

Roger Lipsey

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I can't be sure when and where I first noticed the spiritual in art. It might have been in a remote Romanesque chapel perched on a volcanic peak in central France. There was a little glass exhibition case protecting a little wooden crucifix with a carved and painted image of Jesus standing it seemed at ease, with total composure, on an acrobat's bar provided for his convenience. Still and upright. Dressed in the simplest of robes. No agony, no drama. His face, his eyes reflecting such tranquility. It was a doll-like miniature, pouring love.

Or, at about the same time, the initial encounter could have been through colored postcards of wall paintings in Etruscan tombs. Dancers, athletes, priests conducting ceremonies—and the horses with bright eyes, airy manes, eternal vitality. The artists had been dazzled by life, their art was a form of praise.

I understood that visual art could—and must—record essential impressions, teach us in its silent way, preserve secrets from the past and the best intuitions of knowing individuals of our own time. I learned to appreciate the silence of imagery: it presents itself to mind and heart like a map settling over us.

I went to school with Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, the art historian and interpreter of religious traditions. He, of all people, understood the spiritual in art, knew what occurs “when the perception of a work of art becomes a serious experience,” understood that “art is a kind of knowledge” and that art “ought to be an epiphany of things unseen.” I never knew him—he died in 1947—but I came to know his writings well. For years I belonged to him.

Eventually I realized he had missed something. Among living artists, he cared only for Alfred Stieglitz and his circle; others he ignored or detested. The disorder and materialism of twentieth-century experience blinded him to the presence in contemporary art of the things he valued. Yet I could see that some artists of our time—well more than generally acknowledged—were working from the inside out. I longed to decipher their art. Kandinsky had issued the call, taught whoever wished to learn that even now there is a path from point and line and plane to metaphysical insight and expression.

In my book *An Art of Our Own: The Spiritual in Twentieth-Century Art*—1988, kept in print by Dover Books under the subtitle—I followed Kandinsky's lead with Coomaraswamy's methods. I looked for meaning and spiritual context, listened to the artists, read their writings. It shone through unmistakably: the spiritual in art.

I sat down once with Isamu Noguchi. “I don't think that art comes from art,” he said. “I think it comes from the awakening person. Awakening is what you might call the spiritual. It is a linkage to something flowing very rapidly through the air, and I can put my finger on it and plug in.” His sculpture outdoors at the south corner of the Metropolitan Museum is stone calligraphy. You can perceive in it nearly the whole thing: Brancusi, Zen, the search for eloquent simplicity, the wish to be present and effective in this hard and deeply interesting world.