



**TOWARD A UNIFICATION AESTHETIC**

by

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In 1991, my ICUS paper, *Unification Aesthetics*, was based on Dr. Sang Hung Lee's book *Explaining Unification Thought*. I argued that Dr. Lee's development of a Unification theory of aesthetics was soundly based on the history of aesthetics and combined some elements of both Western and Oriental ideas. Dr. Lee emphasizes the place of Sung Sang Hyung Sang (SS/HS) in Unification Thought (UT) and in Unification aesthetics (UA). I suggested that there were remaining problems of style and purpose to be worked out in Dr. Lee's theory and I questioned whether a mode of thought that is essentially a vision of the perfect relationships between God, Man and the World can be translated successfully into a theory of Beauty in art.<1>

In this paper, my purpose will be less abstract. My intention is to sketch out the manner in which the Unification Church actually uses visual imagery and how that this usage might relate to a theory of aesthetics with roots in western and eastern thought. I will be more concrete and examine specific examples of the way Unificationists use imagery.

First of all as I see it, the Church uses imagery in three distinct ways. First: in an abstract symbolic mode such as the logos - variations on the circle of which the ICUS logo is a good example. Second: the use of the camera both the still camera and the video camera modes with which we are all familiar and third: the use of painting, sculpture, and interior decoration.

The most important source of imagery has been photography which is being used to faithfully document all Church activities and personnel with an emphasis on the inspiration of the Founder. The cameras go everywhere and anywhere to tell the story. And wherever the lens is inappropriate, there is the tape recorder. Every media technique available has been used to record Church activities for the record. One cannot imagine the Church functioning as it does without modern technology, not only its creative use of the media, but we must add jet travel, the telephone, the computer and the fax. Right away, we see that Unification culture has unfolded as a global culture from its inception, that moment when Reverend Moon gazed out over the Pacific from a mountain top in Pusan, Korea. As I suggested in last year's paper, culture gives rise to aesthetics, and not the other way around. We have only to remember that Expressionism in pre-World War II in Germany held the utopian belief that art had the potential to transform humanity and the high hopes held by the early Russian revolutionary artists that somehow art had a transformative power. <2> The Marxist humanist and philosopher, Ernst Bloch introduced the material dialectic

of seventeenth century mystic Jacob Böhme to Marxist historical analysis in his argument that man and his society still have the potential to transmute the physical world into a future utopia. These ideas profoundly influenced the paintings of both Arp and Kandinsky. <3> We need not linger over their power to effect events. We must expect, indeed predict, that any recognizable Unification aesthetic would be of necessity arise in time out of Unification culture and it will be a synthesis of West and East.

At the outset, a distinction needs to be made between documentation and art. It is clear to even the casual observer that activities of the Church have been recorded with consummate skill. But documentation deals exclusively with events that are visible to the eye. When appropriate music, swelling ascending chords and wind-swept clouds are added to a video narration, an impression of unseen cosmic forces can be suggested, implied, but not documented. When there is a need to record spiritual and/or mystical events in the past, present or future time, then photography fails and painting or sculpture become the expressive visual media. When the subject matter is Revelation, a private vision, or inspiration, then no camera can help the artist to communicate a message.

Over the years, certain patterns and traditions in art have come to the aid of spiritual expression when documentation fails. To begin with what might seem obvious: The sense of the unity of the cosmos, the experience of being in touch with that unity, the harmony of the "All in All" has through out the ages been expressed mainly by a circle, the image of perfection. Ceremonial use of the circle is common to most religious traditions and we can observe it here in a Unification celebration.

According to Jakob Böhme, "The eternal center and the birth of Life... are everywhere. Trace a circle no larger than a dot, the whole birth of Eternal Nature is therein contained."<4> The circle was considered symbolic of perfection during the Renaissance and frequently dictated the plan of church architecture. In addition, the designs of Islamic decoration frequently spring from a single dot symbolizing an invisible unity which develops outward into intricate geometries. "Cosmic imagery is suggestive of the mystical concept that the universe is a single, living substance."<5> The ICUS logo with its circles within circles implies this unity just as do the seventeenth century images from Robert Fludd's Utriusque cosmi with their flames and rolling atmospheres. Similarly, dynamic action between the various circles is implied in the ICUS logo even though the logo is a more diagrammatic expression. Here are two more samples of seventeenth century images which express the same concept in a more complex form.<6> The bursting energy of Fludd's circles is condensed in the ICUS circle but motion

is still indicated by the direction of the broad bands which are broken but which nevertheless complete each other. We can state here that in one aspect of the Unification visual system, abstract diagramming in circular form is an important, readily understood modern method of communication. It makes a universal timeless claim condensed that is on a different level than photography. But a diagram is not art. It remains a formula, lacking the sensuous reciprocity required in an art work.

A modern expression of the symbolic use of the circle in a art form, occurs in a 1906-1907 series of paintings by Hilma af Klint (1862-1944). She was a Swedish woman sensitized since childhood to spiritual experience. She frequently used the circle to express her unconscious feelings of the spiritual in man-woman. Af Klint experienced the spiritual through a medium named Amaliel who was her "guide" or "guru". She was never able to explain her own work. She does not seem to have been influenced by the mainstream of European art which was developing theories of abstraction during her active years. <7>

It is interesting to note that during the years 1905-1910 the work of artists Matisse, Constantin Brancusi, Georges Roualt, and Picasso were marked by a "shift toward the sacred in art" a trend that ended with the development of cubism. <8> The reasons for this abrupt ending of their interest in the sacred might be interesting to investigate.

But Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944) persisted in his search for the spiritual in art. In 1911, he wrote:

Our epoch is a time of tragic collision between matter and spirit and of the downfall of the purely material worldview; for many, many people it is a time of terrible, inescapable vacuum, a time of enormous questions; but for a few people it is a time of presentiment or of precognition of the path to Truth." <9>

In his oil painting, Circles Within Circles, Kandinsky uses a bold diagonal to give a strong sense of space influenced here by the Russian avant garde who emphasized the illusion of space as a sign of the fourth dimension. Kandinsky wrote that "the circle of all the primary forms points most clearly to the fourth dimension. Kandinsky never gave up his underlying belief that of color and line could express transcendent states.

It seems to me that the use of the circle for the logos of the Unification Church is basically an intuitive understanding of the cosmic unity sought by mystics of the

past. However, as we have seen, the direct relation to a particular religion is not spelled out by the circle. Native American artists as well as Christian mystics and Islamic scholars have equally shared in this perception. One cannot find any specific Unificationist thought in the use of this symbol.

A more specific symbolization was used in Early Christian and Byzantine manuscripts to designate revelation. In the First Bible of Charles The Bald we can observe the literal image of the Hand of God. In the Byzantine icon we can see the clear, direct path of the revelation from on high to earth. Later during the Renaissance, very corporeal angels descended from heaven to earth to bring messages from the Creator. Sometimes, God was depicted as half a man, a genial, friendly God presiding over earthly events as we see here in a Crucifixion by Andrea del Castagno (1423-1457).

The greatest of all these images is undoubtedly the Creation of Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo. Another powerful image comes from the Isenheim Altar (1510-15) by Matthias Grunewald. You realize that no video camera could have caught these moments. During the Baroque period, transcendent power was represented often as a stream of light pouring down on earth from heavenly heights. The Divine light comes from off stage, as it were, illuminating and signaling at once a mystical event. These manuscripts and paintings which depict an anthropomorphic deity may seem naive to us today, but the artist is dealing with the problem of translating the invisible into the visible - a task that will ever remain problematic. These methods have become traditional metaphors to express what cannot be documented but which have become understood within the Western tradition of painting. The non-theistic oriental tradition makes a different use of metaphor to express a different range of unseen concepts - the cherry blossoms for life's transiency; bamboo for strength, persistence and courage; mountains and valleys and empty space for the Infinite.

Rembrandt elaborated on the Italian Baroque metaphor for the transcendent. His continuing appeal can be attributed to his ability to render a biblical event in a manner that sets it clearly on earth but bathes the subject in a light that we interpret as supernatural. Critic Arthur Danto writes:

Rembrandt in whose paintings a metaphysically brilliant light splits darkness like a sword and at the same time vests form with such radiance that it is as though they are redeemed by some holy intervention and touched with grace. Each canvas executes a metaphor of redemption from shadow to light as if the biblical moment when darkness was lifted from the face of the waters

were miraculously reenacted in each biblical episode Rembrandt painted. <10>

For Christian spirituality, Spanish painting of the seventeenth century may represent the highest, most perfect expression. Painters such as Ribalta, Murillo and Francisco de Zurbaran (1598-1664), Jose de Ribera (1591-1652) may never be equaled in their depiction of the sacred narratives of the Hebrew writings and the Gospels.

In my opinion, since the Enlightenment, no new traditions of representing the Divine have been generally accepted. <11> We have been trained by the visual traditions I have illustrated to interpret light as the most meaningful mode of expressing in painting the action of God. Paul Ranson (1864-1909) in his Christ and Buddha uses the colors popularized by the Nabi painters to project his understanding of the harmony of Christ and Buddha. Yet he shifts to pure white light to indicate the heavenly sphere where colors dissolve. <12> When contemporary artists have sought to use contemporary methods to express the invisible, the effect is questionable. Are we moved by Bruce Nauman's The True Artist Helps The World by Revealing Mystic Truths? (1967) <13> Can we imagine Giotto using a spiral, a sign of motion, of incomplete, yet-to-be-fulfilled action?

The remainder of this paper will attempt to integrate what we have learned about the traditional methods of rendering visible the invisible to the problems posed by Unification aesthetics as described by Dr. Lee. It is clear that Unificationist Watanabe's interpretation of the moment when Rev. Moon received his commission from Jesus while at prayer on a mountain side, relies on a painterly tradition inherited from the history of Western art. He has connected heaven and earth with beams of light. From the center of the light, the holy features appear, giving a gesture of blessing. Not only does this rendition recall Rembrandt, it also recalls the mystical painting of William Blake's illustration of Dante's Divine Comedy. As we suggested above, the artist is dealing with a narrative that could not lend itself to either a diagrammatic or a documentary treatment. The time of the event illustrated is in the past and the event concerns an invisible revelation. If it fails as a painting it is only because the earthly elements, the rocks, the trees are not credible natural observations. As viewers, we want the earthly setting to seem real even as we completely accept artist's rendition of the spiritual. The subject matter here is Unificationist, but the aesthetic is Western traditional and not unique to the Unification Church. The point I am making here is that problems of subject matter, what to paint, are distinct from Aesthetics - how to paint - how to produce Beauty. In other words, can we declare that because the artist is a dedicated

Unificationist and the subject matter is about Reverend Moon that the aesthetic is a Unification aesthetic? The answer to this question is of major importance to a development of a specific Unification aesthetics.

Watanabe's God Looking Down on the Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is a more successful painting because both realms, the heavenly and the earthly, are credible. The smoking remains of the cities are all too familiar from our modern images of urban destruction like Beirut or South Central Los Angeles and we easily accept the vision of the face of God as a proper metaphor for the power of the Creator.

In a much more complex biblical scene, Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac, Watanabe has chosen to minimize the figure of Isaac and thereby taken away something of the terror of this event. Much of the drama is lost. Perhaps it is unfair to compare his painting with Rembrandt's rendition of the same moment. Notice in the Rembrandt the strong hand of Abraham clamped over the boy's face, the other hand with the knife just dropping. The exposed body of the boy and the fully formed angel are shockingly palpable. Certainly, the artist has used real life models to portray the event and vividly described the precise second he is illustrating. Rembrandt's painting makes us believe the story without question although of course no camera recorded the deed nor were we present. The biblical story is of both violence and faith. Although we understand Watanabe's painting, the details of Genesis 22.v.11 are not fully developed. We wonder whether the artist's oriental background where harmony, wa, may have trained him to shy away from a more graphic depiction of this biblical story. Also, whereas father-son struggles are featured in the bible, in Unification Divine principle, Cain-Abel tension is uppermost. Intergenerational strife does not appear to be problematic in Divine Principle. Once more we are discussing subject matter.

Watanabe's rendition of the moving scene where in prison Rev. Moon shares his rice with the other prisoners is more convincing. The darkness of the prison contrasts with the light from the window which we interpret as a mystical light, one which includes Rev. Moon in its radiance. The prison is as credible as the light and we experience no difficulty in distinguishing the earthly from the heavenly realm. Here is an excellent example of SS/HS of the painter, the event, and the viewer functioning together.

What I want to accomplish by showing these slides in connection with the tradition of Western art is to distinguish between the history of style, a skill in rendering and the principles of SS/HS set forth by Dr. Lee. Let us recall that for Beauty to emerge the SS/HS of the artist and the SS/HS of the viewer need to communicate. <14>



Part of the problem of defining a special Unification aesthetic is that religious values, the realm of the sacred, the spirituality, morality, and the realm of beauty may not be one and the same. Absolute values when translated into visual expression are bound by the particular time, and traditions of the artist and will always have to be interpreted by a knowledgeable interpreter.

Where I find the uniqueness of Unificationist experience expressed visually is in the narrative of Reverend Moon's life and in the kinds of events that are recorded by the camera. What distinguishes these images from Christian or other religious traditions is a balance of relationships between nature, animals, people and the Divine. In Watanabe's watercolor narratives, lovely in their simplicity, there is apparent a deep love of the land and a closeness to nature that distinguishes these vignettes from those of the Jesus story. The narrative tells of real work, real suffering, real teaching as we might find in the Gospels but the setting is Korea and the world of nature is included in the drama.

In so far as Reverend Moon's life influences his Church, it seems clear from this series that this Church has roots that build on biblical foundations in an unique way. While Revelation comes from Jesus in this series, Reverend Moon's story is a contemporary one, concerned with problems of our world. Beginning with the image of the Two True Parents, seen against a background of light - which we can now interpret - Unificationist experience is frequently expressed in personal interaction. Reverend Moon's history is one of various and sustained relationships. As an outsider studying this series of paintings, I find remarkable the expression of a closeness to nature, birds plants and animals, the implied preciousness of all Creation. The artist's delicate use of line drawing, possibly reflecting oriental training, is particularly adapted to the message. Notice the simplicity of line, the delicacy of the coloring. There is an authenticity to the Korean landscape with its rural settings, kimchi jars and hilly background. No baroque exaggeration here, and no angels flying around. Clearly the series depicts an earthly life, concerned with the simple tasks of existence, the joy of being alive and in harmony with animals as well as people. From what I can tell, these paintings may be closer to illustrating what a Unification aesthetic might look like than anything we have seen so far. The technique, the construction of the work, and the content seem to me to achieve what Dr. Lee has described. This series has arisen out of the culture of the artist who seems to be in his representations far from the vulgarization of art Dr. Lee wants to oppose. The story of Unification aesthetics is just beginning and any analysis is bound to be an on-going one, full of interesting discussion as this Church is unique in

the way it combines a global scope with the symbolic, the documentary, and the fine arts.

1. Stephen Wright has suggested to me that *songsang* and *hyongsang* might be a more Korean manner of romanizing these terms. He also pointed out that the analysis of the Chinese characters that make up these terms should be discussed in their context and not as separate terms. For a full discussion please see appendix.
2. Catalogue: The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985. ed. Edward Weisberger. Los Angeles County Museum and Abbeyville press, N.Y.1986. p.109.p179.p.206..
3. Ibid. p. 245.
- 4 Ibid. p.25. This quote is from Georges Poulet, The Metamorphoses of the Circle, trans. Carley Dawson and Elliott Coleman, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966. XIX-XX.
5. Maurice Tuchman, "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art", cat. Spirit in Art p.23.
6. Cat. Spirit in Art, p. 25. from Michael Maier Atalanta fugiens.
7. Ake Fant, "The Case of the Artist Hilma af Klint",pp.155-163. Spirit in Art.
8. Tuchman, Ibid.p.38.
9. Rose-Carol Washton Long, "Expressionism, Abstraction, and the Search for Utopia in Germany", Spirit in Art,p.8. The quote is from Wassily Kandinsky,"Whither the New Art?" (1911) in Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo. Boston: G.K. Hall,1982. I:103.
10. Arthur C. Danto, Encounters and Reflections: Art in the Historical Present, New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1990. p. 51.
11. Some critics have asserted that the abstract painting of Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman have mystical significance. However, outside of sophisticated audiences, it is doubtful that there is any wide acceptance of this view. See...

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12. Spirit in Art, p.74.
  13. Spirit in Art,p. 312.
  14. SHAH. Lee, Fundamentals, pp.277-285.

