly and unequivocally it does so, the better the language. And hence expositions of religious truth in language inevitably tend to stress the rational attributes of God” (Otto, p.2). Since official language of words stresses the rational, and art is devoid language, logically, art must therefore appeal to the irrational; the moments when it is simply futile to attempt to explain that which is unexplainable, when logic and reason cannot yield adequate understanding. This is not suggesting here that art contains the answers to the unexplainable in life, but is suggesting that art, and even architecture, by their very nature, like music or dance, can speak to the human spirit in a way that words cannot. It is because of this ability that art has, that causes the sacred to need art.

Because of this natural ability, art can be a bridge or stimulus in which to experience the Holy Ghost or ‘fruits of the Spirit’. It is not entirely clear,

but it seems that Harries truly believes that a divine spirit literally resides in a work, making it sacred so that “the emphasis is not on the subject, [the viewer], but on the object” (Harries, p.24). He states that, “Spirit is experienced as dwelling in matter. The invisible and the visible here coincide” (Harries, p.24). Though while analyzing a counter point, he wrote that, “at its highest, sacred [art] is somewhat like a bridge that transports us into an inner spiritual realm that allows us to enter some inner subjective space. As we cross that bridge everything material, and with it [art], is transcended as the solitary subject discovers within him or herself ‘the awesome and timeless space of the holy’ or the ‘numinous.’ [Art] is understood here as occasioning an experience of the numinous. So understood, it would seem, the numinous does not really reside in the [art], but in the subject” (Harries, p.15). These statements by Harries could perhaps show the difference between ‘sacred art’ and ‘spiritual art’ in that ‘spiritual art’ is a bridge to bring the Holy Ghost to the viewer, whereas with ‘sacred art’ the Holy Ghost remains in the object. In summation, despite whether or not there is a literal materiality of spirit inherent in all matter, what is important is that when an artist creates a work of art with pure intention, putting his whole soul into that



thing, fully trying to convey truth and goodness, he or she is allowing the divine presence of the Holy Ghost to use that thing as a bridge in order to enter into the viewer. And when the viewer encounters that work with an open heart and a desire to learn and communicate, it is then that the magic of the numinous can occur. Be it a simple mild peacefulness or a profound emotional orchestra, when this occurs, that work of art has just become spiritual. But what does it mean for an artist to convey truth and goodness in his work? What is truth in this case? Are there colors, shapes, or forms that are more truthful than others?

In order to answer these questions, let us consider the writings and work of Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) in relation to other works of art. Kandinsky was a leader of abstraction that spawned an art movement that has shaken everything the art world made for thousands of years before it, to its very core. He believed that only true art free from external form can relate to the world, or even more, help the world progress to a truly spiritual realm. In his book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Kandinsky expresses his disgust for the broad acceptance of, and reverence towards, materialistic art, art whose sole aim is the reproduction of objects, and art for art's sake. He argues that lines, shapes, and colors can be symbolic tools to convey the spiritual and impact the human soul. "Colour awakens a corresponding physical sensation, which undoubtedly works upon the soul," he says. It is true that a warm red can be associated

with the warmth and comfort or danger of a fire and a deep cool red can be associated with blood, but each color brings different thoughts and feelings to each individual making it nearly impossible to communicate a very distinct and clear message via pictorial art in the way messages are conveyed in literary art. Though colors do carry with them emotional power and perhaps that is the message, a message of joy, sadness, fear, or comfort. To give an example of how Kandinsky writes about color, he says that "white... is a symbol of a world from which all colour as a definite attribute has disappeared. This world is too far above us for its harmony to touch our souls. White is taken as symbolizing joy and spotless purity." (Kandinsky, p.39)



Composition VI (1913) by Wassily Kandinsky

So what are we to make of this? Kandinsky calls for the abandonment of the recognizable, often cliché materialism that academic art of his time heralded as high. He wants artists to use the power and symbolism of form and color to change the spirituality of society. This is a huge vision and undertaking, which many artists of today either neglect, don't believe in, or have yet to realize. However, does pure form and color, devoid of figurative representation, really act as symbols to allow the numinous to occur? Boyd Packer talks about how to convey spiritual truths in his book, *The Holy Temple*. "Spiritual truths are sometimes very difficult to teach. The most conclusive certification of man's intelligence is his ability to recreate in symbolic form the world in which he lives. In teaching the [spiritual], we do not re-create the material world around us; we deal with the intangible world within us. It is far easier to re-create the visible, tangible world around us in alphabetical symbols than to re-create the spiritual ideals and have them understood. And yet it can be done, and it can be done most effectively by using symbols" (Packer, p. 40).

Any Christian should be able to agree with Packer's statement in light of Jesus's use of parables as literary symbols to convey spiritual truths. In our material world, symbols make the ineffable more easily understood. Kandinsky believes that simple colors and shapes act as a sort of visual 'parable' or metaphor to allow the viewer to encounter the numinous. Although, Frank Stella, another abstract artist (born 1936), would disagree with Kandinsky. When speaking about his work, he said:

"I always get into arguments with people who want to retain the old values in painting, the humanistic values that they always find on the canvas. If you pin them down, they always end up asserting that there is something there besides the paint on the canvas. My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen is there. It really is an object. [I am] making a thing. All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all that I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without confusion.... What you see is what you see" (Harries, p. 9).

Harries remarked on Stella's comment saying, "On this view the painting does not in any way point beyond itself. It is neither symbol nor allegory. It does not say anything. Therefore it can be neither true nor false" (Harries, p. 10). Unlike Kandinsky, Stella does not choose his colors and shapes based on their spiritual properties or what they might evoke in the viewer. Symbolism does not exist for Stella—at least not in his

paintings. But isn't it this quality of 'pointing beyond itself' that characterizes the religious or spiritual symbol? If so, this would rule out Stella's art as being sacred or spiritual art.



Firuzabad (1970) by Frank Stella

In keeping with the earlier argument that the artist must convey goodness and truth with sincerity and pure intention in order to experience the numinous or 'fruits of the spirit', can we assume that the numinous can be experienced through both Kandinsky's and Stella's work? Both artists certainly are sincere in their intentions even though their purposes seem to be the direct antithesis of each other. The question is are they conveying goodness and truth? Kandinsky believes that he is and perhaps Stella believes that same, but my initial reaction is to dismiss Stella. Going back to my personal account at the beginning of this paper, I mentioned that when I returned from my missionary service, I struggled to make art when I saw no real purpose and use for it, especially when people around the world are suffering and needed peace and a helping hand. I argue that conveying goodness and truth in art means to have a purpose beyond just "making a thing". Whether it is to teach, to testify, to inspire, to comfort, etc. However, Stella is making art for art's sake and because of this, regardless of any aesthetic quality or beauty it may possess, it is unavoidably devoid of the numinous.

Let's look at one more work of art that is entirely different. Ansel Adams' (1902-1984) *The Tetons and the Snake River* is a far cry from the colorfully abstract work of Kandinsky and Stella. Adams was one of the greatest American photographers of all time. He worked primarily with black and white landscapes, capturing the American West, including Yosemite and Glacier National Parks. He elevated photography to an art comparable to painting and music, helping others understand its capability to

express emotion and beauty. In *The Tetons and the Snake River* we have a figurative image that shows the external form of the world. The trees, the clouds, the mountains, and the river are all elements that make up this work of art. How do we compare this to Kandinsky's theory when it is clear that there is no color nor simple shapes or lines to act as symbols. The symbols here are natural God-made elements. In trying to convey the sublime, the spiritual, and the ineffable as an art photograph, Adams uses light, rather than color. Art critic John Szarkowski wrote, "Ansel Adams attuned himself more precisely than any photographer before him to a visual understanding of the specific quality of the light that fell on a specific place at a specific moment. For Adams the natural landscape is not a fixed and solid sculpture but an insubstantial image, as transient as the light that continually redefines it. This sensibility to the specificity of light was the motive that forced Adams to develop his legendary photographic technique" (Szarkowski, 1976).



The Tetons and the Snake River (1942) by Ansel Adams

When looking at Adams' photographs there is an incredible sense of sacredness. The fruits of the spirit—peace, gentleness, goodness, faith, or joy—can be felt. The fact that the spiritual can be felt through an image of external form devoid of color seems to be a harsh rebuttal to Kandinsky's spiritual art theory. Kandinsky is not necessarily wrong in his views, he is just not completely right. It is true that colors can "undoubtedly work upon the soul" and that lines, shapes, and colors can be visual symbols to convey the ineffable. But after looking at Adams work, it is clear that there is not a universal visual language to communicate spiritually. As an artist trying to convey a sense of the numinous, I ask whether there are certain

visual elements that are more truthful than others? The ancient Egyptians believed in the power of the triangle, the circle and the square. These shapes are even used symbolically in the temples of my own Mormon faith. But that doesn't mean that other shapes, forms, and visual elements can't also convey the numinous. As can be seen in Adams photo, the use of light can also be a powerful symbol and tool.

To conclude, when creating a work of art, or when simply viewing a work of art, what matters more than which visual elements are present—colors, shapes, textures, light, forms, etc—is how those elements are being used. Are they being used to convey goodness and truth? Are they being used to inspire and uplift, to teach and to testify? Or are they being used just to look at, just to "make a thing"? I argue that there is no universal visual language to convey the sacred and spiritual, but rather that it is up to the artist to use the visual elements to convey truth and goodness with sincerity and pure intention. When this is done, the visual elements, whether in the form of a person, a car, a tree, a circle, the color blue, or anything else, can take on meaning, become a symbol, and be used by the Holy Ghost to help the viewer experience the fruits of the spirit. Kandinsky believes that the world is unconsciously in need of spiritual nourishment and that "this [spiritual] food is offered by the artist" (Kandinsky) not because of the way the artist thinks but because of the power behind art itself. Art has a natural ability to speak to the human spirit and evoke the spiritual in a way that words cannot and therefore artists have the responsibility to 'teach by the spirit' and then leave it up to the viewer to 'listen by the spirit'. If we want to live in a better world, we as artists need to realize that even though art can be enjoyable and beautiful in its formal qualities, we cannot create art for art's sake. To echo the words of Kandinsky, the artist "is not king of the castle but rather a servant of a noble purpose."

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